

Ask the founder of Superhuman anything (Atlas)

How did you create the initial buzz for Superhuman in investor circles? In the early days are you actively updating investors on progress or just hitting them with amazing traction numbers all at once?

We created initial investor buzz for Superhuman with three things: (1) a focus on investors, (2) a classic founder narrative, and (3) a great product with uncompromising support.

In more detail:

1. A great way to get the attention of the investment community is to build a product that happens to work great for investors. We did this with my last company, Rapportive, and we did it again with Superhuman. (Just be sure that your product does in fact scale to users beyond investors!)
2. I sold my previous company to LinkedIn, and that was also a well-known email company. This kind of founder narrative is easy to remember, [fun to write about](#), and the type of journey that investors want to put capital behind.
3. You do actually need to make a product that people fall in love with. But one easy hack — especially in the early days — is to provide phenomenal customer support. It is relatively cheap to do, and your customers will forever love you for it.

We had no traction in the early days — or even in the days after the early days. For a company like Superhuman, it is crucial to find “true believers” — investors who will believe ahead of traction.

I have a question about the iteration process from 0 to PMF — what did this look like for Superhuman before you guys had gotten to the MVP stage? How do you get meaningful feedback from users when the product isn't yet in a state where they can actually use it fully? What kinds of things were you showing/asking users, and what

kinds of conversations were the most useful? Most of the usual advice about getting to PMF assumes that you have a complete product that someone can plausibly start using properly, but we'd like to get to the "complete product" stage while minimising the amount of work that we end up throwing away!

We wrote code for more than two years before Superhuman was in a state where we could sell our first subscription. During this period, we used this three step plan to ensure we built the right product:

Vision

I articulated a clear vision for what we wanted to build — the fastest email experience in the world. I wrote the copy for the landing page, which is still the same copy that we use today.

Iterate

As a member of the target market, I trusted my own judgement of the product and its deficiencies. I used the product everyday in order to drive these two things:

1. Did it feel exciting to use? Did it feel special? Did feel magical? If not, double down on the magic — for example, let's make it twice as fast!
2. Could I myself use the product day to day? If not, let's fix those things.

Validate

We validated all our product beliefs. In fact, in the first two years, we had over 1,000 conversations with potential users. This may sound like a lot, but we found a surprisingly efficient way to do this.

Whenever a user signed up on our landing page, they would automatically receive an email from me. I would ask two questions: what do you currently use for email, and what are your email pet peeves. When people replied, I would interview them over email.

We found what we had suspected all along: people hated Gmail because it was slow, cluttered, needed plugins, and didn't work properly offline; people hated third-party email clients because they were buggy, did not sync properly, and did not have enough features. We therefore validated our vision for Superhuman.

What elements of video games have you most implemented in Superhuman (whether obvious or not)? How do you plan on adding other video game aspects in the future?

This was [excellently analyzed 8](#) by @cristiangraz. I've included a summary here, with some thoughts of my own:

1. On the surface, Superhuman looks like a productivity tool. But beneath lies an immersive game experience.
2. The game has a tutorial level: 1:1 onboarding. This is where you learn the goal of the game, even if you previously did not aim for Inbox Zero. It gives you a safe place to learn the controls and try out your new moves.
3. The game has controls: extensive keyboard shortcuts. The better you become with the controls, the more immersed you feel.
4. The game has pace: the speed of interaction. Without fast pace and excellent controls, our users would not be immersed in the game. Since we have both, our users regularly achieve a state of focus and a sense of flow.
5. The game has a reward: beautiful Inbox Zero imagery. When you achieve the goal of Inbox Zero you are rewarded with gorgeous photography and a screen that is designed to inspire joy. The reward itself is variable, since the Inbox Zero image changes everyday.
6. The game has an inherent cycle: new messages arrive. The game resets at a variable rate, since you don't control when new messages arrive. The game also requires variable decisions, since each message is different.
7. The product itself sounds like a game: "Superhuman". You are the main character in this game, and you are primed towards the idea that — as in almost all games — you will gain superpowers.

You can use game design techniques beyond the experience of the actual product itself, such as on the whole brand experience. For example, we run a waitlist for Superhuman. We encourage folks who want early access to search Twitter for engaged users and to ask for an invite. If you've ever played a roleplaying game, you would recognize this is a quest!

If you choose to build products like they are games, then you are signing up for an altogether different kind of product development. In most companies, product managers worry about what users want or need. But nobody needs a game to exist; there are no requirements. At Superhuman, we don't worry about what users want

or what they need; we obsess over how people feel. I wrote a little about this here: [Goodbye, Mr. Iwata 8](#).

