



Things a Little Bird Told Me

Confessions of the Creative Mind

Biz Stone
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Rating

8 7 Importance
8 Innovation
8 Style

Focus

Leadership & Management
Strategy
Sales & Marketing
Finance
Human Resources
IT, Production & Logistics
Career & Self-Development
Small Business
Economics & Politics
Industries
Global Business
Concepts & Trends

Take-Aways

- When Biz Stone co-founded Twitter, he had an unusual background including blogging and graphic design.
- As a book cover designer, Stone learned not to take offense if someone rejected a design.
- He found that constraints – such as a small budget or a tight deadline – inspire creativity.
- Change is frightening, but creates an environment where creativity can thrive.
- In 2003, Stone sold his Boston blogging company to Google and moved west.
- His subsequent job at Google did not challenge Stone, so he forfeited millions in stock options and a stable job to join an unproven start-up.
- Stone and Jack Dorsey created the concept for Twitter during a hackathon at Odeo, the podcasting company where they worked.
- The first tweet went out on March 21, 2006.
- Despite reliability problems, Twitter had 100 million users by 2010.
- Stone's openness and honesty about the site's problems helped Twitter build credibility.

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) How Biz Stone helped launch Twitter, 2) Why honest communication is the best policy and 3) What offbeat practices Stone uses to trigger creativity.

Review

Author Biz Stone co-founded Twitter, a platform that amassed more than 100 million users just a few years after its launch. In this breezy memoir, Stone argues that you can succeed as a tech entrepreneur even without technical chops. A college dropout who was perpetually broke even while working at Google, Stone describes his primary skills as the ability to think creatively and to communicate clearly. He explains his out-of-the-box innovation tactics. *getAbstract* suggests Stone's guide to anyone seeking new routes to creative solutions.

Summary

"I'm not a genius, but I've always had faith in myself and, more important, in humanity."

"If Twitter was to be a triumph, it wasn't going to be a triumph of technology – it would be a triumph of humanity."

Something Different

Biz Stone is not a programming whiz or a math genius, but as a co-founder of Twitter, he's a Silicon Valley success story. Stone says that the secret to his success is his uniquely creative approach to problem solving and entrepreneurship. Sometimes he hits a home run; sometimes he strikes out. Born in the 1970s, Stone is a Massachusetts native whose single mother struggled to make ends meet. He won scholarships to attend Northeastern University for a year. Because of his arts prowess, he then got a full scholarship to the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

Stone took a job hauling boxes for the publisher Little, Brown. Artists were just beginning to design book covers in Photoshop, and one day Stone sneaked into the firm's art department and drew a cover for a book about the Allman Brothers Band. Stone's work so impressed the art director that he offered Stone a full-time job as a graphic artist, so he dropped out of college.

Stone learned valuable lessons while designing book jackets. For one, covers had to please the designers, the author, the editor, and the sales and marketing departments. The designer might love the jacket, but if one other person hated it, that was that. Stone learned not to take offense if someone rejected his designs and to keep churning out new ideas. A book jacket offers limited space, but Stone could create an unlimited number of approaches within that constraint.

In the late 1990s, as the Internet boomed, Stone left Little, Brown to start a business designing websites. Later, he started blogging. In 2003, Google bought Stone's Boston-based blogging company, Genius Labs, and Stone moved to Silicon Valley. Stone was an odd fit at Google, which hired only the smartest computer scientists. During Stone's job interviews at Google, no one knew what to ask him. In his first months at Google, Stone and his girlfriend struggled financially and accumulated credit card debt. In 2004, Google went public, and Stone was suddenly well off. He could exercise his shares in Google for 10 cents and sell them for market price. Stone paid off his credit card debt and retired the unfavorable financing deal on his Toyota.

"It's a little abnormal to have three CEOs in three years, but the turbulence at Twitter was the reality of what happens when a start-up is successful."

"Graphic design is an excellent preparation for any profession because it teaches you that for any one problem, there are infinite potential solutions."

"Blank spaces are difficult to fill, but the smallest prompt can send us in fantastic new directions."

"For the past decade a large part of my job has been explaining to people why something broke."

Odeo

At Google, Stone worked with Evan Williams, the founder of Blogger. They commuted together from San Francisco to Google's offices in Mountain View. They discussed what they might do if they left Google. One day in 2005, Stone offered what he considered "a genius idea." Given the popularity of iPods and the obvious success of blogs, Stone thought people would want to record themselves speaking or singing. Stone's brainstorm was to create a site that would let people record their own voices and create MP3 files. Audioblogger already existed, but didn't help listeners who wanted to subscribe to podcasts or put content on their iPods.

