

Internet entrepreneurs: Lessons from the front line

BY JESSICA HUBBARD

We often read about how one bright idea for an internet-based venture quickly turns into a billion-dollar business (à la Facebook), or is snapped up by hungry investors looking to possess the next 'big thing'. As we consume this news diet of digital and internet entrepreneurs striking gold – with ingenious apps, social media networks, instant messaging platforms, e-commerce, etc. – we can be forgiven for thinking that there must be a degree of ease to all this.

We speak to some successful digital entrepreneurs about the lessons they've learnt along the way:



1. UNDERSTAND THE GAP IN THE MARKET, AND WHAT YOUR CUSTOMERS' PAIN POINTS ARE.



2. KEEP THE PRODUCT GOAL TOP OF MIND.

DANIEL MARCUS, FOUNDER OF MAGNETIC (ONLINE BUSINESS MANAGEMENT PLATFORM):

One of the biggest lessons I've learnt in the tech/internet space as an entrepreneur is ensuring that you keep your product goal top of mind, and make every decision with that goal in mind. It's very easy to get caught up in making your early customers happy by saying yes to every request.

The problem with this is that daily requests from clients take up a lot of time, and they distract you from your end goal. It's important to keep customers happy, but it's also important that they understand your product goal – if they do, then they won't mind being told no to certain requests.

ELIZABETH DAKWA,

FOUNDER OF GENIE INTEL (DIGITAL MARKETING), GHANA:

Digital marketing is still somewhat of a novelty in Ghana, and so the decision to run my own digital marketing & web tech agency was both exciting and daunting. We have the ability to understand the terrain while it is not yet saturated and hone our capabilities and services to ensure that we offer solutions that are both effective and original.

On the other hand, it is daunting because a lot of brands don't fully understand what digital marketing is, how it can benefit their business and/or how to implement it successfully.

Education is key here.

Communicating to prospects and clients on the whys is just as crucial to closing a deal as the hows. This means that proposals cannot dive straight into the creative and strategic aspects of a plan. They must almost always begin with educative elements that then bring the creative and strategic bits full circle. In a more general sense, the lesson here is that with any new business idea that is unprecedented or has few competitors, it is essential to clearly understand what the gaps in the market are, what the customers' pain points are and how your service or product alleviates that pain.



3. RUTHLESS FOCUS.

NIC HARALAMBOUS, FOUNDER OF NICHARRY.COM (E-COMMERCE); CO-FOUNDER, FORMER CEO OF MOTRIBE (MOBILE):

Do one thing and be excellent at it. Do that one thing incredibly well for long enough and eventually you'll get noticed. Do it for long enough, well enough and keep getting noticed and you'll have a real business.

The other lesson is quite tech/online specific and relevant to the current climate:

Raising money doesn't make you a great business, profit does.



5. PUT 20% OF YOUR NET ASSET VALUE AT RISK. SCALE AND GROW, OR FAIL, AND FAIL FAST.

MURRAY LEGG, CO-FOUNDER OF RETROVIRAL AND WEBFLUENTIAL (DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA AGENCIES):

Entrepreneurs usually start working on launching their own business before they leave the support and financial stability of an existing job. Being willing and able to risk losing a significant portion of your net wealth is important when making the decision to become a digital (or any type of) entrepreneur for two reasons.

Firstly, the enormity of the task that they have undertaken – to build a new business – must be scary enough to keep someone focused on their objective 24/7, working hard living their dream all day, and up at night keeping on top of how they're going to make it a success. It's putting their skin in the game with nothing held back that puts the business on the map of their personal wealth portfolio, and that will make the returns significant enough to justify having left their secure job in the first place.

Secondly, digital is a fast moving industry where businesses must scale and grow, or fail, and fail fast. Entrepreneurs should be prepared to spend on marketing and systems and hire people to help them build the business – they cannot do everything by themselves.



4. BE PREPARED AND WILLING TO TAKE A JOURNEY WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS. THEY'LL HELP YOU FIND SUCCESS.

MARK FORRESTER, CO-FOUNDER, WOOTHemes:

At WooThemes, we started out selling beautiful, off-the-shelf website templates (themes) for WordPress [a free and open-source blogging tool]. We were fortunate to be doing this at the right time, at the right place. Over the course of three years, our customers told us the sort of templates they wanted to buy from us – business brochure themes, video blogging themes, magazine themes, restaurant themes and even real estate themes. That's what we made, and our revenues grew.

What our customers persistently asked for was online shop themes. We didn't know how we were going to build such complicated themes or support such technical functionality, but we knew we had to listen.

Fast-forward to today and we're now the biggest e-commerce toolkit for WordPress, with WordPress powering over 23% of the internet.

We would have never taken that chance on e-commerce if it weren't for our vocal customers. Listen to them attentively.



6. BE PATIENT.

YOSSI HASSON, CEO AND CO-FOUNDER OF SYNAQ (SOFTWARE SPECIALISTS):

For me, the biggest lesson that I have learnt is that most businesses are a 10-year overnight success story! When I co-founded SYNAQ, I had just turned 22. Back then, I thought that by 25 the business would be massive and we would all be millionaires. Little did I know that it would take much longer than that to build real scale and sustainability, and that to build anything sizeable takes time. I had to learn how to be driven and patient at the same time.

Find a solution to a problem for a small subset of people (niche) that are really passionate about that problem being solved, and are willing to pay money to have it solved. ■

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