

7 ENTREPRENEURS WHO PUT IT ALL ON THE LINE

KAUFFMAN
FOUNDERS
SCHOOL

MESSAGE FROM
FOUNDERS SCHOOL

There is a pervasive myth in today's world that people become entrepreneurs for the money. But as Daniel Pink tells us in his series "Leadership and Motivation: Motivation for Entrepreneurs," this is rarely the case. When it comes to laying it all on the line for a dream, money is not motivation.

In actuality, Pink says there are three prominent reasons people take these crazy risks:

1. They are problem solvers.
2. They want autonomy.
3. They crave authenticity.

People do not choose an entrepreneurial path for monetary gain alone. There must be something greater to sustain the hardship and anguish of starting your own venture.

In the course of our work, we've interviewed entrepreneurs from all over the country for our Founder Genius videos, clips where entrepreneurs share insights on specific topics pertaining to starting and running a business. In this ebook, we've gathered transcripts from several of these entrepreneurs that illustrate how it feels when you lay it all on the line to create something of your own.



“They're willing to bicycle into the headwinds in the face of all this opposition, all these naysayers, and as citizens we should actually be quite thankful that they are.”

—Daniel Pink

Best-selling author, *To Sell is Human: The Surprising Truth About Moving Others*



ALEXIS TRYON – Watch Founder Genius Video

Artsicle

Q: You decided to quit your full-time job to start your company. What made you take the leap?

A: I consider myself a bit of an accidental entrepreneur because of that. We started Artsicle as a side project. My cofounder is also my significant other, and he was teaching himself how to code. This idea was eating away at me, and we were going to open studios on the weekends and talking about it, and thought it was going to be a great weekend, non-profit side project...until it wasn't. He was looking at VC jobs. I was thinking about leaving [American Express] but going directly into another similar type of job or going back to the restaurant industry.

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And then, all of a sudden, neither of us was looking, and we were both working on Artsicle. Nights and weekends became afternoons under our desks, and we were in love with it. The choice to quit my job became less of a choice because we were so excited to get this product to market. And I quit at the beginning of December because of an arbitrary deadline we gave ourselves. I had a bonus waiting for me if I would have stayed at the company for two more months. But two more months was way more than I could manage staying away from Artsicle at that point.

Q: What have you learned along the way that you can impart on future entrepreneurs?

A: It was helpful to realize the line between success and failure in a startup is so razor thin that you usually don't know what side of it you're on.

We encounter that on a daily basis. You know, you have a great month, but you didn't do X. Did we succeed or did we fail? Learning to live with that and not fight it quite as much, and realize that it's part of the life that we've signed up for was a huge piece of advice I was given by a fellow founder who would just ask me, "Are you guys succeeding or failing?" I'd say, "I don't know." And she'd say, "Good, that means you're doing it right."

ARTSICLE is a website that helps people discover the world's visual artists. Artsicle connects artists who wouldn't usually have access to the public to those interested in having art on their walls from artists they want a connection with. Tryon grew up in rural Texas, and while not heavy in contemporary art, every time her family traveled, they made a point to see local art. The connection between culture and people expressing themselves became very prominent for her growing up.



JASON LANKOW – Watch Founder Genius Video

Column Five

Q: How are your personal beliefs for you and your founders woven into the fabric of your business?

A: That's something that is definitely in our DNA. We've done a lot of work with different causes and nonprofits that we really believe in, and some of that dates back to certain aspects of our friendship in college. I was in cultural anthropology and just really thought bigger about the world and wanted to make an impact on a bigger scale, and then kind of had some of those ideals eroded as I stepped out into the freeway of life and got run over a couple of times.

The core value of just generally caring and wanting to do something meaningful that really lasts is still something that is always in the back of our minds, and it's coming now, I think, more to the forefront as we start reexamining why we're doing this. As we go through this process that a lot of agencies and companies go through of gravitating from working with a lot of startups to working with global brands and gigantic companies, there's also this kind of nagging question of, "Why? Why are we going this route?" Of course it's exciting when those big brands first start contacting you, but then what are we devoting our talents to?

