

The Social Radars

Spenser Skates, Founder & CEO, Amplitude

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Jessica ([00:00:00](#)):

Carolyn, I am so excited because today we are here with Spencer Skates who is the founder and CEO of Amplitude, the data analytics platform, and he went through YC in 2012 and I'm so excited to hear his story. Hi Spencer, welcome Spencer.

Spenser ([00:00:20](#)):

Hi Jessica. Hi Carolyn. I'm really excited to hang out with you guys. Thank you guys for having me on. Jessica, I just want to say you were always so incredibly kind to me and to Curtis and to us during YC and afterwards, I don't know what we did deserve it, but thank you. You're

Jessica ([00:00:39](#)):

Going to make her cry. You're going to make me her cry right out of the gate. Spencer, that's so nice. Thank you. What a way to start the episode. Thank you. Before I even ask you about Amplitude, I want to ask you where did you grow up?

Spenser ([00:00:56](#)):

I grew up in Cambridge actually just outside of Boston. And yeah, my parents had a house in Central Square on Magazine Street and I went to the public schools there and yeah, ended up growing up there from when I was born all the way to when I went to college.

Jessica ([00:01:15](#)):

Hold on here. I feel like I had to have known this, but I feel like I didn't

Spenser ([00:01:20](#)):

Know this. I don't talk about it too much.

Jessica ([00:01:22](#)):

Well, I'm fascinated because Paul and I met in Cambridge obviously, and we started Y Combinator magazine Street in Central Square, so you really grew up in Cambridge. That's so cool.

Spenser ([00:01:36](#)):

Was

Jessica ([00:01:36](#)):

It gritty in Central Square?

Spenser ([00:01:38](#)):

Central Square was kind of an up and coming place during the time. It was kind of run down a lot of discount stores, that sort of thing, but it was nice. You don't know anything else as a kid, and so that's just what it was like to grow up.

Carolynn ([00:01:54](#)):

Why were your parents there? How did they end up there?

Spenser ([00:01:57](#)):

They both went to grad school at Harvard and then they are statisticians that do research in early detection of cancer. So ovarian, my dad did this big study on early detection of ovarian cancer and so anyway, they do their work with an independent lab affiliated with Harvard

Jessica ([00:02:20](#)):

And that's amazing. And now it makes sense that you are who you are because your parents are statisticians.

Spenser ([00:02:25](#)):

Yeah, the data analytics thing, it was so ironic because I didn't expect to get into anything related to that, but here I am, so it probably was not a coincidence.

Jessica ([00:02:37](#)):

So you were from Cambridge, your parents worked in this area affiliated with Harvard, you go to MIT. So you went once or two stops on the red

Spenser ([00:02:46](#)):

Line to

Jessica ([00:02:47](#)):

College?

Spenser ([00:02:48](#)):

I was very excited to be able to get out of the house and to be my own person and to go somewhere else. And I actually really wanted to go outside of Cambridge to, I dunno, some other college, but I applied to 15 schools in MIT. I didn't think I was going to go to MIT because I remember thinking being from the outside like, oh man, it's a bunch of nerds there and that's not who I am. But MIT was the best school I got into academically and it was like, well, I guess we're going here. I applied to all the Ivy Leagues and a whole bunch of other top schools and that was the best one. And I'm like, it's in Cambridge and I think a lot of the students from my high school who went there were extremely spiky on the science and math and not as much on other stuff.

(00:03:39):

Whereas I had other interests as well and so I just didn't think I was going to go there. But it turns out there's two sides to MIT. There's East Campus, which is what, when you think of the MIT stereotype of someone building a really cool hacker project and they build their own roller coasters and they play with fireworks and stuff like that. That's east campus. And then there's West Campus, which is kind of a more normal college experience. So I fit in much better. All the people I knew had gone to East Campus for my high school, but I was actually more of a West campus person. So it was a great experience and I love the school and I'm so lucky and better off for it.

Jessica (00:04:20):

Okay. Oh wow. Okay. And you actually graduated, right? Yes,

Spenser (00:04:24):

I did. Did not drop out. This was before it was cool to drop out.

Jessica (00:04:27):

Yeah. What year did you graduate?

Spenser (00:04:30):

2010.

Jessica (00:04:31):

Okay. And you are friends with Curtis, your co-founder?

Spenser (00:04:36):

Yeah, so we were living in the same dorm and actually the first time we met we didn't even say hi to each other. He was just playing video games. I can't remember if it was Super Smash Brothers or something else, you're just playing video games in the lounge in the dorm. And I just joined their group and started playing. We literally did not even say a word or say hi to each other at the start, but that was our sophomore year and that was how we became friends.

Jessica (00:05:03):

You didn't even need to communicate. I know you moved to, I think I read East Palo Alto, I think I read in your application. So tell us the story about how you moved to Silicon Valley.

Spenser (00:05:15):

So it actually starts with Drew Houseton and Arash and the Dropbox guys because when I was at MIT I did this programming competition called Battle Code, which is like MIT's largest program competition and a lot of Aaron Iba came out of that and a lot of,

Jessica (00:05:31):

He started it at Spencer I

Spenser ([00:05:32](#)):

Think. Yes, he started it. Is that right? Yeah. He basically created the modern version of Battle code where they got sponsors and funding and made it a big deal.

([00:05:40](#)):

So that was 2003. And then I got into it because it combined all these things. I loved it combined like video games and you program an AI and it's a competitive aspect to it and it's prestigious where you can get a good job if you do well in it. So one of the people I got introduced to through doing well in the competition was Drew and Arash and Albert Knee who had all been through it in prior years. And I remember meeting with Drew for the first time, I didn't even realize what a big deal he was and he was like, have you read Paul Graham's essays and startups? I'm like, I have no idea what that is. And so I started going into the rabbit hole and learning about startups. I'm like, wow, this could be something I legitimately do after college. I had no idea what I wanted to do.

([00:06:31](#)):

I thought I was maybe going to go into the nonprofit world and try to improve things out there. But as I started getting deeper and deeper into startups, I was like, man, am I capable of doing something like this straight out of school? And so I studied the question for a full year. I ended up getting a job in finance as a detour and ended up in Chicago for a year. But on nights and weekends I would just work on side projects. I'd try to meet with founders to understand what their journey was like. I'd read Hacker News and then I would try to recruit other people who from my graduating class to come start a company. And while it's more standard now for a lot of MIT students to go this path back then a lot of people would say they're interested but then would go to the safe job at Google. Curtis actually went to the safe job at Google like, Hey look, I want to do this with you, but I want to work for a year first. And I asked probably something like 20 different friends of mine to start a company with me and everyone was kind of nominally interested, but when it came to, Hey, this means leave your job, not make money, disappoint your parents

Carolynn ([00:07:45](#)):

To explain.

Spenser ([00:07:45](#)):

Yeah, that's the worst part. So I have a Chinese mom and she has 30 cousins, literally I'm not joking, it's 30. And what they do is they compare how their kids are doing all the time. How much money is your son or daughter making? Where are they living? What's their apartment? Do they have a car? Do they have a girlfriend, boyfriend, spouse? This is what they just talk to each other all the time on the phone and they just compare how their kids are doing. So I went from this very prestigious job in finance where I was making a lot of money and very, very society validating to nothing overnight and that what does your mom

Jessica ([00:08:27](#)):

Say? What does your mom say? My cousins will be disappointed.

Spenser ([00:08:32](#)):

I was going to do that no matter what. So from the time I was 18 and left to college, I was going to be my own person. She was like, oh man, I'm worried you're just going to go play video games all day and not do any work and all of that. Now the funny part was, so when I first left my job, I moved in with Curtis and I lived on a mattress on his apartment and his apartment.

Carolynn ([00:08:54](#)):

Spencer, I have a question, sorry to interrupt you. Going back when you were pitching your 20 friends to start a startup with you, were you pitching them on a specific idea which you are now working on that you were then started to work on when you were living with Curtis? Or is it just like, let's go do a startup, we'll come up with something?

