Website Writings

The Power of a First Follower

My gut wrenched over dinner. I forked my stale spaghetti as if somewhere within the meatball sauce laid the answer to my indecision: Whether to run for student government. The election was by far one of my challenges of the year—a wall of excitement, hope, doubt, and fear. After committing to run, I made my first campaign ask to my friend, Ajay.

3 knocks later on his dorm door on Wednesday, 11:57pm, “Hey, so I want to run for student government, as an independent, and I don’t know anyone better to have by my side through this…Will you be my campaign manager?”.

Hah, what a crazy question. Why would anyone, much less an academic prodigy, spend hours of their personal time holding flyers, creating graphics, and marching through a sea of jaded students at 8:00am convincing them to vote?

“Absolutely.”

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Ajay’s response was powerful. The unconditional buy-in of just one friend brought momentum to everything else about the campaign. Shabby ideas became realistic plans. “Doubt” turned to “doable”, and a ‘campaign that could run” became a ‘campaign *to* run’.

People like Ajay for my campaign are exactly what I want to highlight in this article: **First followers.** They can be campaign managers in politics, VCs in start-ups, employee #5’s in large companies, book publishers in the literature world, and more.

While the spotlight for change usually falls on the leaders, **there is a small group of first followers behind them that should be celebrated for providing legitimacy, taking risk, and being leaders themselves.**

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**First Followers Legitimize**

Leaders take risk to make a change, but first followers should be celebrated because they **legitimize** as the first to buy-in**.**

Let’s start with this: Leaders can’t be leaders without followers. A CEO can’t have a company without customers, politicians can’t be officials without votes. To get the first commitment is one of the hardest aspects of starting something new.

That’s why first followers are so powerful. As soon as one person validates a leader or cause, it opens up floodgates for others to join in. Maybe you’ve seen the [Sasquatch Music Festival Video](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GA8z7f7a2Pk) that demonstrates exactly this.

It starts off with a guy dancing by himself in the middle of a grass field. At this moment in the video, he looks a little crazy dancing by himself.



Then, someone else jumps in. Instantly, the atmosphere shifts from ‘weird guy dancing by himself’, to ‘this looks kinda fun’.



More and more flood in after the first follower, and by the end of the video, there’s a dancing mob.



The actions from the first individual shifted perception enough for others to feel comfortable joining, culminating to a dance party. Similarly, first followers provide a first push of momentum. Without first followers, it would be hard to have new ideas accepted readily by the general audience.

But being “first” is hard.

**First Followers Bear Risk**

Venture capitalists are in the business of being first-followers. It’s quite amazing, actually, considering the odds of success in investing: An astounding 75% of venture-backed start-ups fail (FastCompany). Yet, without these risk-bearers, we wouldn’t have many of the world’s greatest companies.

First followers are the uncelebrated champions of risk. They are contrarians who buy into an idea early, but don’t enjoy the limelight that may come with being a leader. Like venture capitalists, first followers juggle risk, whether it be risk of losing money, looking bad among peers, or losing time.

Oh yeah, I also lost my campaign. I was about 40 votes short in an election where about 10,000+ votes were casted. While a victory would make a good story, the loss only accentuates an invaluable quality of first followers like Ajay for me: First followers are valuable because they buy-in—and buy-in with the possibility of failure. It’s easy to support an idea that has gained momentum, but it’s special to support one that can fail.

**First Followers Lead**

The most compelling reason for recognizing first followers is because, in reality, they are leaders. The idea that followers and leaders are separate people is a misconception.

The idea of ‘leadership’ is maniacally sought-after in the workplace. The opposite, being a follower, is usually placed with a stigma of being reactive, docile, and unable to think for yourself.

In nearly every job interview, I’ve been asked, “Tell me about a time when you were a great leader.” I would probably answer with an example of how I put others’ needs before my own, was reliable, and took initiative.

For my campaign, Ajay put his needs aside when he stayed up late to make my grpahics, was reliable when he never failed to show up to flyer in the morning, and took initiative on several ideas in the campaign.

I would have easily spotted Ajay as a leader by asking, “Tell me about a time you were a great follower.”

