Actionable tips for startups from January Barnes, founder of ParlayMe

In my line of work, as a Tech Journalist and Media expert, I come into contact with first time founders and CEO’s on a daily basis. One of the common reigning challenges many face is when and how to launch, scale and exit. Unless of course you’re building a legacy and therefore an exit is not on the roadmap. But most importantly something most first time and even seasoned CEO’s struggle to perfect is the art of delegation. Especially when starting out.

Temps de lecture : minute

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There is often an urgency to do it all yourself, which can initially seem like the most cost-effective and straight forward solution in the beginning but as you grow learning how to let go and hand the baton onto your team members is crucial to success. Here I outline 6 actionable startup strategies that can help you succeed, along with 5 quotes from leading industry heavyweights and some resources all to help make you a reliable and successful Startup CEO.

Something I learned early in my entrepreneurial journey is to focus on what you’re good at and delicate the things you’re not. If you’re great at networking then network away, if you’re brilliant at coding, spend all day coding, if you’re gifted at selling then ace your business development strategy. Most importantly though remember it’s a marathon, not a sprint and make sure each day you’re building or improving, even if it’s just an improvement of 1% per day then you’re on the right path. You don’t need to do everything at once. In fact getting it right rather than getting it to market fast can prove beneficial in the long run. That said don’t be a perfectionist, nobody has time for that, least of all the market.

There is something to be said for having a minimum viable product. Just remember you only get 1 chance to launch so be sure you are ready and by ready I mean able to respond to market conditions and repurpose and adjust your product to capture more market share. I am lucky enough to interview some of the most intriguing, extraordinary and brilliant minds in the business world everyday and I have taken 6 tips that I have learned along the way for Startup CEO’s.

No matter if you’re a first-time CEO or seasoned veteran - these tips can prove beneficial to your overall success: It is no secret that 10% of new technology enterprises succeed, leaving 90% of new startups failing. Although failure doesn’t mean your startup journey is over, rather failings are all key learnings and obstacles to your next big idea!

There are a plethora of reasons why a startup may succeeds or fails. One constant common theme is unfortunately an inexperienced CEO. Inexperience doesn’t necessarily mean a recipe for failure. It isn’t the only reason for falling short of your startup goals, as some of the world’s most successful CEO’s have been ill-equipped and haven’t had robust experience yet have soared to the top. Inexperience shouldn’t make you wary but instead simply act as a warning sign to learn from others mistakes and triumphs.

Read also

1. Why content marketing matters now more than ever before

The old philosophy of build it and they will come couldn't be more redundant than today. As Forbes reported since the Pandemic internet usage is up 70%. With a plethora of online platforms and social media selling, content creation is truly king. The options available are endless. Once upon a time a company had a 30 sec TVC, a print campaign and maybe a digital banner. Today you can do podcasts, live youtube streaming, email marketing, clubhouse panels, blogging, gifs and many amazing digital assets.

All marketing needs to deliver genuine leads and build audience awareness. That is why it's important to understand where your audience/customers are located and how do they like to be communicated to? Whether you are looking to fundraise, generate new customers or build company profile you need to on-brand a targeted digital content approach. If done right it can be the big ticket to scaling your startup for the next stage.

Now whilst it may be tempting to just have Sandra or Barry from marketing who writes killer copy and is a digital whiz handle all your marketing and PR, do not underestimate the power of getting a professional agency to build and execute your digital marketing content and strategy.

Remember delegation is key, outsourcing to professionals that understand the balance between marketing, PR and branding can be not only money well spent but the difference between your startup reaching the right audience or being forgotten in a rising sea of startups.

At ParlayMe we work with first-time founders to seasoned VC's on how to build brand, reach the right clients and communicate onboard and timely messages. Influencer marketing is not the only perk of investing in social media marketing as a brand but for small businesses and startups, in particular, there is a world of opportunity in that realm of hashtags, comments and likes.

Social media has become the new playground that unites all demographics. It's every marketer’s dream come true: It offers free access to such a vast audience of potential customers for any product.

I think it's safe to say that the vast majority of marketers are already using social media in their jobs. But just because you have a twitter, facebook, youtube, instagram and clubhouse account doesn’t mean you’re using these platforms effectively.