Spenser ([00:09:11](#)):

Yeah, it was the second one. It was like, we'll figure out something. So we worked on all sorts of, we were just kids out of school then and we didn't know anything about anything about how to create a product people wanted. So the first thing we did, we tried to create a website for photographers. We created to create an outsourcing website. I think we applied to YC with the outsourcing website. And you guys very smartly rejected us. Yeah, we tried all sorts of funny side projects. And then when I started working with Curtis, the thing we came onto, and this was the first thing that actually got users, this was before he left Google, we worked on a website for alumni of our graduating class to share where they were living. So one of the biggest problems was you go all around the country and some internationally and you don't know who's where. So when you're visiting a city, you're like, okay, it's here or there, or how can I go see them? Social networks still haven't done this well today, which is interesting.

Carolynn ([00:10:05](#)):

I agree.

Spenser ([00:10:06](#)):

And so you just charted everyone on a map so that when you were visiting New York or Boston or San Francisco or London or wherever, you could just see what other alumni were there and go meet up with them. And it actually did well, I think we got half our class to sign up for it and put in their information, which was pretty cool. So it was like, wow, this is the first time we're actually having someone using a product we created. And so that was pretty cool, but I didn't know anything. I was just pitching them on the idea of working with a startup together. And different people would come in and out, they would work with us for a few months, but then like, nah, this isn't the right thing for me. But Curtis was the one person who remained very consistent throughout that time.

Carolynn ([00:10:47](#)):

So did he end up quitting after a year to join you full time?

Spenser ([00:10:51](#)):

Yes, he did. He did. I was nervous about it. I was like, man, if this guy doesn't come through, but he genuinely wanted to learn how to start a company and so he left his job at Google. Google. It was actually funny. They had structured it really well so that every three months there's some thing that you want. So there was the annual bonus and then there was your vesting date, and then there was the trip to Hawaii for his team. And then there was, they really did a good job of being like, Hey, you have to stay for this next three months, but he left and he was like, all right, we got to work on something real. So we got rid of what we call the alum map thing. This is where we started working on solar light and voice recognition because we're like, okay, this is probably the best idea that we come up with. This is a technology that just seems at the edge of possible, let's go. Let's try to create something here. And it was instantly motivating because it was similar to actually, we had done battle code together, that coding competition,

(00:11:52):

And it was very similar to in Battle Code. It's like he was working 12, 14 hours a day. I was working with him. We'd only take breaks to go out to eat when we needed to, and that was kind of it. And so we just work 12, 14 hours a day nonstop. And it was great. It was so much fun because it was just the two of us in it together. We were trying to come up with something and then we applied to YCS winner 12, I think about two months in something like that. And I remember during the interview, Paul Buhe was like, okay, this is totally going to fail, but I like you guys so we will accept you, but it's totally going to fail. And he was kind of right kind of wrong in that and I'm like, why do you think it's going to fail? He's like, well, just some big company that has the dataset, has the training and has the ML engineers, Google is going to do that. So anyway, so we got into YC and kind up,

Jessica (00:12:52):

I have to back things in there up. I'm sorry to get so specific, but I'm really curious quickly, this battle code thing at MIT, didn't it go on for a

Spenser (00:13:01):

Month? Yeah, so it's a three week competition and it's during this period at MIT called IEP independent activity period in January. And you can basically do whatever you want. You can take a class, you can travel, you can work on, they have all these cool hackathon type things that happened during this and this was one of the things you could do. And then we got really, really into it my junior year because it was like, okay, here's something I can sink my teeth into. And that was my first very intense go all in on any sort of project or competition or class.

Jessica (00:13:38):

What are battle coders? Can you describe, are there similarities between the people who you got really into it?

Spenser (00:13:48):

There's different archetypes. I mean we're all huge computer science nerds, huge in our own way. I'm not even that good, but I was just more of, I kind of didn't even study computer science. I studied biological engineering, which is a whole different story and wish I had done

computer science, but there were different, some of the top algorithms engineers would get into this. One guy made this whole genetic algorithm to try to create a bot, which was before any of the current AI stuff and probably too early. Others were really big math nerds. So Albert Knee and a lot of the early Dropboxers came from that stock. Others were kind of just the really hardcore CS academic people. Curtis was a big algorithms guy. And then I was just kind of peripherally just into video games and into coding. And honestly, it's one of these things where you don't need to be the best programmer in the world. You just need to care about winning and putting the time and the hours. And I practiced in the previous year's code beforehand, which nobody did. I just went all in on it my junior year.

Jessica ([00:15:02](#)):

Okay. I was just curious. I know it's a big source for recruiting, right?

Spenser ([00:15:07](#)):

Yeah, it is. We sponsored it last year and we actually got both one of the people on the winning team as well as the runner up to the competition as Amplitude interns this year, which was really cool.

Jessica ([00:15:20](#)):

Nice. Oh, I love that.

Spenser ([00:15:22](#)):

Yeah, it's amazing. It's probably, I think in retrospect, battle code is probably the closest to what starting a startup is while you're in school. Because the problem with classes, classes are focused on the learning and can you pass the test? Whereas this, it's like there is no test. The test is just do you understand whatever game has been created and can you iterate on that so that your AI is better than other people's? And so it's very much shipping a product, having to look at user feedback, iterating on it, and just doing that again and again and again when there's no real textbook for how you're supposed to build it. I

Jessica ([00:15:59](#)):

Love that. Okay, the second thing I just wanted to clarify before I make a comment on your interview was, so Solight was a text to voice app. How did you and Curtis choose this to work on?

Spenser ([00:16:13](#)):

We were just generating tons of ideas and we wanted to get something that was technically intense, so technically difficult and seemed like it was at the edge of possible. And so voice seems like a reasonable bet to do. I think in retrospect, we weren't just authentically passionate about voice interfaces in the same way some other people are. And so that just meant we did learn a lot about the problem by just seeing how people used it and using it ourselves and all of that, but we just weren't passionate enough about the technology to really make something great out of it. And in retrospect, you could say the technology just wasn't there. And still arguably, whether it's here today in terms of a user interface, it's like to make a user interface

leap. So it's like you go from command line interfaces to mouse and keyboard to with modern GUIs to touch screens and then voice.

(00:17:17):

It's not quite there. It has its own issues and its own constraints as a user interface. And so we were like, man, this just seems like at the edge of possible. We actually had this really cool, you probably remember this, Jessica, we had this really cool demo at demo day where I took my phone and I put it in my pocket and I had a conversation with my phone on stage and I'm like, I'm living in the future and it's awesome. And we got the room was so excited about it, we had developed this technology that allowed on Android phones for it. Listen in the background, now this is standard. You can be like, Hey Siri, or hey Alexa, or whatever. But back then no one had done that. And so we had actually developed a version of that on Android phones for the first time.

Jessica (00:18:01):

I do remember that. And I'm going to read something that I hope you're not angry with me about

Spenser (00:18:06):

Spencer. Oh, please tell us about how terrible we were.

Jessica (00:18:09):

No, it's an email that you sent to Paul and it said, thanks for coordinating the applause today. It ended up going great, and Paul said, this is about demo day. And Paul said, incidentally, that's the first time we ever did such a thing. I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone about it.

Spenser (00:18:30):

Well wait,

Jessica (00:18:30):

What happened? What was the story?

Spenser (00:18:32):

I need some context. I remember exactly. So this was 13 years ago, so I think we're okay to tell this. So it was a really impressive technical demo where

(00:18:45):

You talk to your phone without even pressing buttons and just it would be in your pocket and it'd be like, wow, this is so futuristic. This is kind of what everyone imagines voice control to be. And I can't remember if it was at the alumni demo day or just to the batch when we did the presented to all our batch mates, but the room actually thought it was quite cool and started clapping. Now Paul knew that investors are much less easily impressed and aren't going to clap at a thing. And so he's like, oh wow, this is actually really effective. We should start a clack. And I remember Jessica, you asked him, Hey Paul, what's a clack? And then he went on this long thing about how during the Renaissance would have artists would have people

planted in the audience who would clap and cheer for whatever music or art or whatever thing they were performing in order to get the rest of the audience to do so as well. So anyway, so that was the sort of, and it actually happened to work, and I remember all the YC partnership, Hardge was like, and all the investors did the same thing. And it was really cool because to your point that I don't think that was not a normal thing at yc.

