

Kickstarting Innovation

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In a world that's moving faster and faster, Kickstarter co-founder Yancey Strickler's advice to the industry is to slow down, dig deep, and craft a story about what truly matters.

For someone who's made it possible for thousands of creative people to race against the clock in campaigns to fulfill their dreams, Yancey Strickler is strikingly slow-paced. Soft-spoken, with a shock of dark hair like a patch of unmowed lawn, Strickler is sitting in a makeshift 'conference room' in the hundred-year-old former millinery in Manhattan's bar-strewn Lower East Side that houses his company, Kickstarter. Behind a graffiti-scribbled door and up a narrow staircase that feels like it isn't far from collapsing, he's telling the story of how he got here.

Stories are precisely what make Kickstarter tick. It's a service that allows artists, musicians, activists, and would-be civic leaders to raise money for projects by soliciting donations from the masses. Some of its most famous projects have included independent films, iPod accessories, restaurants, novels, and community gardens.

It operates by a system of threshold pledges, in which individuals can promise to donate any sum of money but won't have to pay it unless the project reaches a concrete financing goal by a date that is determined at the start of the fundraising process. Traditional marketing won't necessarily get people on board. To be successful, a Kickstarter

project must be adept at using videos, essays, and photography to grab the attention of strangers and persuade them to back an idea that doesn't yet exist, and perhaps never will.

The short version of Strickler's story is that he found Kickstarter's HQ on Craigslist. The long version is that he spent nearly a decade as a music journalist until, one day in 2005, he was sitting at a restaurant in trendy Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where he was a regular, when one of the waiters told him about an idea for a company that could help creative projects gain the financial and emotional support they needed to get off the ground.

That waiter was Perry Chen, who'd previously worked as a day trader, a preschool teacher, an art gallery owner, and a musician as he drifted back and forth between New York and New Orleans over the course of several years. Chen was in constant contact with the struggling creative upstarts who sparked his initial idea and are now the people whom Kickstarter is aiming to empower. He and Strickler joined forces, and in April 2009 they launched Kickstarter with the help of third co-founder Charles Adler. "Basically, Perry and I didn't have any ▶

Quantify: People

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*Recommendations from other people
account for 60 percent of all video
clicks from the YouTube homepage.¹¹*
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technical skills whatsoever,” Strickler explains of Adler’s involvement. “Charles, to us, *was* the internet, because he knew certain acronyms that we didn’t know.”

When asked what the key to succeeding on Kickstarter is, Strickler is emphatic: “It’s not a marketing plan, it’s not a branding layout of what it is that they’re making; it’s a story of them, a story of the individual coming to this thing and why they’re trying to make this thing happen and what that quest is and what the goal is,” he explains, putting forth a distinct anti-corporate vibe. “We’re

not interested in people selling a product on Kickstarter. That, to us, is not what’s interesting about a product. What’s interesting about a product is how you got to it and how you’re going to make it. So if you’re just looking at this as a sales channel – as a storefront – you’re in the wrong place.”

Yet running an effective Kickstarter campaign *is* marketing – albeit an innovative, narrative-driven breed of marketing that captures the energy of enthusiasts and their desire to be part of something rather than just passive consumers. A concept called the ‘TikTok,’ a case for the iPod Nano

that resembles a wristwatch, existed only in an artist’s rendering before its designer, Scott Wilson, turned to Kickstarter. He said that all pledges over \$25 would count as pre-orders, and put forth an impassioned call for donors who wanted to support not just another iPod accessory, but ‘a collection that was well designed, engineered, and manufactured from premium materials that complemented the impeccable quality of Apple products, not just clipped on a cheap strap as an afterthought.’ The TikTok raised over \$940,000 on Kickstarter, and is now sold in Apple retail stores. ➤

Kickstarter itself has become a sensation, backed by \$10 million in venture funding from some of the most prominent investors in New York's flourishing start-up world. In July, the company announced that 10,000 projects had been successfully funded, over half of them in the fields of music, film, and video. Among its roster of successes are ideas that had been brewing for years but which had been left to lie fallow because their creators had no idea how they would raise the money.

One of them is + Pool, a water filtration system that permits floating swimming pools to be embedded in urban rivers, and which has taken a crucial step closer to fruition. A Kickstarter campaign in the summer of 2011 funded + Pool with over \$41,000, thanks largely to beautiful computer-generated images of a swimming pool lying in New York's East River at the foot of the iconic Brooklyn Bridge. Overheated locals, dazzled by the idea of a new way to cool off outside, placed their bets on it – and told their friends to do the same.

"They've had that idea for a while, they've put it out there before, but they're getting buy-in, both literal and emotional, from a lot of people and it's creating a lot of momentum around this project," Strickler says of + Pool's trio of founders. Their work is far from done – the project faces plenty of infrastructure and municipal hurdles now that its Kickstarter phase is complete. "I'm curious to see if it will happen," he admits.

Harnessing the energy of hundreds, even thousands, of small donors isn't easy. Neither is great marketing. And a successful Kickstarter campaign is emotional marketing at its finest,

offering up something that people love through a story that resonates with the creators' enthusiasm, an exciting call for users to become a part of it, and an implicit promise that the creators will keep up that pact with the users.

"I think what [marketers] can learn is something that will, in fact, be incredibly hard for them to recreate – which I think is a good thing – and that's authenticity," Strickler says. "The power of an individual telling a story about something they care about, or is important to them, and precisely defining how it is they go about doing that is exciting. As a backer or a spectator, I get the warm glow watching that thing come to life, knowing that I have a piece of it in some way."

There are lessons to be learned in how Kickstarter itself grew. This is a company created from passion and a keen observance of the world. It was conceived by a pair of thirtysomethings better versed in the art of itinerant dreaming than in software development or business management. Strickler and Chen didn't want to simply 'start something.' They built a business that was years in the making, something meaningful but organic. More importantly, they built a business that not only has a story to tell but encourages everyone who uses it to do the same.

"We weren't trying to find something to make," Strickler says of Kickstarter's meandering rise through a digital start-up environment rife with fly-by-night successes and me-too entrepreneurialism. "It was just that this idea made sense. And it made sense because we looked at our lives, and the lives of a bunch of our friends, and it was like, 'We would all try this.'" ©

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IT STARTED ON KICKSTARTER

Detroit Needs Robocop [Detroit, MI]

When Detroit's mayor balked via Twitter at the suggestion that he erect a statue of Robocop, the '80s sci-fi hero who fought crime in the beleaguered city, internet enthusiasts decided to take up the cause. A Kickstarter campaign brought in over \$65,000 and multiple offers from property owners willing to have the statue built on their land.

Colonie [Brooklyn, NY]

Intending to be used to fund standalone creative projects rather than lasting businesses, Kickstarter had been lukewarm on Colonie, a proposed eatery and wine bar conceived by three veteran restaurateurs. It initially rejected their application, but changed its mind. Colonie opened to rave reviews in early 2011, with the campaign serving not just to raise money but also to generate locals' enthusiasm for a new neighborhood dining spot.

Fresher than Fresh [Kansas City, MO]

This 'all-natural' snow cone stand on wheels' had a successful run in the summer of 2009, but in order to keep going for another season, its owners needed money to repair the 1957 Shasta trailer from which it operated. After getting \$7,500 in Kickstarter funding, it was back in business.

110 Stories [New York, NY]

On the surface, it's an 'augmented reality' app that superimposes the outlines of the former World Trade Center towers in mobile photos of the New York skyline. Dig deeper, and 110 Stories reveals itself to be both a work of civic art and a memorial through visual storytelling.