

Blog

YC Interview Stories and Advice from 8 Companies in YCW11

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Posted 08 November 2011 by [The GiftRockets](#)



Photo by [Julia Mae](#)

When we blogged about a YC application checklist, it was fairly easy to compile because a successful app is more dependent on people than the company. Moreover, the [GiftRocket team](#) had altogether reviewed many applications, so we had an understanding of what made some good and others not as good.

Interviews are different. We've only had / seen one. So we called in some favors from our friends in the YCW11 class and compiled the stories of 8 additional companies: Mailgun, Like.fm, Grubwithus, Earbits, LAL, Zerocater, and Tutorspree. (*edit: added Tutorspree*)

We asked each company five questions:

- ★ **Traction:** where were you at in the process when you interviewed?
- ★ **Content:** After you explained what your company did, what did the partners ask about?
- ★ **What they liked:** What did they find most impressive about you?
- ★ **Hard questions:** Did they ask anything that flustered you?
- ★ **Advice:** What advice would you give to companies going through the interview process?

The answers are mostly verbatim, with some light editing for readability.

Mailgun

[Mailgun](#) is an [easy email service](#) for developers.

Traction: "When we interviewed, Mailgun only had a few early customers. We missed bells and whistles like automated billing, and the sign-up process was not 100% automated, but we could sign up customers manually and could demonstrate that the product was making people happy."

GiftRocket combines the thoughtfulness of a gift card with the flexibility of cash.

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Content: “We were lucky enough to relate directly to previous frustrating experiences for YC partners. The first thing PB said when we entered the room was “We could have used you guys at FriendFeed”. It helped that everyone at the table was a programmer and the pain of dealing with email was something everyone could relate to. Email is a huge problem which stretches well beyond sending. Nobody disagreed with that. PB, being the father of Gmail, grilled us a bit on the specifics of email business to make sure we’re not making this up, and that was it.”

What they liked: “They did not comment much on our personas but I vividly remember PG getting super excited about the possibility of email-based RPC and giving each function in a program its own email address.”

Hard questions: “For some reason we were lucky enough to get only technical questions, i.e. they were probing for bugs. And we had “unit tests” for that: we knew the files inside out and made it very apparent right from the start.”

Advice: “Trying to prove something, it is often easier to have a single but amazing and irrefutable argument than a bunch of so-so ones. Walking into that room it helps to have a single killer answer to this one question: “why will we succeed?”. And no matter what they ask just go with it, because that’s really the answer they’re looking for regardless of the shape and form of the question on the table. Let them know *we’re doing \$100K/month and growing 120% week to week*. Don’t hope for them to stumble upon your greatness, show it off yourself.”

“I think one of the most important things you can do to help your case is to have a working product (no matter how poor it is relative to your vision) and have evidence that people are benefitting from it. If they are paying for it, even better. Remember, the motto is *make something people want*. If you don’t have this, you had better be an expert at what you are building and be able to evidence this.”

Like.fm

[Like.fm](#) is a [music recommendation service](#) that works by automatically mining data on what you play.

Traction: “I had only about 10k users when I was interviewing. That’s not enough traction to justify ignoring all other factors. I think it’s a big enough number to show potential, not necessarily for the product, but that I can at least get something floating above ground.”

Content and hard questions: “I forgot what they asked me right afterwards. I think it was some stuff about why Last.fm users would switch.”

What they liked: “They seemed to like that I was going after a big thing (Last.fm and their millions of users). They did ask something that I wasn’t expecting, but I forgot what it was. Might have been why Last.fm users would switch over.”

Advice: “There are things you do that lets them know you really are committed, all-in, focused, and determined to succeed. Do those things, and make sure the partners know about those qualities before the interview is over.”

Grubwithus

[Grubwithus](#) is a site that helps you [meet people over meals](#). They’ve talked about [getting into YC](#) on their blog, and are holding [meals with founders](#) for the upcoming batches.

Traction and content: “When we interviewed, we had just launched in one city: Chicago. They asked how we expected to get traction for a marketplace business.”

What they liked: “They were most impressed by how much hustle we had...and how we knew each other for years and had worked together on a ton of stuff.”

Hard questions: "They didn't ask many questions that flustered us..the interview went really smoothly actually and we were pretty sure we got in after the interview."

Advice: "Smile and be likable. YC is not just a 3 month program; the partners have to deal with you for the rest of your life, so they're much more likely to fund people they get along with."

Earbits

Earbits is [commercial free radio](#) for indie music. They've talked about getting into YC before [here](#).

Traction: "When we applied, we had a beta site up, \$110k in friends and family funding, 5 or 6 on the team, and 30-40 partners we were working with. We did not have any revenue."

Content: "It's all kind of a blur. They asked questions so fast that you often only got to say the first few words of the answer before you were onto something else, but that was generally a good thing because it meant they were excited and wanted to learn more. Mostly they asked why we were doing what we were doing and about how we were approaching trouble spots in our business."

