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How Instagram Delighted 1 Billion Users... But Almost Didn't - Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger on Starting Greatness, Hosted by Mike Maples, Jr. - Podcast Notes

About The Author MMiller

8-10 minutes

HomeStarting Greatness with Mike MaplesHow Instagram Delighted 1 Billion Users… But Almost Didn't – Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger on Starting Greatness, Hosted by Mike Maples, Jr.

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Check out the Starting Greatness Podcast Page

Key Takeaways

- **The best products solve a specific problem**
- **When launching a new product, reach out to as many journalists/newspapers as possible for a possible story**
- With your product, have a good answer to the question: **"What job do our customers hire our product to do?"**
- **Serve your users**
    - "Serve the people that use your product day in and day out. Build what they want. Build what they're asking for. Whether it's verbal or not, they're asking for more stuff." – *Kevin Systrom*
- **"All great ideas are going to get told 'no' by a LOT of people"** – *Kevin Systrom*
    - "Don't let the negativity get to you… Be objective about the feedback that's coming back and ask yourself, 'Do I have data to support it or not?'"
- **A simple metric for choosing what to work on: Follow your energy**

Books Mentioned (Recommended Reading for Founders)

- Kevin:
    - *Competing Against Luck* by Clayton Christensen
    - *Principles* by Ray Dalio, which helped Kevin improve his decision-making skills
- Mike:
    - *The Making of Prince of Persia* by Jordan Mechner
        - The book (which reads like a journal) details Jordan's solo-founder journey in making the Prince of Persia video game

Intro

- Kevin Systrom (@Kevin) and Mike Krieger (@mikeyk), are the co-founders of Instagram
    - *For more of the pair, check out the Podcast Notes from their dual-appearance on Invest Like the Best*
- Host – Mike Maples (@m2jr)

The Backstory

- Initially, Instagram was known as Burbn, a check-in app similar to Foursquare
    - In the process of raising money, Kevin happened upon Mike, one of their early users with a solid technical background. The two soon joined forces.
        - (At the time, Mike was 24, and Kevin was 27)
    - A few of Burbn's features:
        - Allowing users to make a plan to hang out with a group of people

- - Enabling users to share photos along with their check-ins
- **Struggling to gain traction, Kevin & Mike decided to double down on the photo feature of Burbn and change its name to Instagram**
  - The early feedback? – Not good
    - Many people said: "Why are you messing with this? This is terrible. Burbn was great."
      - Kevin adds: **"If we had listened, there would be no Instagram today. I don't know why we didn't listen. I think it was just because we knew where Burbn was headed… We knew Instagram had something that the world needed, and we believed in it… We really wanted it to exist in the world, and that probably overcame the inertia."**

The Trip to Mexico That Changed it All

- Although the overall outlook improved, Kevin was still frustrated with the early versions of Instagram and decided to take a short vacation with his wife to Todos Santos, Mexico
  - On a beach walk, Kevin's wife suggested that they add photo filters to the app, allowing anyone to make masterpieces out of terrible iPhone photos
    - Later that night, Kevin went back to the room and wrote the code for the first-ever Instagram filter – here's the first photo posted with the filter

The Best Products Solve a Problem

- **"Upon reflection, understanding that you need to solve someone's deep problems with your solution is how you understand whether or not it's going to go well"** – *Kevin Systrom*
  - The problems Instagram initially solved:
    - The process of sharing a photo was very tedious
    - Photos taken with early cell phone cameras were sub-optimal, to say the least
    - There were too many options of where to share a photo
  - Kevin adds on the above: "We literally designed the entire product around those three things"
    - First, to make the photo-sharing process seamless, photos were uploaded in the background while users entered photo captions
    - Second, Kevin & Mike added the photo filters feature
    - Third, as people wanted to share their photos to many social sites all at once, Instagram integrated one-click sharing for Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, etc.
- All in all: **"When you understand what a human wants to do, and what hurdle you have to overcome, you just solve for those hurdles, and it turns out people really love your product"** – *Kevin Systrom*

Early Success

- **Instagram officially soft-launched in 2010 exclusively on iOS (at midnight, on a Wednesday), gathering more than 1 million users in 2 months and 10 million users in the first year**
  - "To many, it's one of tech's quintessential lightening strikes" – Mike Maples, Jr.
- What did Kevin & Mike do to encourage people to use Instagram early-on?
  - **Perhaps the most effective: They reached out to 50-100 reporters at places like the Washington Post & The New York Times, encouraging them to try out the product**
    - Luckily, they landed a New York Times story on launch day
    - The takeaway: **Try this yourself if you're launching a product —the worst that happens is a journalist/reporter doesn't answer**
- The initial rush of users resulted in multiple server crashes and three days filled with hectic work, tons of Redbulls, and no sleep
  - The way Kevin describes it: "We did every single thing you could possibly do wrong in keeping Instagram alive and look at where it is today… It was a crash course in keeping something running. It was life support."

What job do our customers hire our product to do?

- This question comes from one of Kevin's favorite reads: *Competing Against Luck* by Clayton Christensen
- For example: A cheap plastic bottle of water helps you hydrate, while an expensive glass bottle of Voss might add a bit of elegance to a dinner party

- **"If you're a product person, if you're responsible for selling something to people… knowing what job you're solving for people is the most important thing a product person can do."** – *Kevin Systrom*
- Pondering this question for Instagram, Kevin came up with some answers, one of which being: People wanted to share the joy of a moment with others
  - And something that helped Instagram better fulfill this job? – Stories (a feature they launched in 2016)

Serve Your Users

- 🎧 "The biggest thing that kept us from adding anythin*g* unrelated to the core Instagram product was the feeling of giving up what we were initially. But that's a selfish thought. **What you should be there to do as a CEO, co-founder pair, or anyone who works at a company is serve the people that use your product day in and day out. Build what they want. Build what they're asking for. Whether it's verbal or not, they're asking for more stuff."** – *Kevin Systrom*
- (29) Related to the above, Kevin recalls an old saying: "What got you here won't get you there"
  - He adds: "Unless you shift your perspective on some of those closely held beliefs, you won't get to the next level"

Recommended Reading for Founders

- Kevin:
  - *Competing Against Luck* by Clayton Christensen
  - ***Principles*** by Ray Dalio, which helped Kevin improve his decision-making processes
- Mike
  - ***The Making of Prince of Persia*** by Jordan Mechner
    - The book (which reads like a journal) details Jordan's solo-founder journey in making the Prince of Persia video game

Advice to Founders

- **"Be more open, especially with your co-founders, but with your team early on"** – *Mike Krieger*
  - Transparency > secrecy
- 🎧 **"All great ideas are going to get told 'no' by a LOT of people"** – *Kevin Systrom*
  - When starting a company, make sure you keep this at the front of mind
  - **"Don't let the negativity get to you… Be objective about the feedback that's coming back and ask yourself, 'Do I have data to support it or not?'"**

Follow Your Energy

- **"With Instagram, it's almost as if it came out of our DNA. It was the thing we wanted to work on so badly that it didn't matter if it was a bad idea. We LOVED it."** – *Kevin Systrom*
- "The best way to come up with a good startup idea is to not try to think of a startup" – *Mike Maples, Jr.*
- **"Go to where the world drives you. Go to where your energy naturally is and double down on it."** – *Kevin Systrom*

Additional Notes

- While studying abroad as a junior in college, Kevin took a photography class in Florence
- One of the early potential name choices for Instagram (post-Burbn) was "Instalux"
- In Instagram's early days, Mike & Kevin worked out of Dogpatch Labs

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