Maybe ‘leaders’ aren’t the only things we need in this world. I’d encourage all of us to ask, instead of being great leaders, how can we be great followers? Whether it’s a friend running their campaign, a classmate starting a business, or family member selling their first book, you may help start the next big thing.

Thanks Ajay and everyone who helped, because it takes guts to say, “Absolutely.”

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10 Lessons I Learned After Starting a Business at 16 Years Old

When we were in our junior year of high school, my co-founder, Raaghav Minocha, and I pleaded our parents for a $1000 loan to secure a down-payment at local dance venue. We wanted to create “The Mixer”, a safe, but fun, place where any high school student could meet others and dance.

2 years later, we’ve built a small business pulling in $25,000/year, attracting 2,000 attendees yearly, and donating over $5,000 to local student-centered charities.

Now that I’ve entered college, my team and I have passed the business down to the next generation of high schoolers. Reflecting back, though, my experience has taught me invaluable lessons on life—here’s 7.

Starting Up

1. **Entrepreneurs aren’t always original. In fact, there’s a lot of plagiarism.**

I learned that there are seldom “innovative, revolutionary” ideas that transform a marketplace, or how things are run. The truth is, if an idea is good enough to make money, it’s probably already out there. And our mixer business was no different.

In fact, “Mixers” were around when I was only a freshman in high school. The problem was, they often got shut down for alcohol abuse, lacked security, and had no central organizer.

All we did was hire top-notch security and build credibility under a company name, HS Mixers.

“Two random dudes hosting a dance”, became HS Mixers. Our solution for a dance was already out there—one just needed the eye to recognize its potential.

1. **You won’t get far if you’re walking on eggshells—you’ll probably need to break some rules.**

In start-ups, entrepreneurs have to get from Point A to Point B as fast and efficiently as possible. Sometimes, the most efficient route breaks rules. Instead of immediately shying away from risky options, entrepreneurs consider everything with a risk-and-reward balance.

In our case, HS Mixers’ end goal was to host a safe dance. But dance hosting was a liability nightmare. Someone could sneak in illegal substances, a fight could break out, and all our attendees were minors.

With a few well-thought-out moves, including waivers (which were fake), hiring the local police department for our first dance, and doing bag-checks decimated concern of safety for our attendees.

Things like fake waivers—illegal? Debatable. Did it get us from A to B efficiently? Yes.

**3. A product that a few people love is better than one that a lot of people merely like.**

This is growth-critical. When people love your service—not merely like, but love, they tell their friends.

When you’re in a start-up, you don’t have the resources to run mass-marketing campaigns to attract customers. That’s why you need a product/service people love—*you need your early customers to do it for you.*

HS Mixers thrived off a few loyal customers who attended all our dances. These core customers were not only the “life at the party”, but also helped expand our business: They became our campus-ambassadors, in-person ticket sellers, and social media amplifiers.

HS Mixers never ran “mass-campaigns”. Our early adopters did it for us, even if they didn’t know it. Our business eventually generated gargantuan attendee lists with over 2,000 entrees of the names, phone numbers, emails, and schools of individuals.

We wouldn’t have gotten our evangelists, though, without making sure we delivered a dang good dance—leading to my next point.

1. **Every start-up should be *OBSESSED* about the user experience of their product/service.**

Start-ups need be maniacally obsessed about improving the customers’ experiences. That means founders must constantly looking to receive feedback for improvement.

To get money, we needed fun dances—one can say we cared a little about customer experience.

We were obsessed with it.

Improving customer “Touchpoints”, or interactions customers have with your business, can go a long way—even something as simple as playing music while students lined up, for example, helped add to our dance experience.

Taking Off

1. **Salesmanship is underrated.**

How did two 16-year-olds convince a million-dollar venue older to host a bunch of sweaty high school kids in his venue on a Friday night?

Salesmanship.

Making your product is only the first leg of the journey. Making sure that all stakeholders will help you, and are satisfied, requires a human-to-human touch—which is where good salesmanship can help tremendously.

Growing:

1. **A business should be constantly running tests to validate their model.**

Every entrepreneur has assumptions about their target market. The only way to test these assumptions is to run tests.

It’s how we found out that kids didn’t really care too much about the type of venue—whether we spent $5000 at Club Autosport or $500 at a school gym brought in the same amount of people.