How did you build early consumer buzz for Rapportive and Superhuman?

Firstly, we made products that people love. For Rapportive, you see everything about your contacts right inside your inbox — and become brilliant with people. For Superhuman, you get the fastest email experience in the world — and become brilliant at what you do.

Secondly, we sold first to people who were most likely to spread the word. For example, there's only one topic that CEOs like to talk about more than fundraising or product-market fit — and that's their latest productivity tools! Not only will CEOs share their tools with each other, they'll also share them within their organizations — both to their boards and also to their employees. So if you make something that CEOs love, you can leverage an incredible two-dimensional virality: horizontally between companies, and vertically within companies. We accidentally stumbled upon this strategy at Rapportive, and we now deliberately lean into it at Superhuman.

How do you select people for your betas? And what do you do to make sure you learn as much as possible from your betas?

We select the folks who are most likely to succeed with the product. For example, we don't yet have an Android app. If we meet somebody who does a lot of email on Android, we would recommend that they wait until we have an Android app. In order to learn as much as possible, we massively invest in conversation with our customers. For example, we onboard every single customer 1:1 over a live video call. And we very diligently tag, triage, and track every single piece of feedback that we learn both during the onboarding and thereafter. In order to do this, we have built a large team of Onboarding Specialists and a large team of Customer Delight Specialists. Most companies would consider these teams to be prohibitively expensive, but we believe otherwise.

What are the best channels for acquiring new customers at Superhuman?

Our best channel, by a large margin, is referrals — where existing Superhuman users invite their friends, peers, or colleagues to use the product. Superhuman is now shared to such an extent that each paying user creates, on average, one more paying user.

It is worth noting that it is not possible to rely on referral alone. Referral can significantly boost other acquisition channels, but without those other channels it quickly becomes ineffective. (For Superhuman, our other channels are PR and content marketing.) I've written more about virality, and how to model it, here: [How to Model Viral Growth: The Hybrid Model 19](#).

How did you get the first organic paid users for Superhuman?

The very first paid users for Superhuman were a few of our investors. From there, it grew by referral. People would see Superhuman and ask for access; our existing users would refer them in.

Did you set the cap of your company in the seed round and series A or you waited for the offer to come and did an average cap?

We had multiple valuations in our seed round, as we raised it over one and a half years. Whenever we made meaningful progress, we raised our valuation.

Similarly, we had multiple effective valuations for our series A: some investors were early, and some came in late.

What is your relationship with your investors?

We have 120+ investors, so there is no one representative relationship! That said, I do think it is important to build deep relationships with your major investors (those who have invested the most money). Write to them regularly; weekly if possible.

How has that investor update cadence changed over time?

Before we had any users, I wrote to our major investors quarterly. Since we had no users, I could only report on hiring and R&D, both of which tend to happen across months, not weeks.

When we started onboarding users, I wrote to our major investors weekly. I included screenshots of testimonials from Twitter, as well as a graph of ARR that shot up and to the right!

Do you plan to come out with a web app for Superhuman?

We already have one! Today, you can use Superhuman in Chrome, on macOS, and on iOS.

What advice can you give for someone raising their seed round?

This is a very meaty topic! Here are the most important points:

1. The first check is by far the hardest to get. Once you have it, the rest will be much easier.
2. In order to get your first check, you will either need great traction or strong investor relationships.
3. If you have strong investor relationships, then pitch for the money. If you have great traction, then pitch for the money. In the seed round, you do not need both!
4. If you have neither great traction nor strong investor relationships, then focus on getting great traction. Why? You usually build strong investor relationships by showing you can create great traction.

It seems like Superhuman was founded about four years ago. However, the company seems to have had its “overnight success” moment in the last year. At a high level, what happened between 2015 and last year? Why did you spend so much time in R&D? Also, this seems contrary to the advice of “launch quickly”—so, how should other founders think about spending over years working on a pre-launch product?

So... here's what happened:

2014: incorporate, buy [superhuman.com 9](#) for \$175k*, investigate trademarks, and raise ~\$750k from seed investors

2015: write landing page copy, create wireframes, commission initial UI designs, recruit co-founders, recruit the founding team, build initial prototype, and increase seed round to \$4.1M led by First Round Capital

2016: raise ~\$10M series A, grow the team, build the product, grind, grind, grind, do our first onboarding!