“The core value of just generally caring and wanting to do something meaningful that really lasts is still something that is always in the back of our minds...”

What are we collectively throwing our best creative work at, and what types of companies are we really helping and supporting? I think that's something that is becoming more and more important to us as we consider that we don't want to be all things for all people and take on everything from everyone who wants to work with us.

COLUMN FIVE is a creative marketing agency that specializes in infographic design, data visualization, motion graphics, and interactive web development. Lankow and his friends wanted to find a way of working for themselves, but couldn't decide on the right way to do it. In the midst of "nuking" bad ideas, the cofounders discovered the emerging market for infographics in the digital space and how they could give publications and even brands a leg up in content marketing.



CALVIN CARTER – Watch Founder Genius Video

Bottle Rocket Apps

Q: What do entrepreneurs need to do to leave an influence on this world?

A: The most basic way that I could advise anyone, is no matter what situation you're in, whether you are going to college or you can't afford college, or if you're in a private school, a public school, you got a full ride, you know, you're paying your own bills, whatever it is—what situation are you in that you can add value? Then just add it. Don't ask for permission to add it because now you're attaching your destiny to someone else's opinion about their perceived value of the value that you want to add. Just add the value.

Let's take my case in college. The computer rooms were always a mess. You know, the paper was never there, ink and cartridges were always running out. Viruses were always on them. They were dirty. It was just a mess. So I just said, hey, dormitory office, how about for six bucks an hour I'll go in and just take care of those rooms,

“What situation are you in that you can add value? Then just add it.”

and Elliot and I thought about putting them on a retainer. Then we started getting a little smarter about what other value could we add? What if we just took care of that as an outsource opportunity where we would go and get the ribbons for the printers—these were old printers. We would secure the operating system updates; we would secure the software to keep the viruses off of them; and we would just charge a flat fee.

We just got into a relationship where it was this amount per month per computer room, and then they just kept adding computer rooms around the campus because they were pushing computers more and more.

This was before a lot of kids had their own computers, and that was a great opportunity, right? What value could we add? I wanted to add value, and I wanted to learn how to make money, and these were opportunities. And when I see an opportunity, I have an intense desire to take on that opportunity as an entrepreneur.

BOTTLE ROCKET APPS produces high-quality apps for the most discriminating brands in the world, such as *The Washington Post*, *Spin* magazine, and National Public Radio. The day after Steve Jobs announced Apple's platform would be released to third-party developers, Carter ran out to Office Depot to buy paper and pencils and started sketching apps. And to this day, all employees start with pencil and paper.



LAURA WEIDMAN-POWERS - Watch Founder Genius Video

CODE2040

Q: How do you come out of the gate with so much credibility in the beginning of starting a company?

A: I think it's necessary as an entrepreneur to be a little delusional about what you can achieve, but you have to sell people on that vision. And nobody wants to hear, "I think we might be able to." You have to go in there and say, "This is what we're going to do, and it's going to be awesome." And that's really critical to getting people on board.

I think until you put yourself out there, you don't realize what supports are available and how many people will, kind of, extend a hand to help you achieve your goals. And there's really no way to be convinced of that until you take that first step and become vulnerable because that's what people really respond to. So, you know, it's sort of a, you have to take my word for it until you kind of put yourself out there. But there's a whole community that's there to support you every step of the way if you take that first leap.

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CODE2040 is a nonprofit organization that works to get more black and Latino students in the tech sector through a summer fellows program that places high-performing engineering students in internships with top tech companies and provides them with a mentorship and a leadership development curriculum. It wasn't until Weidman-Powers got out to the Bay area for business school that she realized tech was really a thing. She couldn't shake the thought that there was a real missed opportunity to share an entrepreneurial mindset and spirit with students who didn't have access to these kinds of people or opportunities on a regular basis.



JASON CHRISTIANSEN - Watch Founder Genius Video

Rigid Industries

Q: Does the pressure of running a business change as you start to grow bigger?

A: I'm the master of going back to sports analogies. Baseball. It was me. I was a pitcher. It was whatever I did, or however I pitched. But nobody was going to lose their job over [my performance]. The only person that was going to was me.