1. **Analyzing customer data can mean the difference between you and a competitor.**

Starting from our first mixer, my co-founder and I required attendees to fill out demographical information on our waivers. We collected over 2,500 data points on customers, and like a machine learning algorithm, we got better and better at predicting which areas would bode well for our next mixer launch.

Using our data, we expanded our business into 4 other cities outside Cupertino.

Knowing our customers through data meant the difference between wasted time and energy, and a successful San Jose launch.

1. Mission

When your start-up is going to shreds, at the end of the day what will matter is your mission. What are you trying to achieve with your business?

HS Mixers’ goal was to provide any high schooler with a fun and safe place to escape the stresses of school and meet other students. It’s social-centered mission

Rejectees—Stay on the Island of Misfit Toys

You’ve been rejected. Whether it be not getting into the college you wanted to, a club on campus, the job offer you wanted…where to now?

Welcome to the island of misfit toys, where people’s skills, are great but not good *enough*. Where rejection is “in no way a reflection of your overall capabilities.” The place where the *other* people go when they “had such a competition applicant pool this round”.

Where you’re full of potential to work, but no one wants to work with you.

Well—I’m here to tell you to stay a misfit. I’m here to tell you why misfits, you, the individual who may not fit the organization “mold”, those who seem to be continually rejected, are the ones with unique potential. I think they’re the ones who change the world.

~~I didn’t do too well this applicant round. Four times I’ve gotten to a final round now and have been axed. Concession: I think there are places I could have improved on.~~

~~But I also think that while my case interview skills lack, I can add to an organization in other ways. And you know what I’m going to do now that I didn’t make it?~~

~~I didn’t get into a consulting club for nonprofits—but I’m going to go work on expanding a philanthropic initiative my small business is working on. I didn’t get slated for the ASUC—but I’m going to continue to talk with people, connect, stay civically engaged—and through the days, my influence will show in other ways.~~

You see, misfits have a unique quality: They must find unique ways to get around to their ambitions, because they’re not handed it through the establishment.

Let me give you an example. What do the CEO of Goldman Sachs, Steve Jobs…have in common? They are all dyslexic. In fact, an estimate says around 20% of successful entrepreneurs are dyslexic. Malcolm Gladwell did a great study on this, and in short, dyslexics, by not being able to read, must find ways to get around to communicate and take in information. There’s a secret sauce in that process, a mix of tenacity, problem-solving, cross-discipline learning, that converts to great thinkers, ideators, and entrepreneurs.

I think the same holds true for all of us. Maybe there’s technical aspects rejectees can improve on (test scores, interview skills, etc.), but I’d hold back on bringing yourself down for being someone who “doesn’t fit”. Be nice, be smart, be respectful, but don’t hold yourself back for not being a “fit”.

Because it’s on the Island of Misfit Toys where creative and genius happens—not when you’re working for the establishment, or someone else’s mission.

Here’s a point: Great companies will take in great misfits. Somewhere out there, there will be a company that will open the canister of yourself and watch you grow higher and higher. It may even be the same one that rejected you.

For now, we have our own work to do.

(PS—wrote this after rounds and rounds of rejection. Trust me, I have, well, experience).

“Here's to the crazy ones, the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes... the ones who see things differently -- they're not fond of rules... You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them, but the only thing you can't do is ignore them because they change things... they push the human race forward, and while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius, because the ones who are crazy enough to think that they can change the world, are the ones who do.” – Apple

100 Lunches With 100 Random People

<Photo by Tamara Katoni>

My blood pressure rises. I make initial eye contact and approach. Then, words with the heaviest of weight come out: “Can I sit here with you?”.

Like many, I had the experience of not having someone to eat with. Early my freshman year of college, however, I made the commitment that if I didn’t have anyone to sit with, I’d scout someone else sitting alone too, ask if I can join, and smile.

Half a school year later, I’ve met so many different types of people. Here are some of the lessons I’ve learned along the way:

Leave your phone at the worktable, so you can be open at the dinner table.

