The Best Way To Launch Your Startup | Startup School

Video URL

Launching Your Startup

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foreign head of Outreach at y combinator so I've been at YC for about nine years now and that means I've seen over 3 500 companies go through the program and launch at YC one of the things my team does is help companies with their first launches and today I want to change the way you think about launching most Founders overthink their first launch they think they have just one shot at launching their product publicly and that the messaging has to be perfect or that no one will ever buy or use or invest in their product I talked to Founders constantly who lovingly prepare their launch for months but if you're like most startups you'll launch something and no one will care and if it takes you six months to get the first version of your product in front of anyone your startup may be dead before you get another chance to launch So In The Same Spirit of always be shipping I want you to think about launching as something that you do continually so here's what we're going to talk about today first we'll talk about when to launch and why second we'll walk through some strong one-line company descriptions including some that I pulled from the startup School community and third we'll talk about the

When Should I Launch My Startup?

Reference

ask when should I launch and the answer is ASAP it's probably right now why so Founders are really good at lying to themselves a lot of you have really strong convictions about what you're building and that's good Founders need that conviction but many of you have strong but theoretical Notions of how you're going to solve a problem and how people are going to interact with what you're building so putting your product out there even in its earliest state will help you determine whether you're solving a big enough problem that someone is willing to pay for you or use you even in the products really unpolished state so if you launch too early what's the worst case scenario what's the worst thing that can happen people might think the product is ugly or it sucks investors might hear about the product before it's ready you know competitors might see it or Worse no one will see it or no one will care and that's fine just launch again Airbnb launched three times before they really started to get users launching and having no one care that feels terrible but it's not a reason to give up it's a reason to iterate and launch again launch and iterate launch and iterate until you have a core of users who really love you Paul Buchheit he's the creator of Gmail and a long time YC group partner he has said it's better to make a few people really happy than to make a lot of people semi-happy so early on as long as you've made something that a few users absolutely love you are on the right track it'll be good for your morale to have even a handful of users who really love what you're doing and it'll help you figure out what to focus on what is it about your product that they love and how can you do more of that where can you find more users who love that sort of thing that you're doing if you have a core of users even 10 users who really love you all you have to do is expand that number and it might take

One Sentence Pitch

Reference

we've determined you should all launch let's talk about something every one of you needs before you launch to create a strong one sentence pitch you need Clarity of vision we believe that people who have thought deeply and about about an idea can explain it clearly and succinctly they use less words they can explain con complex Concepts in a way that a five-year-old can understand and having a clear idea is important because a clear idea is the best foundation for growth the best companies and movements grow organically by word of mouth and that's good news because Word of Mouth growth is the cheapest way to grow and if you think back to the first time you heard about something like say tick tock or a slack there's a good chance you've heard about it through a friend or co-worker talking about what you do clearly and succinctly is going to be one of your most important jobs as a Founder it's a skill that you'll need to convince potential co-founders investors users employees and eventually hopefully shareholders to believe in you it's also a skill you'll need to grow to grow you need to get all these groups of people talking about you to help you spread the word that's why it's necessary to make it easy for anyone your grandfather or

the person that you meet at the airport to talk about what you're doing so that word can spread about you virally when people sit down at the dinner table they should be talking about you and your company and you don't have to be naturally good at talking about your company at first it takes some of our

How to Create a Short Memorable Description

Reference

coming up with a short memorable description of your company so first we recommend leading with what not with why and this may seem counterintuitive because we tell most stories chronologically it's natural to start with you know how you discover the problem you're solving and why it's important and one reason a lot of you do this is because you're all very ambitious people and you want to solve these big problems and that's really awesome and Founders need that ambition but when you only have a limited time with someone it's important to give them context up front so start with the company name and what you do and there's no need to set up the problem just get to the point so I'll use a real example from a YC companies application the company is called pave if they'd started with why they were building this company they would have said many of my friends are super confused about their stock options and it pisses me off how stressed they get thinking about them but before you give me the back story again start with one sentence that tells me what you're building First Press people and investors and even other Founders get pitched tens of times per you know per day definitely per week and they have particularly short attention spans so here's the actual description of the company pave pave lets companies plan communicate and Benchmark your compensation in real time this is a straightforward description of what they're building and who they're building for they are building 2 tools to make compensation and pay more transparent for companies uh and and their employees so hopefully whoever you're talking to asks follow-up questions and then you can get to the why later so the second mistake Founders make is adding a lot of meaningless marketing speak to their pitches so this is a tweet from Gary tan he said meaningless jargon is the number one issue I spend time trying to fight when helping startups so here is an actual description of a company don't worry it's not a startup School company or a YC company indiecloud is a know-how and Synergy platform don't say like this it has zero informational content about what you actually do when you're describing your company the person you're talking to should have some idea of you know what they'd have to build to reproduce what you're talking about a know-how Synergy platform could literally be anything it could be a collaborative edtech company or it could be a Marketplace for experts like you literally have no idea what you what you'd have to build to reproduce a know-how Synergy platform another mistake Founders make is rambling they just go on and on and on and don't do this the person you're talking to will have already zoned out so here's the actual description Airbnb used on their YC application we built the first Online Marketplace that lets Travelers book room to locals instead of hotels this