Williams left Google, raised \$5 million and started Odeo, a podcasting firm. Stone stayed at Google, where he had no boss and received hefty bonuses. Because his employee options vested over four years, he still had two years left to maximize his wealth from Google's gravy train. But Stone didn't feel challenged at Google; he forfeited his unexercised options and joined Odeo. He found that while change is frightening, it creates an environment where your creativity can thrive.

At first, the podcasting gambit looked like a winner. Williams and Stone figured audio blogs were such a small niche that tech giants wouldn't be interested. They were shocked when, in late 2005, Apple added a podcasting tool to iTunes. Williams laid out a plan for Odeo's service to thrive through what he called "social discovery." Odeo would recommend content to users according to other content they liked. The strategy was sound, but neither Williams nor Stone were passionate about podcasting. They had no burning desire to become titans of the industry. They decided to sell the firm and do something else. Odeo had used just \$2 million of their \$5 million investment.

Twitter Takes Flight

The idea for Twitter arose during Odeo's waning days. Williams and Stone kept a skeleton crew to operate Odeo, and Williams suggested a "hackathon" in which employees paired up to work on new ideas. Stone worked with Jack Dorsey, who was inspired by the brief status updates his friends posted on AOL Instant Messenger. Dorsey's idea was a "short-format blogging" service letting users post a sentence or two, a framework ideal for phone screens. They wanted the site to be simple to build and easy to use. As they worked on the project, Odeo co-founder Noah Glass suggested names: Jitter, Flitter, Twitter and Skitter. Glass liked Jitter, but Stone preferred Twitter.

At the end of the two-week hackathon, Dorsey and Stone showed their newly created service to the Odeo team, whose response proved underwhelming. Some thought text-only updates were too simple and that Twitter needed to spruce up its offerings with audio or video. But Dorsey and Stone loved their idea. They continued to work on it long after the hackathon.

Stone had lost the financial cushion he built during his Google days. He was running up credit card debt at 22% interest. No buyers emerged for Odeo, and Williams didn't want his venture capital investors to lose their money because he had lost interest in podcasting. Williams created a new company to buy back Odeo for the \$2 million investors had put into it. Ultimately, Williams found a buyer willing to pay \$1 million for Odeo, so he essentially paid \$1 million for Twitter.

The first tweet went out on March 21, 2006. The format limited messages to 140 characters each, the length of a text message. Offering only a tiny space for expression spurs creativity – a notion that's counterintuitive and effective. An endless supply of time, money or space

"So often people follow a career path without thinking about what really inspires them."

"If you don't love what you're building, if you're not an avid user yourself, then you will most likely fail even if you're doing everything else right."

"Once true passion hits you, you can recognize all the times in your life when you were chasing the wrong dream."

"If you take an idea and just hold it in your head, you unconsciously start to do things that advance you toward that goal."

can hamper creativity. While some people hated Twitter's short character count, the limited space was a meaningful factor in Twitter's popularity. The constrained space gave it "a consistent rhythm and poetry." A year after its launch, Stone and others from Twitter attended the South by Southwest (SXSW) Interactive Conference in Austin. Twitter spent \$10,000 to post large monitors in the hallways of the conference. The screens became a "tweet visualizer" that displayed conference attendees' tweets.

South by Southwest

Twitter was notoriously unreliable in its early months. The site crashed often – as, for example, during the opening morning of the South by Southwest tech conference. Stone and Dorsey stayed up all night trying to get the flat screens to work and coping with a service outage. Miraculously, Twitter was back up and running for the conference. Attendees enjoyed seeing their tweets appear on big screens a few seconds after they sent them. Stone watched in amazement as SXSW attendees used Twitter obsessively. At one point, a session emptied because of a tweet that the session across the hall sent out. A single tweet was retweeted, creating the same effect as an announcement over a loudspeaker. When Twitter won an award, Stone wrote an impromptu acceptance speech for Dorsey: "We'd like to thank you in 140 characters or less. And we just did!" Twitter grew from 45,000 users before SXSW to 685,000 users by the end of 2007.

Free Pizza

Twitter's platform wasn't robust enough to handle rapid growth. The site frequently crashed. Stone stayed honest about the site's problems. When Twitter went down, Stone would go on Twitter's blog to report on the problems to users. He was transparent, but made sure to spin the blog posts as good news – engineers were fixing the problem so it wouldn't happen again. The attention to honesty paid dividends. In 2007, when chatter about Apple's iPhone drove traffic to Twitter, the site crashed. As Twitter's staff worked late to fix the problems, an order of pizzas arrived. A Twitter user tweeted, "Did you get our pizzas?" A stranger had sent food during a crisis. This showed the power of Stone's policy of honest and open communication.