Probably the hardest thing when not with your friends is fighting the urge to pull out your phone. But here’s the thing: With a divided attention, you’re not going to notice the environment around you, you’re not going to be engaging in conversation. This is really a lesson about vulnerability. I want to pull out my phone so I look engaged and am not paying attention to the outside world; But when I’m sitting alone and just eating, people come up to you, you smile at people, and you’re able to sit in your own skin

Overcoming the Initial “Hi”

This may be the hardest part. Going up to a random person you’ve never met before, asking if you can sit next to them, and starting to engage in conversation. What if they think you’re weird? While your hands are sweating like Niagra Falls, think to yourself: It’s ok. Take the leap. They’re probably as nervous as you.

Digging Deeper with the ‘Five Why’s’

After starting a conversation, I use the “Five Why’s” to dig deep and get to know a person intimately. I first learned about the Five Why’s in an entrepreneurship book, The Lean Startup. It goes like this: After diagnosing a surface level problem, one would ask a successive set of “Why’s” to drill down to the root cause. Turns out, it works great when talking to others, too.

“Today, I left my job at Thermofisher Medical”

“Oh, wow! I heard that’s a good company. Why?”

“My manager had me focusing more on data analytics, then strategy.”

“Oh…hmm, why, do you not like data analytics?”

“I like data, I’m a computer science major. But it’s just that I love creative work and I’ve always wanted to be a healthcare consultant.”

“No way! I’ve wanted to do consulting too. I don’t see too many CS people going into it though—why consulting, moreover, why healthcare?”

“Well, you see, when I was little, my mom always used to tell me…”

You get the point. Now, one warning: The Five Why’s doesn’t mean ‘be obnoxious’. I mean be curious and have a desire to learn what’s under the surface—but mindful of when to stop.

Silence: Some of the Best Conversations are Half-Filled

Sitting down with someone random is a wildcard. You don’t know who they are, what their day has been through, what their personality is like, if they have a test in an hour—nothing. And that’s why sometimes, your spontaneous lunch date may have gaping holes of conversation.

And that’s fine.

“I have never doubted the ability of young folks, especially high school students, to make a difference in their communities.

When my community found out my best friend's dad was paralyzed, it was with my classmates, not my parents, which I sought to find solutions to raise $32k for a wheelchair. When the Nepal earthquake hit, I remember a student body jumping into action to help. My small business itself thrives with team members who have yet to gain “real world experience”.

I think high schoolers especially have an untamed curiosity that can add value to any organization.

In my latest LinkedIn article, I write an open letter to businesses, big and small, to try out one thing new this summer: Hire a high school student. To be a mentor early on and reach a hand out at a time in their lives where students are growing exponentially.

I'd love for you to check it out--drop a critique or a like, and let me know what you think! :)

An Open Letter to Businesses: Hire a High Schooler This Summer

Starting Small, Dreaming Big

I still remember my first internship. It was with my local state senator, and I was a rising sophomore in high school. From day 1, the transport routine was a regular: Skateboard to the local 23 bus line, arrive in Campbell, swap into a suit, then walk in wide-eyed at the idea of being able to serve in a California public office.

I started data entry my first day. Coming across a constituent to be entered, I mentioned to my supervisor, “I can’t get him in the system. This guy has a first name, two middle names, and a last name—look: Rabbi John Doe Smith”. She laughed, mentioning Rabbi was a title, not a name.

Now a freshman in college, I owe it to the staff at that office for taking that aloof but curious high schooler in. It ended up landing me a congressional internship as a junior, and had other ripple effects that made me grow in ways they wouldn’t have imagined.

That’s the type of story too few high schoolers have these days. While organizations “hire to go higher”, getting the best minds they can get their hands on, too few are taking a leap-of-faith, or an extra burden, to take in young minds who are ready to be slingshotted into real world work. And here’s why that’s wrong.

High Schoolers: They Do More Than You Think

Walk onto a high school campus, and you’ll be surprised the amount of creativity and good that’s being generated. In my alma matter high school alone, my classmates and I witnessed our peers developing breakthroughs with biotechnology. But not only that. We designed and executed a campaign to raise $32,000+ for my best friend’s paralyzed dad. We put up magnificent rallies requiring coordination that even seasoned project management teams would be jealous of.

Although it may not always be in the “language” that employers may see, high schoolers are adding value in mind-blowing ways. Businesses shouldn’t fear this, in fact, they should leverage it.