Jessica ([00:20:02](#)):

No.

Spenser ([00:20:02](#)):

And we actually got tons of press out of it.

Jessica ([00:20:04](#)):

I love it. So wait, I don't want to skip ahead to demo day yet because I wanted the interview, which I remember everyone loved you both, but there were sort of about the idea, but this was a prime example of YC by then had learned to fund the founders, not the idea. And it was so clear that everyone in that room thought that U2 were such strong founders and programmers, but they were a little skeptical about the idea PB being one of them. But you got some traction in the three months did, right? And you had a good demo day, right? So what happened?

Spenser ([00:20:45](#)):

Yeah, we had a few hundred thousand downloads. So somebody who was not our friends was using it. That was cool and we had a lot of excitement at demo day. I think what we saw was it was very hard to get users to stick around because they try it out once or twice. It'd be a cool tech demo, maybe a few would go on to use it, but you didn't get this group of very passionate users about it. And so one of the things we did was we, and this is what led to Amplitude later, is we built our own analytics because we wanted to understand, there was this one particular question we had, which is how much does the accuracy of the voice recognition matter for the long-term retention of a user? If someone has a successful match event, does that mean they're much more likely to stick around?

([00:21:33](#)):

So we ended up spending all this time building this whole data analytics infrastructure to answer this. Turns out it matters a tremendously, you're twice as likely to stick around if you have a successful match event than if you don't on your first try of using the app. But we realized that we could not get the quality high enough to where it would often fail the first time someone tried to use it because the quality of the technology was not high enough and we were just using some unauthorized Google API and so it's not like we could under improve what was behind the scenes on that. We could do some hacks on top of it, but we couldn't actually improve the core voice recognition. And we also talked to a number of other companies in the voice recognition space and it was going to be hard to, we didn't have the expertise and the underlying algorithms. We just had the user interface on top and it was going to be hard to create something that was successful and had traction without being able to improve on the voice recognition itself.

Carolynn ([00:22:37](#)):

Was it actually impossible to build this on iPhone? Did you have to build it on Android because there was just no way Apple was going to tolerate any shadow APIs or anything like that?

Spenser ([00:22:49](#)):

So it wasn't actually the shadow APIs, it was on Android at the time. Apps could run in the background and so you could keep the microphone open even if the app were closed and still do other stuff on your phone. And then you could say text by voice and then the thing would pop up and you could receive text messages just by talking to your phone. And so Android phones had that capability. Apple still doesn't, very aggressive about not letting stuff run in the background. So yeah, that was the why.

Jessica ([00:23:21](#)):

Okay, interesting. So though you guys built some software to analyze the data, your user behavior, can you tell us how the kernel of Amplitude got started while you were doing solight?

Spenser ([00:23:39](#)):

So it was so obvious to us that the way to build this product was to look at what your users were doing. It was like, yeah, see how they're using it, what they're using it for, what they like, what they don't like, where they're getting stuck, why they keep coming back. It was just so obvious to us the way you do this, because we have internet connected products. It's not like in the old days where you'd chip out a CD and you have no clue how someone's running your software at a desktop. It's like you can actually see it in real time. And so obviously the way you make your product better is by looking at that. And so we tried a bunch of off the shelf things, Google Analytics, flurry others, and none of them could answer the question I had talked about earlier.

([00:24:15](#)):

So we're like bunch of two engineers with a bunch of hubris. We're like, of course we will build it ourselves. We started with a SQL Light database and then we moved to these others over time as we scaled what we were trying to do, and we actually got some very good insight out of this, we found out that the accuracy of the first match was incredibly important and so we could spend a bunch of time tuning that. Now when we showed this to other members in our batch who had much more successful companies, I remember talking to the Plan Grid founders. I remember talking to the Gusto founders, I was like, clearly you guys are probably going to be doing something more sophisticated. We don't have our stuff together, but you guys do as a company. But they were like, no, I have no idea how people are using our product. And I'm like, how are you improving it? So anyway, that ended up, they were then like, well that's really cool. Can I get this what you're using to build this too? And so that was the first signal that there was an opportunity there to turn that whole thing into a company.

Carolynn ([00:25:21](#)):

How far after the batch are these conversations happening? So it's Winter 12 is when you had demo day and then what's the timeline?

Spenser ([00:25:31](#)):

This was both at the tail end of the batch and right after it, I can't remember. Demo day must have been in March or April then and then yeah, we ended up deciding to wind down Sunlight in May and then we came on to deciding to do this full-time in June.

Carolynn ([00:25:47](#)):

So this is all happening in 2012. This is not years

Spenser ([00:25:51](#)):

Of work once after another

Carolynn ([00:25:52](#)):

Whatever. So you didn't go and you didn't take any money and go hire a team. It's still just you and Curtis. You're still just figuring out and that's when you pivot basically.

Spenser ([00:26:02](#)):

Totally. Yeah. We had raised about 120 K in Angel funding. This was an addition to the 150 from Start Fund at the time. And then I was so funny, I was convinced one of the angels actually invested in us because we won one of the lamest companies in the batch

Jessica ([00:26:20](#)):

Because I'm like,

Spenser ([00:26:20](#)):

This makes no sense otherwise. This was Adam Draper actually. Yeah, Tim Draper's son.

Jessica ([00:26:27](#)):

Why would he have invested in you as the thinking? You're the lamest.

Spenser ([00:26:30](#)):

I think his actual algorithm was to invest in the youngest founders in the batch, which included us because I just looked at all these, I looked at all of his other investments and I'm like, man, all these companies don't seem like they have their stuff together and are going,

Jessica ([00:26:44](#)):

It's a bias

Spenser ([00:26:45](#)):

For young. That must be why

Jessica ([00:26:46](#)):

I think he saw your promise

Spenser ([00:26:49](#)):

To his credit, I think he was so early. He's sometimes too early to stuff, but you'd much rather be that in venture.

Jessica ([00:26:59](#)):

That's so funny. I do remember you guys look pretty young. I mean now of course there's the 18 year olds going through yc,

Spenser ([00:27:05](#)):

But that's nuts. That is

Jessica ([00:27:07](#)):

Nuts. You

Carolynn ([00:27:09](#)):

Think

Spenser ([00:27:11](#)):

One of the things that I was actually, in retrospect, I'm so appreciative is you've given those who are younger, an alternative path from existing institutions which just have not been kind to millennials or Gen Z, which I think is so amazing. The hard part about being young is that, okay, so there's this famous Harvard Business School study that looks at elements of world-class performance and it says there's three big ones, deliberate practice over 10,000 hours expert coaching and then enthusiastic family support. And so you really need the second one, which is it's so much faster to learn something from someone else. It's like what Isaac Newton said. It's like if I've seen further, I've stood on the shoulders of giants, he wouldn't have been able to invent calculus if algebra hadn't been very fleshed out by that time. Same thing as a young 20-year-old. You need to be able to learn off of someone. And so one of the things I've just been so tremendously appreciative about Jessica, what you and Paul and Carolyn and YC has done as a whole is that it's provided a place where all these people can go and learn how to do that. And so they know that they can get that expert coaching.

Carolynn ([00:28:26](#)):

Can we touch on one thing real quick? You mentioned family support is one of the three

Spenser ([00:28:30](#)):

Enthusiastic family support.

Carolynn ([00:28:32](#)):

And so I'm wondering, and this may be skipping ahead a little bit, but at what point did your mom start bragging about you to the cousins? How long did it take before she was like My son Spencer?

Spenser ([00:28:46](#)):

I actually don't know. I actually don't know. She's quite the character. Every story she tells, it always ends with why she's the best. That's the punchline of the story. So you can just say that and you'll cut to the end. So I actually don't know. I don't know. Yeah, I think probably midway through once we had raised a few rounds of funding and look legitimate.

Jessica ([00:29:10](#)):

So let's pick up though, because you are changing your idea. You say, gosh, it seems like we have some interest in this analytics tools that we've been using. What happened next?