is a tight description it describes the problem they're solving and who they're solving it for so here's one I pulled from the startup School Forum open queue find and talk to your target B2B users fast again they tell you the problem they're solving and who they're solving it for they're making it easy for B2B companies to reach potential customers and you can sort of imagine what you might have to build to reproduce what they're doing okay here's another one I pulled from the startup School Forum yum it's a clever name adaptive ml driven mental health for your team and I get this what this is It's a digital mental health tools to help your team cope with stress and burnout but I think you can Workshop it a little bit if you're showing this to potential customers I think they'll care less about the fact that the product is ml driven and more about the fact that it's personalized digital therapy so I I changed it up to

When is the X for Y Construction Not Too Cliche?

Reference

personalized digital therapy programs for your team some people ask me whether the X for y construction is too cliche to use when describing their company and let's be honest the term you know Uber for x or Airbnb B for X has been a bit overused I want to emphasize that all of you should have a one-line description that does not use the X for y construction but the X for y construction can be used in certain cases so for example paisy which is a YC Alum can describe themselves as stripe for his former Soviet Union countries but they could also describe themselves as payment processing for former Soviet countries but let's talk about when it's okay to use the X for y Construction going back to paisy if the founders are talking to people in Silicon Valley so investors or press for example uh then it might make sense you might use the X for y analogy if it really is the best way to paint a picture of what you're building very quickly if you go with this construction you need three ingredients first of all X should be a household name second it should be reasonably clear why y might want X and third y should be a huge market so one YC company described themselves early on as buffer for Snapchat even know buffer is doing well as a company it's not a company that not everyone necessarily knows when I was reading this description in their YC application I literally had to go to Google and Google buffer so in this case you're better off describing the problem that you're solving so here's an X for y example from the startup School community that I think works hark alive is Airbnb for dance and movement classes it paints a fast picture of what Harker live is but honestly you could also just as easily say harkalive is a Marketplace for dance and movement classes so to review the best one-liners are descriptive they describe what you do the problem and who you're solving it for they're conversational and don't use jargon or marketing language and there's no long-winded lead up they're concise short and sweet so now that you know what you need for a good one sentence pitch let's talk about why you want to launch continuously even before you have a fully functioning product launching early gives you the chance to practice and refine your idea you can a B test the idea or

messaging on people you get an opportunity to see how people respond to it and then once you have a product launching through different channels will give you an opportunity to see how people respond to the actual product and launching on different channels will also help you determine whether you're even talking to the right users different channels will naturally reach different audiences so let's talk about some of the types of launches you can do in your early stages here are different types of launches and I'm going to go through each one of these briefly so first is the silent launch and this is something every one of you should do while you're in startup school I clicked on 10 random startup School companies today and only half of them had landing pages so you don't need anything fancy at the very least you need a domain name your company name a short description a way for users to contact you and a call to action your call to action might be sign up for a newsletter or sign up to here when we launch here's an example of a startup School company landing page Lara they have their domain name a company name short description and a call to action sign up for the wait list and this is all you really need the next type of launch is to friends and family even if you're at idea stage you can test out your one to two sentence pitch on friends and family and once you have an MVP you should do a friends and family launch as quickly as possible so in its earliest days Reddit was shared among the founders of the first YC batch I use the Wayback machine to find the earliest view of Reddit I can find from 2005. so this was even before they called upvotes upvotes so share your product with friends and family watch them use the product and ask them for feedback but one thing about the friends and family launch don't stay in this phase for too long because your friends and family might not be the ideal users for what you're building and sometimes their feedback isn't going to be as helpful as a real users next type of launch launching to strangers I want to share the MVP for doordash this is the very first version of the doordash site when they first started out the founders were building other things they were building tech for small business owners and so they started approaching store owners for feedback and they spent a lot of time talking to this one store manager Chloe she was the manager of a macaron store in Downtown Palo Alto in talking to Chloe they realized that the app they were building really didn't solve any of her problems but just as they were about to leave Chloe always said hey there's just one thing I want to show you and it was this thick booklet with pages and pages of pages of delivery orders she said this drives me crazy I have no drivers to fulfill them and I'm the one doing all the deliveries over the course of the next few weeks the founders interviewed over 200 small business owners across the bay area and they kept hearing the same issue deliveries are painful then after they you know absorbed enough information about the product they built this their MVP in just a few hours so if they'd waited too long to get direct feedback from their customers they might have spent way longer you know six months plus building out the wrong solution for small business owners so I'd recommend you get out there even if it makes you slightly uncomfortable and start talking to your potential customers as soon as possible do what doordash did and talk to 200. so next is one of my favorite ways to launch through online communities so I think you should plan a launch

