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Gary Vaynerchuk Is Thirsty

The host of WineLibraryTV wants to use the Internet to make him bigger than Emeril Lagasse, Rachael Ray, and Oprah

by [Catherine Holahan](#)

Gary Vaynerchuk is still thirsty. The 32-year-old Internet celebrity has changed the way millions see wine with WineLibraryTV.com's "Thunder Show," a popular video blog in which Vaynerchuk combines the palate of Robert Parker with the in-your-face passion of *Mad Money's* Jim Cramer. He has transformed his father's small Springfield (N.J.) wine shop, from which his show takes its name, from a \$4 million-a-year business to a \$50 million-a-year enterprise that makes half of its sales through online orders. This month, Vaynerchuk even released a book, *101 Wines*. But Vaynerchuk still wants more. "I want to own the New York Jets, that's what I want," says Vaynerchuk. "And I absolutely believe I am going to own the Jets."

It's big talk. But that's Vaynerchuk's trademark. Sitting on the arm of a high-backed leather chair in a large office atop his 40,000-square-foot wine store, declarations flow from Vaynerchuk's mouth like, um, wine. Wine is "awesome." He drinks from a "big-ass glass." His goal is to be the Emeril Lagasse (bigger!) of wine. "My personal brand has exploded," says Vaynerchuk. "I feel like all this is going in a very big direction."

For Vaynerchuk, the Web was always about more than just selling wine. Vaynerchuk sees video blogs, social networks like [Facebook](#), and microblogging services like [Twitter](#) and Pownce as tools for building a personal online brand. Once created, that brand can be used to sell anything from business advice to bottles of Bordeaux.

Embracing Web Video

Tech entrepreneurs have long used the Web as a word-of-mouth marketing tool to build personality cults and audiences for their online projects. [Digg](#) founder Kevin Rose and noted technology blogger Robert Scoble are just two examples of techies turned online celebrities through social media tools that draw crowds to new projects. Vaynerchuk, who is known for eschewing wine galas in favor of tech events such as March's South by Southwest digital conference, is the first to bring that business model to wine. "When the tech geeks talk, I pay close attention," says Vaynerchuk.

Vaynerchuk first reacted to the social Web after seeing a *Saturday Night Live* clip. It was 2005, and the SNL cast had released a music video online called "Lazy Sunday," featuring cast members rapping about eating cupcakes and going to see a movie. Millions watched the digital short: e-mailing it to friends, posting it on video-sharing site YouTube ([GOOG](#)), and uploading it to peer-to-peer services. For Vaynerchuk, it was a revelation. Soon after that, he saw what video-bloggers Amanda Congdon and Ze Frank were doing—building large online fan communities around their content—and thought he had to get in the game.

Initially he wasn't sure he wanted to do videos about wine. Vaynerchuk just wanted to get his name—his personal brand—out there on a subject he was passionate about. His first thought was a sports video blog. Eventually, however, he realized a wine show played more to his strengths, giving him an opportunity to share his more than 16 years of industry knowledge and unique palate. "Everyone thought: 'He's doing WineLibraryTV to sell more wine,'" says Vaynerchuk. "The day I started WineLibraryTV was the day I was out of the wine retail business."

A High Price

Vaynerchuk didn't grow up expecting to join the family business. His father, Sasha Vaynerchuk, opened a liquor store in New Jersey soon after emigrating from Russia in 1978 with his wife and 3-year-old Gary. He worked endlessly at the store, often leaving before his son went to school and returning long after he fell asleep. "I didn't take a vacation for 17 years...I wanted to build a base for my son, for my children," says Sasha Vaynerchuk, who had stopped by his son's office on a recent Friday afternoon. "Everything in life has a price."

As far as Vaynerchuk was concerned, the cost of his father's business was his time with his family. Even as the family grew more affluent—moving from a small Queens apartment to the New Jersey suburbs—Sasha still spent countless hours at work. Gary couldn't imagine paying that price, especially not in a wine shop.

Vaynerchuk's passion was for collectibles, particularly baseball cards. At age 14 he borrowed \$1,000 from his father to buy cards from the local wholesaler that he then sold at the mall for a significant profit. The cards made Vaynerchuk a "billionaire" as far as his classmates were concerned, giving him a status at school that he never gained from test scores or books as had his Russian immigrant classmates. He was able to pay back his father and still make hundreds of dollars in profit, he says.