Spenser ([00:29:24](#)):

So that was June, we decided to go all in on that. And this time around, one of the mistakes we had made during Solight was we had not been close to the users of our product. And so we did user interview studies once in a while, but it's not like we were religious users and it's not like we spent lots of time with them. And that was a huge mistake. We just build, you know how to do as an engineer. As an engineer, you see a problem, you can go fix it, you build a thing, that's what gives you joy, that's how you're wired. This whole talking to users thing, it's like how do you even do that? How do you get into a good loop where you're getting feedback? And so we said, alright, we need to make sure we're not making the same mistake.

([00:30:04](#)):

And so before we build anything, let's just go talk to a lot of people. And so we set a goal, we wanted to talk to 30 companies before starting anything on the analytics side just to see if there was enough there. So we did that. We spent a month doing that. And of those 30, I think we concluded probably about seven would actually use this if we built it and we're like, you know what? That's good enough. Let's go for it. What's really ironic though is in retrospect, none of those seven ended up being long-term customers of Amplitude. None of them actually wanted to pay. And so it was about a year of just building and just begging anyone we knew to use the product in the early days. So we just give it to them for free, we'd hope they use it. And then the idea was sometime later we asked them for money, and that was the next year from June of 2012 to 2013.

([00:30:55](#)):

And then we met our first real customer. And I've told this story a bunch of times, but we went to this mobile slots casino gaming company and this company called 12 Gigs. And we went in, I gave the demo and we got to the end of it and he asked me a question I'd never been asked before, which is how much does this cost? And I'm like, what? I thought I was going to have to beg you to use this, but you're asking me how much does it cost? And so I was like, okay, what's the right answer on this? And I first thought \$50 a month, but I remember Patrick McKenzie patio eleven's advice about Just ask for as much money as you can. And so I'm like, all right, what's the biggest number I can say? So I came up with a thousand dollars a month, and his reaction was like, wow, that's so cheap. And I was like, oh my God. In that moment, I was validated in everything I ever wanted to do, which is to get someone to buy software I'd built. I'm a real business person now, but the difference between that was the 50

Jessica ([00:31:48](#)):

And a thousand thousand. That's massive.

Spenser ([00:31:50](#)):

That's big. Yeah, you had some real nerve there. Well, I just was following the advice. It was like, okay, a thousand was the biggest number I could think I was, I started at 50 and then I was like, you know what? Let me double it to a hundred. And I'm like, that's not big enough. Let me just put a zero in front of it and just see how they react. And to me, a thousand dollars a month was so much money at the time, but to them they had bigger problems and it was nothing. And it was like, if this thing can solve it, yeah, easy, no-brainer transaction.

Jessica ([00:32:21](#)):

And did he start paying that and was he pleased with your service?

Spenser ([00:32:27](#)):

Yeah, that was the first real customer we had. They started using it. They gave us tons of feedback. We'd go over to their offices regularly to see how we could make it better and to see how they used it. They would grow the amount of data they sent us so we would charge even more. It grew to 2000 and 3000. And the reason he was actually so excited about, I didn't realize this at the time, but the reason he was so excited about it was because he was a former product manager at Zynga and Zynga at the time. They had this huge internal analytics system. It was something like Z Analytics, and they were so used to building their mobile and social games by looking at data. And it was so obvious that this was to do it. Now that he had left to start his own company, he had nothing. He had no idea what was going on.

([00:33:14](#)):

And so he was willing to use something that was so nascent and embryonic and crappy and no track record from these young, I think we were 24-year-old founders at this point who didn't know anything, who hadn't sold software before in their life because he was so desperate for something to solve this problem. And that actually was the archetype for so many of our early customers. We had actually, we started meeting a lot of people in the Zynga Zynga network who had gone on to other companies and they saw the value in what we were doing, and that was they became a lot of our early customers and investors.

Jessica ([00:33:55](#)):

That's fascinating because they used to have a robust system at proprietary at Zynga, and so they then left and wanted this, and you guys were the only ones doing it. What about your competitors? They weren't offering what you did.

Spenser ([00:34:09](#)):

Surprisingly no know. What I think the market had concluded at the time was that there wasn't money in the analytics, so you had to go build something else. So the main competitor at the time was this company called Flurry, and they had pivoted from an analytics platform into an ad network, and their analytics was kind of very shallow. So the questions I asked about, okay, what predicts long-term retention? They weren't able to answer, and neither was Google or Adobe or anyone else off the Mixpanel or Kissmetrics or anyone else off the shelf at the time. And so we said, look, let's just exclusively focuses on this problem and let's go deep and just let's build whatever they asked for. And that started Amplitude's Ascent where it was actually

very straightforward. It was like, you go talk to these customers, you ask them what will they pay for if you build it, you go build that thing, they'll pay for it, and you just do that again and again and again.

(00:35:08):

Then that's been the whole growth of the company from zero to a hundred million is just doing that better and deeper than anyone else. That's the great thing about B2B is analytics was kind of a perfect problem for us in retrospect. We did the battle code thing. We were kind of algorithms, distributed systems, computer science nerds, in contrast to voice recognition with analytics, it's precise and you can get an exact answer, and it's just a question of how do you get that answer more efficiently? And so we were able to do that in a way that no one else we saw out there was. And so we just kind of ended up, it wasn't about we had one magic feature, you just build the next thing and the next thing and the next thing that your customers asked for.

Carolynn (00:35:54):

Spencer, did you guys have to raise you? Obviously someone wanted to pay you, you were going to generate revenue, but did you raise money before that happened to build a team or anything?

Spenser (00:36:05):

We did, which you could argue whether it was the right thing to do. So we raised a \$2 million seed round in 2013, and it took us about nine months to raise that thing. It was brutal and rough because most people had the exact same conclusion you guys did in yc, which is like, yeah, analytics, I don't want to invest in this, but Spencer and Curtis seem interesting. And so we were managed to scrape it together from 20 different angels. I remember the first vc, this company called Meris, this firm called Meris Capital, and this guy Peter Singh, fortunately he passed away a bunch of years ago. So we hyped up battle code as this amazing thing and we're all the smartest and best and it's just some college competition, but we hyped this up. We're all the best founders and most managing engineers come out of. And we hyped that up to him. And so he's like, all, all right, I'll put money into you guys. We ended up, we got from Data Collective and Matt oco and SV Angel and a bunch of other folks, and we managed to scrape together a seed round after way too long, fundraising. And then we added a third co-founder around that time, Jeffrey Wang, and then started hiring out an early team. And then I switched full time from the engineering side because Jeffrey had joined and Curtis could partner with someone else to work on the product to just going out talking to customers and selling them.

Carolynn (00:37:28):

When did you change the name?

Spenser (00:37:31):

I don't even remember. Sometime in 2013. And I just reached out to, I came up with a list of 500 different domains that one word domains that I thought would be good. And I wrote a Python script to just automatically email the owners of those domains with a bid just being like,

Hey, I'll pay you \$5,000 for your domain. And amplitude.com was the best one that came back out of that group.

Carolynn ([00:37:58](#)):

It's a great name.

Spenser ([00:37:59](#)):

Yeah, it is like one word. It's clear. It's got the standard of alphabet positioning. It's related to charts and graphs. It has a wave ride the wave sort of thing, so I love it.

Jessica ([00:38:11](#)):

So you've moved into, is it fair to say high resolution analytics for people?

Spenser ([00:38:18](#)):

Yes. Yes. That's a great way to put it.

Jessica ([00:38:19](#)):

Okay. So you have that, you shift into sales. Is sales, does it come easy to you or did it seem unnatural? I'm very curious how you and sales got along at first.

Spenser ([00:38:35](#)):

There were parts of it that I think I understood and got, and there were parts of it that I did not. So I hired this coach named Mitch Mardo who had done, he was like an ex, he was a sales leader at a number of companies and he was just going around helping out engineers learn the craft of sales. And it turns out sales is as deep and complex and important to the problem to a business's success as the engineering. And I had seen at that point, this was a few years into the company, I'd seen so many companies where these brilliant engineers had created these incredible products, but because they weren't willing to go learn this, they never got success. And so they'd lose against much worse products and much worse companies because of that. And I'm like, all right, whatever this thing is, I got to go learn it now.