"The Fail Whale"

Stone found an image of a whale being lifted by a flock of birds and posted it during Twitter's crashes. The image earned the nickname The Fail Whale, and contributed to Twitter's reputation as a start-up doing its best to keep its site running. The start-up survived, and it made the transition from a cute concept into a giant corporation. By 2010, despite its continued reliability issues, Twitter had more than 100 million users.

Twitter became big enough for boardroom drama. In 2010, its board fired Williams and replaced him as CEO with Dick Costolo, Twitter's chief operating officer. The decision to fire Twitter's co-founder wasn't a shock. Despite its huge user numbers, Twitter still crashed frequently. The company's lack of technical acumen sabotaged its growth. With billions of dollars at stake in an IPO, Twitter cycled through several CEOs.

A Worldwide Phenomenon

As Twitter grew, Stone saw it as a way for people worldwide to communicate freely and oppose repression. In 2008, as antigovernment protests heated up in Egypt, protesters used Twitter to organize demonstrations. A University of California grad student traveled to Egypt to document the protests. When Egyptian police detained him, he surreptitiously tweeted "Arrested." His followers saw the news, and a university administrator hired an attorney, freeing the student quickly. Journalists and politicians soon became fixtures on

Twitter. In the 2008 presidential election, both candidates had accounts. It morphed from a quirky little site for geeks to a worldwide phenomenon.

Leadership Lessons

Stone's tips for becoming a truly creative thinker include:

- **Visualize the future** – Whether it's a life goal or a business problem, picture where you'd like to be in a week or a few years. Let your subconscious mind stew on the issue and how to solve it. This tactic is surprisingly effective.
- **Embrace “wacky ideas,” no matter how ridiculous** – Stone gets his creative juices flowing through brainstorming sessions that might start with an outlandish premise – such as assuming there's no gravity. Williams was always the more sensible thinker, but he let Stone follow these flights of fancy.
- **“Fake it till you make it”** – Stone possessed an unshakable confidence in himself, even when it didn't seem warranted. When he started blogging in the early 2000s, he called his blog “Biz Stone, Genius.” Stone knew he was no genius, but he figured no one else knew. His confidence helped him gain a following online.
- **Don't get comfortable** – A secure job is great, but you must embrace risk to push yourself to greater achievements. Stone left a job at Google to go to a start-up.
- **Follow your passion** – Without passion, a perfect business plan will fail. If you obsessively love what you're doing, you'll be more likely to succeed despite obstacles.
- **Forget the money** – Instead of focusing on money, think about what inspires you, what you enjoy and what sort of surroundings you'd like to work in every day. This might lead to maxed-out credit cards, but it can yield big successes.
- **Embrace limits** – Constraints, such as a small budget or a tight deadline, can inspire creativity. The movie *Jaws* was terrifying in part because director Steven Spielberg lacked the money to build a full-sized mechanical shark. As a cost-cutting alternative, Spielberg shot from the point of view of a killer shark looking up at a swimmer on the surface. This workaround proved far more frightening than a fake shark.
- **Be willing to fail** – As a teen, Stone took a gymnastics class. He wanted to learn to do a back handspring. He couldn't quite get past the fear. A coach told Stone: “The key is being willing to fall past the control point.” In other words, success comes after embracing the possibility of failure. In Silicon Valley, 90% of start-ups flop.
- **Don't strive for perfection** – In its early days, Twitter was notoriously unreliable. Built in haste for a modest user base, it was a “house of cards” that went down anytime a small glitch arose. Twitter took criticism for its unreliable service, but the result was the rapid growth of an easily constructed platform.
- **Learn to listen** – Stone's most valuable skill is listening, whether the speaker is a computer scientist at Google or an annoyed Twitter user.
- **Create your own opportunities** – In high school, Stone wanted to play sports. Owing to his inexperience, he failed to make the basketball or baseball teams. He asked permission to start a lacrosse team, reasoning that no one else would know how to play, either. He became captain of the team. Stone says, “The determination that led me to create a new sports team taught me an important lesson: Opportunity is manufactured.”

“Success isn't guaranteed, but failure is certain if you aren't truly emotionally invested in your work.”

“I invite you to open your mind to new possibilities. Let's fake it till we make it.”

“Nobody is flawless, and when you act as if you are, it always rings false.”

About the Author

Veteran Internet entrepreneur **Biz Stone** worked for Google, helped create blogging and podcasting, and co-invented Twitter. He lives near San Francisco.