A Chance to Try His Pitch

A year later, however, Sasha Vaynerchuk decided it was time for his eldest son to learn the family business. He ordered him to work at the store—Shopper's Discount Liquors—after school and on weekends. To the gregarious, enterprising teenager, spending sunny days in a liquor store basement, bagging ice alone, for \$20 a day wasn't a job, it was punishment. Vaynerchuk remembers crying during the commute from Hunterdon County to the Springfield store. But his father wasn't moved. "My dad

eventually let me do what I want, but I had to fight hard," says Vaynerchuk, adding that he owes much of his head start in business and salesmanship to his father—his toughest sell. "Pops is amazing for letting me have it. But he's not Mother Teresa."

After a year of asking to move up to the main floor, where he could at least interact with customers, Vaynerchuk eventually got the chance to sell wine. It was Thanksgiving weekend and the store was busy. His father needed all the help he could get. So he told Vaynerchuk he could try to sell the Kenwood Chardonnay. Being 16, Vaynerchuk wasn't allowed to taste the wine. But he read the notes on the bottle and formed his pitch. "This is a tremendous wine," he remembers saying, boasting that it was better than Kendall-Jackson, the hot-seller at the time.

Vaynerchuk doesn't remember exactly how much wine he sold that weekend. But he remembers the store changed for him that day. Suddenly, the shop felt like his calling. He had found his niche: sales, marketing, and above all, interacting with the customers.

Keeping It Simple and Cheap

WineLibraryTV is nothing if not interactive. An hour before the daily taping, Vaynerchuk is glued to his computer, scanning e-mails for shout-out requests from his growing base of fans: the Vayniacs. About 80,000 of them watch each show. One fan is graduating from medical school. Another is having a birthday. Another has just gotten married. All want a mention, and Vaynerchuk dutifully copies their names and events on a blank sheet of paper that he will then tape to the base of the camera. It is the only part of his show that Vaynerchuk will script.

The entire 15- to 20-minute show is filmed uncut and off-the-cuff. Doing it this way helps keep costs low and gives Vaynerchuk the time to film every weekday. The show set is one table and Vaynerchuk's "big-ass glass." The equipment is a solitary camera, manned by longtime Wine Library employee Chris Mott, and a few lights, which Vaynerchuk purchased after the show began taking off. "I like the thrill of it being very authentic and real," says Vaynerchuk. "I don't even have a mike."

Fifteen minutes before taping, a Wine Library employee brings up four different bottles of Chilean red, each marked with some historical facts and, when applicable, the scores other critics have given the bottles. During the show, Vaynerchuk often makes references to these scores in an effort to prove that palates differ and that the score he gives the wine on the show is not the ultimate ruling on the wine. "Trust your palate," he likes to say. Other than the reference data, the show is entirely Vaynerchuk, his taste buds, and whatever descriptions come to his mind as he smells, swishes, and tastes—though rarely swallows—the wine. He has to drive back to his home in New York, he explains.

Smells Like Fertilizer, in a Good Way

Vaynerchuk starts the show the same way each week, words flowing faster than wine from a decanter: "Helloeverybodyandwelcometowinelibraryty," he shouts. "I am your host Gary Vay-Ner-Chuk." For the next 20 minutes, Vaynerchuk liberally pours wine into a glass capable of holding nearly half the bottle, smells and tastes it, describing everything he senses along the way. One wine smells like the inside of a balloon with notes of black cherry. Another has a nose of oak with vanilla and black raspberry. Another smells like fertilizer and gasoline, in a good way.

After Vaynerchuk finishes taping, his father enters the room. Although more reserved than his son, Sasha Vaynerchuk is no less proud of his achievements. Still, he expects more from him. "It's not a big deal," he says, discussing his son's success. "There are much bigger things to come...I think he has a very good chance to replace Oprah."

"I need more than 10 years," says Vaynerchuk.

His father gives him a hug and fatherly peck. "I think 10 years is more than enough."

Rachael Ray's career may better describe the model that Vaynerchuk hopes to emulate. Ray started out as a celebrity chef on cable's Food Network. The 39-year-old now has two shows on the Food Network, a daytime talk show, a magazine, several cookbooks, and is the spokeswoman for several brands including [Dunkin' Donuts](#).

TV is in Vaynerchuk's future. He was signed by Creative Artists Agency shortly after appearing on *Late Night* with Conan O'Brien in August, 2007. (During the episode he had O'Brien taste everything from grass and dirt to sweaty socks in order to pick up different notes in the wines he had brought.) He has since appeared on several talk shows and has been approached about taking WineLibraryTV from the Web to the TV. But he's not sure he is ready. "I have Internet fame," he says. "Real fame is more intense."

But Vaynerchuk is not ruling out TV. He got a taste of fame from the Web and he's still thirsty.

Check out the BusinessWeek.com slide show to see [Gary Vaynerchuk's top 10 wines](#).