([00:39:28](#)):

You naturally learn how to be a salesperson as part of being a company builder. You're always selling your company, you're recruiting people, you're selling yourself to yc, to investors, to your batch mates. And I go back to one thing Paul has always said, which is just have a good product and then you will then be convicted that a customer using that will be better off for it and that authenticity will come through. And that's most of it honestly, in terms of just sharing your passion for whatever you're doing with someone. And I've been very, very passionate about analytics. And so that just naturally comes through. Now, there are other parts of the process which are more scientific, which I had no clue about. So as an example, one thing I thought, you just show up to a meeting, give the demo and be like, you want to buy the thing. Turns out very, very different from a process standpoint. Instead you want to see, okay, what is the customer trying to solve and what's their pain? And Ken, does that match up of against what you do? And so Mitch would always, I'd have a weekly meeting with him and we'd talk about the customers I talked to and I'd be like, I talked to this customer, I demoed our cool

product, I talked to this customer, I demoed pro product. He's like, first you got totally wrong. You're talking about yourself, not the customer.

(00:40:36):

Second, you got to tell me what the business pain is. And I'd be like, well, they want some dashboards to replace sql. And he's like, Spencer, that's not a business Paine. And so after enough weeks of just having this question of what's the pain beaten into me, I would then start to ask why in these customer conversations, alright, you want these dashboards? Why is that? How is that impacting your business? Why is this so important? Who in your business cares what happens if this doesn't? You start to really understand who they are as people and what they're trying to do. And then that made it much easier to very naturally sell. Then you're not talking about yourself. You're talking about, oh, okay, cool. Well if we do this for you, it can solve the fact that you have all these data analysts writing SQL all the time and nobody on your executive team knows what's going on, or it solves this problem where your product team has no idea if the features they're launching are going to be successful.

(00:41:26):

It very naturally feeds into, okay, it's your story and here's how I can help your story. Anyway, so I learned, learned a whole bunch of other things. I learned to, one of the very specific things is timeline. So you want to say, okay, great. When you're going from zero to one, you're basically going to sell your product as cheap as it takes for someone to buy it now. So you'd be like, okay, well how can a decision on this in the next week? And you name a day. And then you also say, alright, well what price? It's like, well, the price is too high. It's like, okay, well what price do we need to make it happen today or tomorrow or this week? And then they'd say, it'd be like, cool, we can do it. And you just go, because getting the reps in and just getting customers who are paying something, you don't really care about optimizing the price till later.

(00:42:13):

So anyway, you learn all these things about the art and science of sales. I think the biggest thing, I'd say the biggest mistake I see engineers making is they think they will pick up a book to learn this thing. And while there's some fine books and find frameworks out there, there is nothing that beats one doing it and two, getting expert coaching on doing it. It's like if you tried to learn how to play soccer by reading a book, it's like you're not do play soccer and then get coaching once in a while to direct you about how you can get to the next level. It's the same thing in sales.

Jessica (00:42:47):

Pearls of wisdom right here. Yes. No, it's so useful because it's so true. Nothing is better than just doing it and learning from someone who's very good at it and also making a bunch of mistakes

Carolynn (00:42:59):

And learning from those mistakes.

Spenser (00:43:00):

Totally. Yeah. The rule I have is you want to, learning from someone else is 10 times faster than learning yourself. Now, there's some things you're going to have to learn yourself. Nobody is going to teach you better about your customers than directly. But how to run a sales process that has been done millions of times out there. And so there are people you can bootstrap off of their learning and grow so much more quickly. Before I met Mitch, I was like, I didn't know what I was doing. And so I was wasting a lot of time with customers who didn't have pain and were never going to pay us money. And instead what I should have been focused on is the reality is just go find other customers who do want to pay and then follow their cent and then chase that down. And so I wish I had started that learning process earlier. And it's funny, these skills, they scale up to the sales skills, scales up. You look at Sam Altman and what he's done with open AI and he's the world's greatest salesman. It's the exact same thing. It is a core skill for any entrepreneur to learn, and there's a playbook on how to do it. And getting coaching and advice from others is much, much faster than trying to figure it out all yourself.

Jessica ([00:44:15](#)):

So you're growing, you're doing really well. I kind of want to hear about going public. Me too. The direct

Spenser ([00:44:25](#)):

Listings. Yes, yes, yes. So many things for us to talk about in that.

Jessica ([00:44:30](#)):

I know

Spenser ([00:44:31](#)):

The best advice I actually heard was that the listing itself is the wedding and it's much more important to focus on the long-term marriage. So build the successful company. Don't worry about the event itself. So there's a lot of mystique. Public markets are one of the kind of great systems of capitalism, and so there's a lot of mystique about it. But one of the things I've come to appreciate is public market investors give you a lot of latitude to define your business however you want. There's certain things you're required to report that's expected to report, like you need to report your quarterly financials that the SEC and other groups require a review. But outside of that, you can kind of define, here's what I'm trying to do with my business and why, and here's where we're going. And all the great CEOs have done this and don't get too wound up on getting pushed around by the institutions and systems that exist in public markets.

([00:45:27](#)):

So I'll talk about the listing and I'll talk about what happened after the listing. Even though I got that advice, and even though I knew it, I still was a little too focused on the wedding and the listing itself versus the company afterwards. I remember there was a set of executives at that time that I should have changed out and I knew were not the right long-term fit, but I did not because I'm like, I don't want to disturb the boat before we go out, but that was actually the best time to change them out from a position of strength. And yeah, you'll have to answer questions, but you're going to have to answer questions about whatever you do. And if you let

it drag out more, it'll become more of a problem and more of an issue and it'll blow up in your face even further.

(00:46:05):

You have to run the business the right way to make the thing succeed, not to pretty it up for public markets. And so the one thing I will say on the listing itself on wedding planning itself that I strongly advise companies going public is do a direct listing for the love of God. Do a direct listing. So I was in finance for a year before I came out, and one of the things you learn in finance is it's very, very transactional doggy dog world. And everyone's always looking to make a dollar off of anything traditional. IPO processes are the biggest arbitrage, existing arbitrage opportunity in all of finance. And they're taking advantage of CEOs and management teams that are going through this process for the first time when the reality is they are leaving tens or hundreds of millions of dollars and giving it away for free to public market investors because people want their stock price to go up, or people want a good news article about themselves, or they're just too afraid to buck the trend.

(00:47:08):

A direct listing, what a direct listing does instead is it opens your stock the same way every single other stock opens every day, which is with an auction process. So you have a number of buyers, you have a number of sellers, and wherever they meet in the middle, that's the price. And so you're getting a market-based price. It could be high, it could be low, but at least it's fulfilled by supply and demand in the market. Whereas a traditional listing process has you artificially pick out a price, and it's like the difference between centrally planned prices versus market driven prices. And so inevitably bankers, what they want to do is they want to, their real clients are their public market investors. They're going to do multiple transactions with these guys, whereas you're only going to go public once.

(00:47:56):

I remember, I heard on one listing, a banker threatened to withhold the listing and stop the process because the public company wanted to push, or the soon to be public company wanted to push the price too high. And it's like the one paying the bankers millions or tens of millions of dollars in some cases. And you're telling me you're not going to do it because, okay, well you're supposed to be a fiduciary to me. What the fuck? So anyway, so the whole thing is this giant racket. There's this one professor from the University of Florida, Jay Ritter, who studied this thing ad nauseum. So look up any of his data if you don't trust my word. And there's lots of people in the system like Bill Gurley and others who have taught quite extensively about this. But that's my number one thing. Just have the courage to do it. And there's been enough companies that have done it by now, it's not a big deal because then you're not giving away equity for free. You want to give equity to people who have earned it, who have worked hard for your company, not to public market investors. So that's my one wedding planning advice.

Carolynn (00:48:58):

So you obviously came to this with your own, you knew because you worked in finance.

Spenser (00:49:02):

Yes.