The Case for Creativity

Do you know how the first popsicle was made? By accident: A young boy left out sugared water in a cup with a stick on his porch. Overnight it froze. Instead of throwing it away, he tried it, loved it, some adults capitalized on the discovery, and now UniLever enjoys popsicles as a 1+ billion-dollar industry.

It’s these type of innocent “accidents” that make high schoolers and young folks such a valuable asset. Don’t believe the creativity of young students outweigh your creative capacity?

Next time you have free time with a youngster, try this “design thinking” test. You both have one minute to think of as many ways as you can use a ball. Go. (Massage your knots; As a disco ball; to play soccer…etc.)

As the correlation goes, the younger the people are, the less trouble they have with this challenge, and the more uses they come up with. I learned lesson as an entrepreneur. Design thinking is basically a style of thinking where you recognize utilities useful for things they aren’t overtly useful for. The concept started with designers and seeped into entrepreneurship to find new solutions and generate new business ideas. Design thinking is: “Taxis have been used for decades…they’re slow, inefficient, and expensive. What are some ways I can solve this problem?”.

While a high schooler can do data entry and other menial tasks, they also tend to have a creative capacity that are, yes, unmatched by older folks in the workforce. This is where not being constrained by rules and lessons of the adult world converts from a liability to an asset.

Hiring is a two-way street.

But you see, taking in a high schooler is not just about your business. It isn’t even about how youngsters possess value to elevate your work.

In fact, it’s about *you*, personally, and cultivating a culture for *my* generation to excel. It’s about reaching out a helping hand so that my peers and those younger are able to grow in ways they never would’ve been able to before.

To do this, we need mentors. We need more employers to take the leap of faith, just like my first office did, of taking a youngster in despite a lack of experience. As President Obama said in his own LinkedIn article about first jobs, ‘preparing our kids for the future is going to take all of us working together’. It directly starts from mentorship, something that any company with people can provide. It starts from *you*.

Hire A High Schooler. You’ll be glad you did.

So this summer, businesses big and small, teachers to techies, researchers and repairers, try something new. Hire a high schooler.

I hired one. In fact, I hired 8. My small business, HS Mixers, thrives on a robust team of high school students running event-management. I’m in college now, and even I’m baffled by the work they continue to do: Data organization of gargantuan spreadsheets (our 17-year-old CTO), to executing comprehensive, creative marketing strategies (our sophomore/junior event coordinators).

Be that mentor who kick-starts a kid’s career focus. Who keeps him off the streets by letting him in your lab. Who helps her discover her passion in STEM.

Have some faith, and reach out a hand. It can help your business, but it can also change their life.

I am too protective.

Where did these thoughts come from? Why can’t I cope with them?

Why can’t things be normal? Why do folks go out of their way to show me? And what am I supposed to do about it?

12/29/2016

How IKEA Is Redefining Customer Experience



*Mygola*

This may look like a picture of a restaurant, but it’s actually of one of the biggest furniture sellers on the globe. Why may IKEA have play structures for kids, a restaurant, and other anomalies if they are just selling furniture, you ask?

It’s all about customer experience.

When my family and I went on an IKEA trip last Sunday, I was expecting another boring 4 hours of sitting on lousy furniture and twiddling my thumbs. Yet IKEA provided a pleasant surprise.

Here are 3 lessons we can take away from IKEA in reshaping customer experience:

1. It’s all about first impression.

Arriving in Palo Alto’s Ikea felt like arriving at an airport. The “terminal”, or warehouse, is huge. Ample parking everywhere, and most of all, when you walk inside you are complemented with a totally different world—the world of furniture and home goods. IKEA doesn’t want their customers thinking they are in for another run-of-the-mill shopping day—they communicate, “We sell furniture. And we mean business.”



*GettyImages*

1. Don’t just make your customers feel the products—drive the narrative on how the products will be interacting with them.

That big warehouse serves a purpose other than storage: All products are on display at IKEA. All of them. Like a family driving around the neighborhood looking at Christmas lights, we were cruising through a clearly-guided path with assembled beds, cabinets of every kind, bath towels and blankets.

Most notable to this point, IKEA had a “400 sq. foot home”, where they literally built an impressively compact but fully-loaded home with all their products.