What they liked: "I believe what they found most intriguing about us was that we were approaching a very typical business with a completely new model and distribution approach. It was not some small adjustment to a typical business model - we were really revolutionizing the way a music streaming service would work and we weren't scared of it. We knew why we wanted to do it this way, it was based on real experience, and we had a team with the perfect background to do it."

Hard questions: "They didn't ask anything that flustered us, but they kept asking question after question non-stop and we really wanted them to see what we had already built. They did not ask to see it; we had to make it a point to show them. So, we kept answering their questions with, "Let us show you the product." After two or three times saying that, we finally managed to turn the focus to the demo and it was very valuable. If you have a good product or demo, make sure you show it off and don't expect them to ask you to do so. But if you're going to show them something, make damn sure it works."

Advice: "Chill out, have fun with it. If you have what YC is looking for, it's going to come out best if you go in relaxed and just engage in the interview like you're chatting with fun people who love hearing new ideas. Be very flexible about how you think about your business. Answer their questions with your thoughts and back up firm opinions with data, but be ready to say, *that's a good idea* or *That may work*. These guys have seen a million ideas. If you know something about your business for certain, you can tell them why, but if you don't, you can expect that they'll have valuable insights."

LAL (LikeALittle)

LAL is a flirting site that has taken college campuses by storm.

Traction and content: "When we applied, we had an initial product and a good amount of traction. They asked us about the learnings we have had so far from the current product (although I don't recall exactly)."

What they liked: "They were impressed by our team (backgrounds and history of perseverance), willingness to do groundwork to get users and user feedback, and initial traction."

Hard questions: "They didn't ask anything that flustered us."

Advice: "Show that your team is 1) dedicated to doing whatever it takes to be successful. They know the number one reason startups fail is because they give up or stop trying so take that doubt out of their mind entirely. Number two is being extremely scrappy in talking to/listening to users on a consistent basis. Every week, there should be touch points with

users and new insights about the product from users. Show that you doing that often.”

Zerocater

[Zerocater](#) helps companies feed their employees.

Traction and content: “When we applied, we had revenue on a very minimal product. We’d heard stories about how hard the interviews were, but we were lucky to have an easier time than others. It took us three minutes to explain the idea, and for the rest of the time, Paul was brainstorming ideas for us.”

What they liked: “We were solving a problem they’d experienced firsthand. Paul asked Jessica how she felt about organizing food for Y Combinator events. Her answer was an emphatic “I hate it!”

Hard questions: “We were generally prepared for all of the questions they asked.”

Advice: “Traction forgives all. It helped us have an easier time with the interview.”

Tutorspree

[Tutorspree](#) is an online marketplace for [private tutors](#).

Traction: “We hadn’t launched yet, but we had managed to sign up a couple hundred tutors, mostly in the NYC area. We had no paying customers at this time.”

Content: “They asked a lot about the size of our market, and how we differed compared to any existing competitors. We thought we were much better and gave them the reasons why. Tutoring is an enormous market domestically here in the US. (\$7b)”

What they liked: “I (Ryan) had startup experience at SeatGeek which I think they liked - and also Josh was able to say he was the #1 diamond dealer on Amazon at the time. This was true, and they all thought it was cool and got a laugh out of it.”

Hard questions: “They asked how much customer acquisition costed us - we hadn’t experimented too much with PPC yet, so we told them we weren’t sure yet. We probably should have had an answer for this though.”

Advice: “Have a friend pretend to be PG and drill you with questions about your company. We did this and it seemed to be very helpful.”

GiftRocket

[GiftRocket](#) is an [online gift card](#) company.

Traction: When we interviewed, we had just switched to a new idea from what we wrote on our application. We had discussed it briefly with Harj in one of the video chats.


Content: They first asked us about the market and whether people would be willing to use this. We had done extensive research here and told them about our findings.

What they liked: They liked our idea a lot; they liked that we were going after something massive; they liked that we were willing to switch to an entirely new idea than what we applied with; they liked that we all wrote code and had the beginnings of a website / app within a short timeframe; they liked that we had already quit our jobs and were going to be working on this either way.

Hard questions: They asked about managing fraud and about how we’d market the product. We hadn’t thought through either. The marketing question was excusable since it was too early for us to run tests, and PG himself defended us on that point. The fraud one was less

excusable and we rattled off some half-baked answer that wasn't too impressive."

Advice: If you're early, know your market inside out. They asked us a few questions about market size, smartphone usage in the US, growth, and so on. We had the precise answers and communicated them with full confidence despite the fact we had come up with the idea days ago. As well, have something to show, even if its just wireframes. We had already started working on the website and an app. The graphics were extremely basic but it helped show that we were able to get stuff done.



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