Carolynn ([00:49:02](#)):

But how much pushback did you get from other people around you?

Spenser ([00:49:06](#)):

Believe it or not, the biggest pushback was internal on our board. So public market investors, they actually don't care because it's been standard enough. And yeah, there are some who will whine and cry about the good old days where they got to rip companies off, but most of them have moved past that. 95% of them moved past that. And we'll just buy companies wherever it is.

([00:49:27](#)):

The bankers, they also don't care. You have to find the right ones that will do it. But we went with Morgan Stanley and they're on the bleeding edge of this, so they're good with it. Analysts also don't care. There's some tweaks to the process you have to do, but they're minor and it just doesn't matter. Believe it or not, it was actually fear from our existing board of directors. And we have a very strong, great board of directors. At the time, we had Eric Visia from Benchmark, and they're one of the top VCs. We had Pat Grady from Sequoia. It's not people that are going to be pushed around, but in spite of that, they were still like, well, maybe we should consider a regular. And I'm like, no way am I signing up for that. No way. So I'm like, alright, look, to entertain you guys, I'll go through this process of evaluating this, but the conclusion is going to be we're going to do a direct listing. So I'm just telling you now,

Jessica ([00:50:13](#)):

Wow, good for you. I know I'm so impressed

Spenser ([00:50:17](#)):

In retrospect, I should have focused on upgrading my management team and the business, but that was one, just from being in the finance world, I was just very tired of getting companies that had gotten so ripped off on this thing.

Carolynn ([00:50:30](#)):

Yeah, I'm actually surprised how many underwritten offerings there still are. Yeah,

Spenser ([00:50:35](#)):

It'll change. It'll change. I think so too. It's a very fear-based thing. It's like, well, I don't have the confidence, so I need all these fake systems to support me. Now

([00:50:43](#)):

Let me talk quickly about my biggest mistake. So my biggest mistake was not focusing on changing the business and the team and the way it needed to be changed. And I had to do that after listing, which needed to be done one way or another, but was even more painful. One of the mistakes I made, I knew our stock was high. I didn't know how high, but I knew we were in a hot overheated market at the time. SaaS was the best thing since sliced bread back in 2021. And I remember I wanted to communicate that to public markets in an appropriate way. I'd be like, ah, stuff is high right now. Something like that. I remember my I, investor relations and PR

people were absolutely terrified of me saying anything like that. They're like, no, you have to pump up your stock. You have to do it.

(00:51:27):

And I'm like, well, I think it legitimately is high now. We should signal that in some way so that people don't get burned. And they're like, no, no, no, no, we can't do that. That's not the best practice. And I'm like, alright, you guys are the experts. I'll listen to you. Massive, massive mistake in retrospect, because we came off, we're now off about 90% from all time highs. A lot of people lost a lot of money on public market amplitude. I wish I had signaled that earlier so that the volatility would not have been as drastic. And so people would know, and I'm the one still here at, none of those people are here at the company anymore. I'm the one still here having to live this thing and run with this thing. And I wish I had done that to signal so it wouldn't have gotten so crazy. And so it would've helped my credibility and all these other things too.

(00:52:10):

And so that was a huge mistake. Now, there are ways to do that. To be clear, you don't want to go out and be like, our stock's too high. You should sell you. You don't panic everyone. But there are ways to do it. Sam Altman did this recently on the AI side. He had some dinner with journalists a few months ago where he is like, yeah, there's going to be a bunch of people lose money on this AI thing and stuff is kind of heated up right now. So there are ways to signal and communicate this thing, but that was one of my biggest regret in terms of communicating with the public markets.

Jessica (00:52:37):

I feel like that's a Spenser Skates founder mode moment, founder mode moment. Yeah,

Carolynn (00:52:41):

Yeah. No, I totally agree.

Jessica (00:52:43):

Brian Chesky was always saying, everyone's telling you what to do, and by the way, they're not in with the company anymore and you're left holding the bag with their bad decisions that they forced you to do.

Spenser (00:52:53):

I remember my head of IR at that point when our stock came off in early 2022, he immediately quit. And I'm like, what the fuck, man? I don't need you here to sell this when the stock is high. I need you to sell my stock when it's

Jessica (00:53:06):

Low.

Spenser (00:53:07):

He's like, well, the story has changed. And I'm like, anyway, my own fault. You're the ceo, so buck stops with you. So ultimately, so it is one of these trial by fire. The way to learn the lesson is through pain. I will say in defense of, again, there is a reason you hire experience and you hire these executives and you hire these advisors because they have learned this thing, but you at the same time, you have to remember you are the one that owns the success. At the end of the day, you cannot delegate that or outsource it to someone else. And so you should incorporate that feedback as a data point in your judgment, but don't substitute it for the judgment itself.

Jessica ([00:53:53](#)):

Yeah, exactly. That's perfect advice. Paul told me something interesting that I had no idea before you went public, you simulated being public.

Spenser ([00:54:05](#)):

Oh yeah, yeah. This was actually really, can you tell the story? Thank goodness we did. This was actually, I wanted to harden up the Amplitude team to feel what it was like being a public company. And so what I would do at every all hands, so we had all hands every week I would share a fake update on the stock price. What I did was I thought about, okay, what is the worst possible thing to happen to a company? Well, probably that you have a huge runup and people get really excited and then it comes off really down and hard and even worse than where you started.

([00:54:37](#)):

So I simulated that. So I'd given an update being like, Hey, we went out at this valuation, which was our last round. Hey, we doubled our valuation. How do you feel about that? Hey, we just went down. How do you feel about that? Then I remember talking to some public company CFOs at the time, and this one had this one story, which is they were picking up their mail in their apartment building and one of their neighbors who they never even talked to came up to them and be like, oh yeah, your stock has some chop in it, doesn't it? And it's just like, who the fuck are you? So I told that story and I'm like, yeah, you're walking your dog and your neighbor comes by and starts to comment on how badly your stock is doing. How do you feel on that? You want to make it real for them.

([00:55:18](#)):

And so that was very, very important. Now, as it turns out, we very unfortunately had that exact same trajectory when we went out, we went out, we had this massive runup, and so people got all excited and being like, okay, we're going to go take over the world. And then we had this giant rundown and then it went further down and it was just absolutely brutal. And so it was very important to instill that mentality into the company about how to understand because in the short term, we do not control such things. We only control the success of the company in the long term, and if we do that, the stock and everything else will reflect that. So it was actually, thank goodness we did that. I recommend CEOs doing that and thank goodness we did it. I remember I got pushback internally at the time because they're like, whoa, you don't want to freak people out about the stock price? I'm like, no. If they're going to get freaked out about a fake stock price, why are they here? This is trading for the real thing, guys. That was one of the few things I do think we did right to create the right expectation in the organization.

Carolynn ([00:56:14](#)):

So you've been a public company CEO for roughly four years.

Spenser ([00:56:17](#)):

Yeah, four years, yeah.

Carolynn ([00:56:18](#)):

And I'm sure you don't have any regrets probably. Absolutely not. Right. But I

Spenser ([00:56:25](#)):

Mean, I wish I had focused more on the marriage instead of the wedding, as they say. That was my biggest one. But I'm happy we went out public. I'm so happy with Amplitude. I'm long-term bullish on what it is we're doing and I'm committed to this thing for the long term.

Carolynn ([00:56:40](#)):

I say that only because there are some examples, peers at YC who have decided not to go public. They're huge companies, but they're just like, yeah, the public company thing, not for me. And I wonder, it sounds like you don't have any of that. It was the right decision. You're very happy with the way things are going.

Spenser ([00:56:58](#)):

You have to understand the game. It's not, so I do think you have a little bit of an obligation to the employees, investors and other shareholders to eventually get them liquidity through public markets. Now there's secondaries and you can argue whether those are good or not, but it forces a bunch of discipline on the company that you may not get through other ways. Now you have to be very careful because again, you have a lot of wedding planners who will try to overly plan your wedding when you own the marriage. So just remember who's in charge of what at the end of the day. So I say a few things. One is that public markets give you a lot of latitude to define your business and what you're doing with it. The one reason not to go public is if you have a lot of uncertainty over the next few years on your revenue, if you have a lot of uncertainty, that is a good reason not to go public.