*Inhabitat NYC*

IKEA gives customers an intimate dive with the products they’re selling. They are helping the customers *experience* and *feel*, not just look.

1. Every touchpoint, critical moments when consumers interact with the business, should be deliberately catered for a positive experience.

Furniture shopping is a heavy task. Here are some reasons why I avoid a furniture store like a plague house:

* It’s confusing
* You’re unsure of what to buy
* The kids (or me) start nagging
* You get hungry
* Furniture is heavy
* It’s boring

Based on when a customer walks in to goes back to their home, IKEA sat down and really thought about how they can cater their customer’s touchpoints. As follows:

Confusing? Cruise through the labeled pathway or “route” that winds through the whole store.

Unsure? Sit, lay, touch, open, turn-on anything and everything. It’s all on display.

Nagging Kids? Take them to IKEA’s supervised play place, “Smaland”, for kids and run their energy out.

Hungry? Order Swedish meatballs at their fully-loaded restaurant. Heck, they’ll even subtract the cost of your eating from your total purchase over $150 on certain days.

Ready to buy? Receive a cart from a hydraulic dispenser, go to the warehouse, and get your boxes. You can get it delivered or assembled, or take it home yourself.

Going Home: Either have them deliver and assemble or take it yourself.



IKEA.com

Walk-in, walk-out, IKEA covers the pain points of what would otherwise displease furniture-shopping customers. They emphasize comfort, easiness, accessibility to earn their customers’ time in an age of Amazon and online shopping.

Customer Experience—Takeaways…

Products are important, prices are important, culture is important. But don’t discount the power of making easier of what the customer is actually there to do—shop.

12/28/2016

Expectations and Entrepreneurship

Like a rough wave against a cliffside, failure has eroded me this semester. Yet, like the cliff that takes a new shape after the tide recedes, I’ve come out of my misery with new insight. Specifically, on expectations.

Expectations. They are static, unchanging. Expectations form first as you judge how you want to do, then they harden like molten, not changing until you finish your objective asking yourself, “Ok, how’d I do?”.

And so when I didn’t meet some of my personal expectations this semester, I called myself a loser.

But then I looked at another dimension where expectations were being shattered every day, for better or worse: Entrepreneurship.

Running my small business HS Mixers (HSM), I’ve had expectations from day one. Before I even threw my first “mixer”, a dance for high schoolers, I envisioned huge ragers, numbers hitting 4 digits in attendance, and me scaling my business all across the Bay Area.

Now, let’s reflect back: HSM has thrown 10 great dances, yet none of them have been a huge “rager”. We’ve served over 2,500 students, but no dance has tipped over 600 in attendance. Our business is healthily scaling to 5 cities, but not by myself, rather with a hardworking, robust team of high schoolers.

Right now, we’re doing pretty good, but by my Day-1 definitions I would’ve called myself a failure. What’s the catalyzing difference between my personal and entrepreneurial life?

One of the bedrock lessons in entrepreneurship: Iteration.

Iteration means when you hit a roadblock, or when you don’t meet an expectation or goal, you pivot your strategy. You fail fast and you try another route. And once you’re on that new route, you learn to see if you want to stick with it, or fail again and try another.

Iteration happened the moment I saw small, controlled dances were better than the huge “ragers” I first hoped for, because they were safer and more intimate. From every dance onwards, we focused not on ragers but on systematic, controlled dances. I didn’t meet my initial expectation, but with iteration I learned and achieved something better.

This semester in my personal life, I’m learning to iterate. Which means that if I didn’t end up in the club I interviewed for, I’m going to find out what I did wrong, get better, and see if I want to try something else or interview again with bolstered skills. It means that when that position I ran for didn’t pan out, I’ll use the free time to develop myself in other ways and make new goals. It means I’ll try something new, which could open up even more opportunities.

I realized: If you’re like the cliff and you stand there, rock-solid sure you’re going to stay in the same shape for a while, you may, sometimes. But when the tide comes up and you have the same expectation, you’re going to find yourself in a lot of disappointment because you’re going to get the crap beaten out of you. From the lessons of entrepreneurship:

Embrace failure. Iterate. Then innovate.