2017: grow the team some more, grind, grind, grind, derive the [Product-Market Fit Engine 8](#), run the Product-Market Fit Engine, get featured in [WIRED 2](#), become [the most wanted product on Product Hunt 1](#), get written up in [TechCrunch 7](#), talk from the [NYSE](#), slowly onboard all the way through the year

2018: raise ~\$4M more, recruit a full-stack growth team, ramp onboardings, release our iPhone app, keep running the Product-Market Fit Engine, double down on onboarding, recruit our first onboarding specialists

2019: recruit our customer delight team, rapidly grow the onboarding team, [raise \\$33MB series B](#) led by Andreessen Horowitz, land a front-page spread in the [New York Times](#), get written up in the [Economist](#), be featured in the [Guardian](#), grind, grind, grind

We spent so much time in R&D because it takes a really long time to build something better than Gmail.

I personally don't believe in "the launch". I agree with Shishir Mehrotra, founder and CEO of Coda, who said to me: "you should only ever launch for one of three reasons: either you need more leads to sell, candidates to hire, or capital to spend; if you already have all three, a launch is just distracting".

Brian Balfour explains the Superhuman strategy extremely well here: [How To Launch A Product or Feature To Maximize Growth 12](#).

What's the story behind buying superhuman.com 9 for \$175,000?

The initial ask for superhuman.com 9 was \$250k. After many months of negotiation, we settled on \$175k. This may seem expensive, but we also achieved a 7 year, 0% interest, lease-to-own deal. I knew that over 7 years we would be raising a seed, a series A, a series B, and perhaps a series C, so this deal structure made it effectively free!

I would strongly recommend that you do not try to buy domains yourself. Instead, find yourself a domain broker with a very strong track record. You might pay them 5-15% of the overall cost, but they can work magic, and it is always worth it.

What led you to create the current signature “Superhuman” onboarding flow?

In 2016 and 2017, I did onboardings so that I could demo the product, conduct in-person pricing analyses, setup users, find all the bugs — and then make sure those bugs were fixed for next week. We learned rapidly, and the product became better with each cohort of users. These initial onboardings were often an hour or longer. In 2018, we decided that live concierge onboardings would be our go-to-market strategy. We made onboardings 30 minutes each, and recruited our first team of onboarding specialists.

In 2019, we doubled down on onboarding, and continue to grow the team. We find that our onboardings create power users, increase retention, drive virality, and foster real human connection.

We're building [Puma Browser](https://puma-browser.com) 7, a privacy focused browser with a way to pay for content directly. Some people suggested to try the Superhuman model and charge \$9-19/month. Do you think there's space for a paid browser? What would you like it to have for that to make sense for you?

I think there is room for a paid browser! I personally would pay for speed. I might pay \$15 to \$25 per month for a browser like Chrome, but which was twice as fast and never, ever hung.

Any tips on finding amazing UX Designer?

This is tough! Our Lead Designer applied because she saw “Sent via Superhuman” in some emails. So that’s traction. Before traction, you have to do it the hard way: directly reach out to potential candidates.

In the meantime, there’s a lot of truth to the adage “dress for the job you want”. In 2015, we had no designs, and I wanted to hire a designer. So I hired a design agency to produce beautiful product mockups. This let me convey to candidates just how serious we were about design, and helped me close our first design hire.

Any tips on early stage growth? We’re at ~1,400 people on the mailing list and ~1k MAU.

This sounds like a fantastic start! I would figure out how you could get your MAUs to make 3-4 referrals each. If you can do that, it would easily double your user base.

Any tips on raising a Seed Round before launch?

(See above)

When you’re searching for PMF and have a limited amount of users to talk to, (around 30-50 paying customers), what would you do acquisition wise? Would you go try to acquire more of those types of users or would you focus on what they really love about the product then double down on that until you’re at a point where you’re confident you know what problem your product solves? We’re basically trying to understand whom to acquire when our product solves multiple problems across many customer segments. We don’t want to go all in on one customer segment in

case we have PMF indications in another segment that we'll have to ignore acquisition wise. At least that's how we're looking at things.

I would suggest coming up with a theory of who you want your initial customer to be. For example, for Superhuman we said that we wanted our initial customers to be founders and CEOs, because we would then spread virally — both between their organizations, and also within their organizations.

(We considered lots of other personas, but quickly ruled them out. For example, we decided not to explicitly go after salespeople, as they already have a plethora of tools.)

You can then go after your desired customer, using the Product-Market Fit Engine to evolve your product as well as tweak your market.