([00:57:43](#)):

But if you meet that bar and you're say a few hundred million plus in revenue, then there's in my mind, not really a reason to do it. It gives you a bunch of tools you wouldn't have otherwise. We've been able to acquire a bunch of four different companies in the last year because we have a liquid stock currency. We're also able to attract different types of talent. It's also gives us a credibility of long-term staying power boost with the ecosystem. So with our customers, with analysts, whenever someone's evaluating us versus our competitors, the only guy that's public. And then the process itself, yes, there is some bureaucracy and some overhead. So it costs us probably a million and a half a year just to run all the things we do. But they're not bad practices like auditing your company that you probably should be doing anyway and preparing financials and then the earnings calls themselves instead of in private markets, it's the same thing.

([00:58:39](#)):

You're used to pitching, raising around every two years or whatever it is. This is a little different. You got to do this every quarter, but it's less intense. So it's the same muscle except just done in a little bit of a different construction. And so the one downside I will say that I don't like about it is because you have a liquid stock. We're a high beta company and that moves up and down freaking all the time for no reason most of the time, for nothing to do with anything we've done. So macro's good or bad, there's new tariffs in place. This person won the election versus this other one. Fed announced an interest rate, cut all sorts of stuff that's unrelated to your execution. And that can be frustrating or I don't care actually personally because I've been in financial markets before, I understand what this is and we're just very long-term on it. And price can fluctuate how it wants, but it does make it a little harder to plan. And then I think executives who are very compensation oriented can index very highly on that, which drives their moods up and downs, which can be a little frustrating. And they know my feeling on it, which is like, guys, we're going to be in this for the longterm and focus on the stuff we can control. But it still inevitably seeps out from time to time.

Jessica ([00:59:56](#)):

I would get so frustrated if I had employees always checking the stock price day to day, I'd be like, just forget it. Relax. It's a long-term thing here.

Spenser ([01:00:07](#)):

It's hard. If they could somehow the, I understand it's important for public markets, you trade and there's a price and it's market clearing price, and that's what it is. I'm not emotional about it, but I think because other people in the organization do get emotional, you end up having to respond to that. So it's frustrating, but it's what it is.

Carolynn ([01:00:27](#)):

This is a Gary Tan phrase. You got to catch their feelings.

Spenser ([01:00:30](#)):

Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Jessica ([01:00:32](#)):

So Gary, I love it. Before we started the podcast, we were having a quick conversation and you said something that I wrote down. I want you to talk about it. You said as you become more successful, and now that you're a public company, it's easy to want to be more private and conservative about what you say,

Spenser ([01:00:50](#)):

Conservative,

Jessica ([01:00:51](#)):

Conservative. And you are like, I strive to be unfiltered and direct as I grow. And can you talk about

Spenser ([01:00:59](#)):

That? This is a holdover from what I think of as 1950s corporate America who has kind of set the tone for what does an executive look like. And so because of that, and that's carried all the way through tech and into Silicon Valley in the latest generation of larger private companies, and there's a certain persona you have to have where you're in control and you have everything on the time. You don't have opinions that offend anyone. You don't say anything that might get you into trouble. You don't pass strong judgments about the right way to do something because you want to get along with everyone because you're the king in the kingdom and you want to make sure everyone in the kingdom is taken care of and everything else. And so that's the very 1950s corporate. There's a particular corporate speak that just drives people off the wall, which is like, what are you even saying?

([01:01:55](#)):

I mean, you guys do a really good job of beating this out of people and YC in terms of how to be concise and direct and clear on what it is you're saying. And so that's the way a lot of the ecosystem is traditionally trained. And so a lot of founders, when they go public or they become larger, they think they have to adopt the same way. Now what I think we've seen is that there is actually a real hunger for strong points of view in an ecosystem. I mean, the founder mode with Brian Chesky was a phenomenal example of that where he really was passionate about how to run Airbnb. And I mean, Elon's another kind of really wild example of it too, where people actually respect and gravitate to strong points of view. And there might be people who strongly agree with you, and there's also going to be people who strongly disagree with you.

([01:02:43](#)):

And so I think in traditional corporate America comms training, the goal is to reduce the second group as much as possible. Now as it turns out, if you try to have a point of view where nobody will disagree with you, you're not going to say anything and nobody's going to talk about you. And so there's actually a lot of potential energy stored up with just having a point of view somewhere. And some people disagree, and that's okay. And so as an example of that, I've gotten really into Twitter of all places over the last few months where I've just been very opinionated about a bunch of different things. Obviously mostly focus on amplitude, but some outside of it as well. And I think people respect and resonate with that. And so I think there is a change right now. There's an opportunity because the default is to be so tight. Now, there are some things you do have to be careful about saying, I mean for sure, strong stuff about politics. Actually I put a political post out on Twitter this past weekend, but getting into silly,

Jessica ([01:03:43](#)):

Did you pay for it?

Spenser ([01:03:45](#)):

There were strong opinions. And it's funny, I have this new metric, so whenever I say something very opinionated and someone on Twitter doesn't like it, they will post an image of Amplitude stock price and reply to me being like, oh yeah,

Jessica ([01:04:01](#)):

God trolls.

Spenser ([01:04:02](#)):

And so I have a new metric, which is like, okay, is someone posting that number of mentions of Amplitude, stock price, and reply to my comments on Twitter? That's actually a good thing. That's a positive

Jessica ([01:04:12](#)):

Metric. A futuristic is like if tons of people are trying to

Spenser ([01:04:15](#)):

Burn me, you know, said something worthwhile, you know, said something worthwhile. Sorry,

Jessica ([01:04:19](#)):

Spencer, I actually just this morning saw you say something that resonated with me that I thought most CEOs might not go there, but you did. You were talking about how running a big successful company was all consuming and you did have to give some things up. And one of the things was you built your life to accommodate this company. For example, you lost touch with a lot of friends, and though that made you sad, you were okay with it because you were that committed to your company and you just sort of explained it. And it resonated with me kind of how I felt when I was still at Y Combinator. I gave up a lot of things for Y Combinator. Ultimately I wasn't okay with that and I made changes, but it was just interesting that you said it because I was thinking, gosh, he's being real with people here.

Spenser ([01:05:09](#)):

Yeah, that was with Juin. I had surprised that I shared that. I'll give you the academic side it, and then we'll talk about the personal side. So back to the elements. So I studied startups and just world-class performance, and I was like, okay, I want to be great at something. And it comes back to, okay, deliberate practice, 10,000 hours. So most people are actually willing to do that. You spend five years in a job, 40 hours a week, you'll get to that 10,000 hours expert coaching. So you go to institutions and experts and other people that can help you and peers and other people can come better. But the one that nobody talks about is the last one, which is enthusiastic family support. And what that meant was I had been in relationships before and there was always a tension between the relationship and the company and whatever I was interested in my life, whether that be school or company or whatever else.

([01:06:03](#)):

And so I just got to this point where I realized, okay, hey, most relationships are just not going to fit into me building a company, and I have to be okay with that. And that's hard. That's extraordinarily hard. And then I was right when I was least expecting it. My now wife, Ann found me and was actually very persistent, and I told her right early on, I'm like, look, most relationship has not worked for this exact reason. And so if we're in this, my one thing flexible on a lot of stuff, but my one thing is this is my life's work and mission. I have to be all in on this and you have to be part of that and it's going to take up a lot of space in my life and our joint lives. And she was totally cool with it. And not only was she totally cool with it, she was like,

okay, hey, here's the life we can create together and here's what it looks like. And she's gone on to become a very successful venture capitalist and invested in the whatnot, founders who are also wonderful YC company and

(01:07:01):

Just started our own firm last year. And we see our careers as compounding each others, and we work together on stuff and it's amazing, but the family is, even at the family level, we are all so oriented around amplitude and what we're doing, and it takes up a lot of space in our collective lives. And so there's a lot of people who are willing to work hard. I think there's actually this quote, I remember by Caesar, it's like there's a lot of men who are willing to die for a cause, but the true heroism is being willing to suffer in silence for a long period of time. And so I got so obsessed, it sounds so awful when you say it, but I got so obsessed with how do you build a successful company? I'm like, I will take every single advantage I can possibly have and reorient my entire life, including my families around this thing.

