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# Reimagining Messaging

November 2019

On first blush, WhatsApp seems like an incredibly durable business. Strong network effects. Incredible distribution. An unassailable giant.

But WhatsApp wasn't the first messaging app, nor will it be the last. WhatsApp doesn't own customer identity and it doesn't offer much in terms of user discovery. WhatsApp's main moat is the fact that It Just Works. Really well. Like Zoom, it perfectly executed the "last mile" of UX. Yet seemingly the pace of innovation on the app has slowed since 2018. No support for auto-disappearing messages, no iPad support, slowing response times, etc. Like every startup eventually, it seems like it's officially a Big Company.

So how does one think about making a WhatsApp killer?

**Negative Friction**

Recently I've switched part of my conversations over to Signal, and interestingly, I find myself messaging less. This is a great study in micro-frictions of UX. Just like slowing down search 100 milliseconds reduces query volume, the small paper-cuts of Signal (not being fast enough, etc) cause you to send fewer messages.

It's exciting to think about what the inversion of this would be. What's a messaging experience that's even more engaging than WhatsApp? An obvious improvement would be speed. WhatsApp is pretty responsive, but maybe you can make it even faster. What else?

**Hyperactive Design**

Zen.ly is a location-based social network that was acquired by Snap for $300M. It was at times more popular than Facebook in Japan. Location-based networks have been around forever. They all failed. Why does Zenly work?

Clues become evident when you use the app. Opening Zenly is like unwrapping a cool lemon pop on a hot summer day. It's colorful. It smiles at you. When you think of Zenly, your inner eye sees rainbows. It doesn't stop

with colors: Zenly sprinkles haptic feedback across its app as liberally as Gordon Ramsey adds salt and butter to food. It's everywhere, and it's a delight. You want to interact with all the things. The app gives the customer a reward for each interaction. Your mind wants to continue and collect rewards.

That being said, I'm not certain design alone can explain Zenly's success. There's something else going on here.

**"Sure, why not?"**
The iPhone will become a teenager next year. Mobile isn't new. We've gotten used to certain things. More importantly, the fresh generation of Gen Z is entering the App Store en masse. And this generation is special. It was truly Born Online.

If you grew up without the Internet, sharing your location might seem weird. Using an app that looks like a Warhol painting might seem weird. But if you ḅẁỹ Ằỵ ŎĞỴĞẃÍ Ŏꞏ ỹ ꞟỜḅ ǀ ÂꞝN ǴúǴƁ ẁǴûꞏ ĂꞟĂúǴ, you might find yourself with different preferences.

It might be that you find sharing location as a fun online interaction. Not as something weird.

It might be that you expect video to be the norm, not text: Heroes.jobs is an interesting "Gen Z for LinkedIn". It's video-first, redesigned from the ground up for mobile, and "looks like a joke". But that's the whole point.

(Interestingly, both apps were made in Paris. Maybe Gen Z software is the next Daft Punk, something the French are uniquely suited to.)

**Close Friends Only**
Now that we've discussed speed, hyperactive design, and modern preferences around sharing information, we should cover the most important aspect of a new messaging app: it doesn't need to conquer Facebook's global network effect.

I don't know about you, but my time is increasingly in messaging small groups, not Facebook. Small groups are the new social networks. The next counter-cycle to the giant island of Facebook and Twitter will be an archipelago of different groups, one for each niche and community. Mobile distribution has gotten quite good. Downloading an app is almost as easy as joining a WhatsApp group. If you made something good, it'd spread quite rapidly amongst a small group.

**In Closing**
This isn't the easiest startup idea. You need to make something really, really

smooth. Optimize for making the app İ ẎB̃ÄÖİ Ẏ ỵ r̀ ỸẎẹ̈İ Ġ. Include some of the features WhatsApp isn't building (auto-disappearing messages) and cultivate online intimacy by sharing more passive information amongst users. My bet is if you built Snapchat, but focused on group chat (instead of photos and videos), you'd attract an attractive audience.

We'd gladly fund something like this at Pioneer.

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