Maybe the manager, but most likely, it was me first. And those fans, I mean, I'm playing for them, right? But it's just a game. They're going to wake up and they're still going to be able to go to work or hug their kids when they get home, whatever it might be.

Business is totally different. I have a newfound love for everybody that ran the teams that I played on, and respect for them. For me now, I look at it and go, "Man, I am directly responsible for 150-plus families, and if we decide to do something off kilter, it could affect how many people we have there."

There is a sense of ownership within Rigid. People have stickers on their cars; they have lights on their vehicles. They wear the shirts when they're not working. There's a sense of pride and ownership within it because they've been a part of this rapid growth. We've kept them in touch with everything that we're doing.

For me, that's important. I think that we are definitely growing as a company, and for me, knowing that I have that group there. They rely on me. They expect me to make sure things go correctly and that we continue to grow so that they can be safe and secure in their jobs and know that we're going to be around for a long time. I'm okay with that. I had a lot more stress sitting on the mound pitching in front of 50,000 people. But this, this is totally different, because it's life, and I relish in that.

“There's a sense of pride and ownership within [Rigid] because they've been a part of this rapid growth. ...For me, that's important.”

RIGID INDUSTRIES is a forward projection LED lighting company that manufactures forward projection LED lighting for anything from a combine to a tank to an ATV to a boat. Christiansen spent the first part of his career as a pitcher in Major League Baseball. Going from athlete to business owner has been quite a ride, but not one without some parallels.



MYNUL KHAN – Watch Founder Genius Video

Field Nation

Q: Were you prepared for the struggles of being an entrepreneur or the possibility of failure?

A: Failure wasn't an option. And it's not an option. You don't think about that, because 90 percent of the entrepreneurs will fail, that my chances of becoming a failure are so high. You just don't think about it, right? You start by, "Okay, I've got a mission," and the purpose drives the passion. Because of the passion, you don't give up. You keep going at it, and you don't think about the statistics saying you can be a failure. But you need to be persistent, no matter what comes up, and think you can.

Every day is a challenging day. Every day is a brand new day. The problems that we're facing right now are so different from the problems that were solved five years ago. That's how it's going to be five years from now. It's going to be a brand new set of challenges that we'll be solving. We are not going to give up, because we know that we have purpose—why we are doing it—and we are so passionate about our purpose and our mission. We're going to go at it persistently. And that's, I think, all it is.

“Because of the passion, you don't give up. You keep going at it, and you don't think about the statistics saying you can be a failure.”

FIELD NATION is an online platform that connects businesses to the workforce and independent contractors. It's used not only to find contractors, but also to manage the entire project and payment. After starting his first company, Khan saw how a business that grew quickly without proper attention to product development and scalability could ultimately take a downturn. Taking a year off to reflect, he spent time focusing on what was really the problem he wanted to solve and how much time it would require to get it right the next time.



LAKESHIA GRANT - Watch Founder Genius Video

Virtual Enterprise Architects

Q: What advice would you give entrepreneurs who are just starting out?

A: Even though your family and your friends are going to think you're obviously insane and crazy, you have to take the step forward, but it has to be an educated step. You have to make sure that you're armed with all the tools and everything that you're going to need in order to make that step possible. You don't want to jump off the cliff with no parachute or safety net or anything in the process.

The biggest advice that I would say for someone like myself, I would truly say, inform yourself and educate yourself first, but most importantly, act. Don't just think about it. Don't just write it down on your vision board and never attempt it, because you'll end up regretting it in the end. If you fail, there's no harm in that failure. However, if you never attempt it you're going to always view that as a failure no matter what you do. And that's the last thing you want to do, even on your bucket list, is to have a whole list of activities, ideas and never to have acted on that.

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VIRTUAL ENTERPRISE ARCHITECTS provides holistic consulting to integrate the strategy, business, and technology needs of customers. VEA provides services throughout every level of the architecture, including: business, data, software, infrastructure, and security services. Grant started with a vision of creating a family environment where a company could foster a culture of family within a work environment.