for every single community that you are part of when a company goes through YC for example they have the option of launching on Bookface before they launch publicly Bookface is our internal platform for Founders it's like Facebook meets LinkedIn meets quora all for YC Founders and there are currently over 6 000 Founders on bookbase so for many companies in YC it's a good way to get some first users and some early feedback and it's a fairly low risk way to launch because you're launching in front of a friendly community of other Founders there are countless examples of companies that have launched and gotten their first or first thousand customers through online communities another community that you have access to is Hacker News they have something called show hn so many YC alumni Dropbox and git lab for example and hundreds more have launched on Hacker News Robin Hood is an example of another company that successfully launched on hn so back in December 2013 they had a really simple site and all it said was commission free trading stop paying up to ten dollars per trade at the time they only had a button that let you join a waitlist the waitlist would show you how many people were ahead of you in line and how many people were behind you in line so it was a Friday night and they'd been working on building this wait list in preparation for a launch they were planning the following week with someone totally random posted them on hn and boom they got to number one on hn and ended up getting 10 000 signups the first day and then over 50 000 over the next week so each Community is different they have different tones audiences interests launched communities you're genuinely genuinely engaged with so be authentic don't get bogged down and too much marketing and promo language people these days just shut off when they see that do your research and get an understanding of what will compel members of that Community to be interested in what you're doing so we don't have time to do a huge Deep dive into these next types of launches but I wanted to skim them briefly and share some resources and things that I found recently so in a q a we did with the replit founders a few weeks ago you asked amjad and Haya how did you get your first users and they said you just have to be everywhere Hacker News Twitter Reddit Etc so I wanted to share a thread that YC Alum Catherine cross tweeted out about building her community on Tick Tock Anja Health Catherine's company helps parents freeze their babies umbilical cords and placentas for there's some stuff for their stem cells so she wrote This Thread about how she committed to posting tick tocks to start building a community in advance of the company's launch and in just a month she hit 10 000 followers so she shared this thread on tips for building a community on Tick Tock which uh we will link to in the chat there is of course the pre-order launch and if you are a hardware or product or physical product you can do a pre-order campaign on a platform like Kickstarter or Indiegogo so preparing uh for a pre-order launch could honestly be a whole presentation of its own and honestly there's a little bit more skepticism about crowdfunding and pre-orders than there was say five years ago so it's worth thinking about whether it's the right thing for your company but YC Alum ship Bob wrote a guide on pre-orders that talks about why you should or should not consider doing this type of campaign there are a lot of great you know sort of guides that walk you through uh pre-order campaigns

and how to prepare for them online as well all right and then there's the waitlist launch we talked about a really good example of that with Robin Hood earlier and there are other examples like superhuman uh that launch successfully with a wait list one note on the waitlist launch the longer you wait to launch an actual product and the longer you wait to onboard people the harder it is to convert people from your waitlist so please don't sit on your waitlist for too long okay so why are we not going to talk about press it all in this talk these days if you were an early stage company that hasn't raised you know say a million or more it's going to be incredibly hard to land press stories at least in the U.S but that said even if you do land press it's not a silver bullet it's not a scalable way to get users it might help you get in front of some early users and investors but as you see press can't be counted on for sustained growth it will not get you to product Market fit so don't spend a ton of your time during startup School worrying about getting press what I do want to emphasize is while you're in startup school you should start to build your own Community it can be as simple as starting an email list of your supporters and figuring out you know how to engage them on an ongoing basis and you may be surprised who reads the email and shows up to help and in the future every time you release a new product or a new feature you can use all these channels to launch on them again stripe has always been great at engaging with the community each time a new product launches they blog about it they've the founders get on Hacker News and they talk to the hn community they spread the word on social media they pitch press stripe they are Masters at launching again and again so to sum up I want you to stop thinking about launching as just one moment in time if you launch and no one pays attention do what Airbnb did and launch again and again

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