(01:07:54):

And that's the very extreme trait. Now, is that good or bad? It comes with its own trades, like the friends thing I mentioned, but when I think one, I think one, I'm kind of naturally this way where I'll get really deep and into things no matter what, and so might as well put it to something worthwhile for humanity. And then two, to be able to be part of something greater than yourself, that to me is a different level of living life. And it comes with intense sacrifices and trade-offs and all these things. And anyone who's done anything worthwhile will tell you the exact same thing. But yeah, I'm very willing to sign up for it.

Carolynn (01:08:32):

It takes guts to say that actually it really does, because does people really want to spin this myth that they're doing it all and having it all, and there's no compromises or sacrifices, so to just be like, yeah, yeah, this is the way it is and this is the way I've worked my life out very,

Jessica (01:08:48):

I found it so refreshing. Yeah, no, everyone wants to say, oh, it's easy. And I don't know if that's true.

Spenser (01:08:57):

I agree with you guys. I think one of the kind of cultural norms that we've accepted in the US in order to support parents and particularly mothers is that, hey, you can kind of do both and it's not a big deal and you shouldn't be docked for your career, which I strongly agree with in terms of that's how we should

Jessica (01:09:15):

Operate.

Spenser (01:09:16):

But being on the other side of it, it's like, look, there's very real, I think I said this the last time, but Ruth Bader Ginsburg I think summed this up quite well, which is you can have it all, but you can't have it all at once.

(01:09:29):

And so what trade are you willing to make when in life? And so that's always kind of stuck with me and I am enjoying it. I'm okay with these trades, but they're very, very real trades. I've lost touch with a lot of friends and there's still some friends, like one of my friends from MIT, David Chen, and he still makes time regularly reach out to me, and he's so kind and I'm so appreciative of his friendship, and I just feel bad I can't reciprocate quite at the same level that he does. And there's friends, which literally our friendship is just sending each other posts on Twitter all day long, and I haven't actually seen them in a few years. This is one of the tricks I do to myself. In the early days, I would imagine someone in a much life worse situation, so I would go back a generation, I would think there were people who got drafted to go fight Vietnam and that life compared to what, this is nothing. This is nothing. I'm still get paid, I still get recognized. I still, I'm able to maintain a great lifestyle. It's a lot of hard work and there's sacrifice in it, but compared to that, it's nothing. Or I'd compare it to like, Hey, if I went to be a monk or a hermit and took the path of Franciscan Monk or the Buddhists where you give up all worldly possessions and you just live a very, yeah, compared to that, this is great.

Jessica (01:10:44):

Well said. I think this is a great place to end.

Spenser (01:10:47):

I want to close out with this one thought, which is I think my observation, a lot of founder, I was very lucky that I spent a lot of time in introspection before starting to think about what life I wanted to live, and it comes with, its very real trade-offs, and it's not for everyone, but you don't have to be smart or you don't have to be more talented or whatever. The real question in my mind is how do you set up your

Jessica (01:11:14):

Interesting, I think more people should talk about that. I don't think that there are these super open conversations behind closed doors. There are, but I don't think there's public conversations on this subject. I think people try to really hide the truth. So I love that you're saying that.

Spenser (01:11:33):

No, of course, Jessica. Hopefully my story, not to say I'm a model, but can at least give others a data point.

Jessica (01:11:42):

I think we've learned a lot from you today. It's been awesome. This has been such a fun conversation. Yes,

Spenser (01:11:47):

Thank you. Sorry, I want to give one more appreciation, the best source for these stories when I was first starting, because what you want to do is you want to gather a lot of data points on what it's like to be entrepreneur is founders at work, and I still have a whole set of copies on

my desk going to cry and cry. It was just like you get 30 very real stories about the very early days of great companies and what it was like, and that was gold because that allowed me to, you read these business books and they have these frameworks for you and whatever, and honestly they're mostly garbage, but to get those primary data points, source data points and what it was actually like to be a founder, that is more invaluable than anything else. So I just, Jessica and Carolyn, thank you for having this podcast and telling founder stories and everything else. That's what we will equip the next generation. That's

Jessica ([01:12:38](#)):

Sweet. Oh, Spencer, you're the best. Thank you. No, we really thank you so much. Nice to still feel like my book's relevant and it was useful to you in your journey.

Spenser ([01:12:50](#)):

To this day, I will say the YC community has been the one point of stability throughout the 13 years of building this company, and I'm so deeply, or 14 years since being in startups, I so deeply appreciative for that because the ethos is, even with venture capitalists that are very supportive, they're still kind of in the thing with you versus being this outside thing that's just going to be unconditionally supportive, and that really does mean a lot.

Carolynn ([01:13:20](#)):

That's the whole point of community building. That is it right there, and we're so glad you're part of the

Jessica ([01:13:26](#)):

Community.

Spenser ([01:13:27](#)):

No, of course. I feel very lucky that you guys have always been so kind,

Jessica ([01:13:32](#)):

So thank you for coming on the show. We loved catching up and hearing the amplitude story. It's going to be a fabulous episode. Thank you, Spencer.

Spenser ([01:13:42](#)):

Thank you, Jessica. Thank you, Carolyn. Really appreciate you guys. Thank you for letting me tell part of my story.

Jessica ([01:13:47](#)):

Love it. It's awesome.

Carolynn ([01:13:48](#)):

All right, we'll see

Spenser ([01:13:49](#)):

You soon. Awesome.

Jessica ([01:13:50](#)):

Bye. Oh, Spencer skates. That was so much fun talking to him.

Carolynn ([01:13:55](#)):

I love how we book ended that episode with you getting Cleed because he's so sweet about

Jessica ([01:14:01](#)):

The way he's adorable with that complimentary compliments. He's so nice. I mean, that was so much fun, and actually I learned a lot, even though I've known him forever, I don't think I really remember all the ins and outs of Amplitude's journey.

Carolynn ([01:14:17](#)):

Oh yeah, of course. And that, I mean, it was a while ago. He's been at it for a long time and I was thinking a little bit when he was talking towards the end about just being really honest and transparent. We, because we just talked to Justin recently and Justin's very much like that about his personal life, and that's really refreshing where people just aren't hiding behind any, trying to be like Mr. Or Mrs. Perfect. It's a little bit of a theme I think maybe we have this season and I really like

Jessica ([01:14:47](#)):

It. How about when he was talking about the sales process and all he learned, all I could think about was Peter Reinhardt's experience with the New Jersey guy being like, so why are we here? Why are we here? Awkward. It was

Carolynn ([01:15:05](#)):

Well, and I was just going to say, that's another theme probably if you look back at all of our recordings of founders, engineers, learning sales is definitely something that has to happen and everyone approaches it a different way, but I think the way Spencer talked about it was super helpful and he obviously really absorbed those lessons and became clearly a great salesperson, which amazing.

Jessica ([01:15:28](#)):

It is amazing because this ties into my last comment that I want to make, which is one of my favorite moments of this episode when he is like, yeah, I didn't want to go to MIT. I mean, it was just a bunch of nerds, and I'm not like that. I want to be like, Spencer, are you sure? But I'm thinking, imagine Spencer at 18 years old. Do you know what I mean? Not sure. He was a huge nerd playing the video game. I don't even remember which one it was. Oh my God. And his mom worrying about you're just going to play video games all day. Yes. Rightfully worrying.

Carolynn ([01:16:07](#)):

Yeah,

Jessica ([01:16:07](#)):

I know. I love

Carolynn ([01:16:09](#)):

That.

Jessica ([01:16:10](#)):

That was

Carolynn ([01:16:10](#)):

So great. He's a great, I'm so glad we got him on the show. That was just a great conversation and I really, really like talking to him. It's going to be

Jessica ([01:16:18](#)):

A winning episode. It is. Alright, see you Levy. See you on the next one. Bye.