Over the past year quality over quantity has become paramount. Getting the right message rather than too many messages out there has become vital. Also understanding how each platform is different. Simply regurgitating the same content on each platform is not necessarily the best strategy. Rather understand the nuances of each platform, be it video, word, audio or gif - and don’t be afraid to create hybrid messaging.

> *Just remember marketing, just like sales or building product is a full-time job, Not an after thought but something that should be implemented for day 1.*

2. Fail fast and often

It may be a term you’ve heard before and perhaps you’re curious as to why some startups mentors swear by this principle and others despise it. Whilst it can be polarising here’s my take - Fail fast is not about developing the latest coolest gadget or product on the market but instead it is an overall approach. Where a startup will develop a product whilst conducting many small experiments with the knowledge that some will stick and some will fail. One prominent American investor and General Partner in Silicon Valley Venture Capital Firm Andreessen Horowitz, Marc Andreeseen has voiced his concerns with founders adopting a fail fast and often approach, stating

> *“I think ‘fail fast’ is catastrophic if it is applied to strategy and goals,”*

> *“A lot of founders talk themselves out of what are going to be good ideas in the long run because they aren’t getting immediate traction.”*

He has a point, if you focus on getting immediate results you can miss the longterm goal posts. So my advice is fail fast and often but don’t give up. Rather than sending your startup idea to the scrap heap because you didn’t generate XYZ in sales within 3 months of launch. Doesn’t mean your startup is destined for failure, rather it can mean quite the opposite, that you simply need to adapt, refine and most importantly don’t give up! If you’e getting traction then test, experiment and make the most of your time as a small nimble business that can make changes and adapt your product based on customer feedback.

Critics of this approach also believe the mentality to act first and ask questions later can be detrimental to your overall growth. For more traditional companies, there's some appeal to this notion. If your organisation usually needs a half dozen meetings to decide what to order for lunch or what colour manilla folders you should order then the idea of launching into action with only a vague notion of a plan, and a "license to fail," is appealing.

In fact, some companies have instituted all manner of policies to encourage "fast failure," even to the extent of requiring teams to stand up and applaud when a colleague announces they've failed. My advice is to take perhaps a happy medium approach. Rather than throwing ideas against the proverbial wall rather seek to evolve and progress through thorough testing and learning.

> *Most importantly if you adopt the fail fast and often approach be sure to understand why the failure occurred as opposed to who was responsible, and prioritise learning from the failure over any other activity, and strategise how to move forward after failure.*

3. Build a minimum viable product (MVP)

This is the quickest and most effective way to test your idea and scale up based on customer feedback. Part of the lean startup culture mentality is this approach. It often avoids overspending and overthinking product development that can cost a startup vital time and money. Stop being a perfectionist, you can redo your logo, redesign your website and streamline your mobile user experience until you’re blue in the face, like anything startups grow, change and develop over time. How your startup is at the beginning is very different to what it will be in 6 months, 1 year of 5 years from now.

Take the new audio social media platform ClubHouse - they are a perfect example of a MVP model. Their logo is fairly basic, they have limited mobile user experience, only available on IOS and search functional is limited. In fact in the beginning you couldn’t even search for clubs on Clubhouse and instead users started publishing online lists of CH clubs. It could be said that MVP works best in a B2C environment.

As B2C startups have a shorter sales cycle and customers are more likely to give feedback in real-time, allowing you to adapt and modify your product. However B2B is often a longer sales cycle and getting real-time feedback can well let’s face it, drag out. So be sure to understand your market, product fit and if you think MVP is the best approach then get going! Most important with any MVP make sure you prove viability, save time and money and get feedback.

4. The three legged stool

As many potential startups have discovered, scalability is one of the prime factors potential investors look for when deciding to fund companies. Having a solid, strong and complimentary team is always the ultimate goal, but having the right team is the dream. It doesn’t happen as often as it should. How many times have we heard of terrible co-founder feuds and often ending in lost friendships and forgotten startup ideas. Conflict often arises from cross pollination I.e too many cooks in the same kitchen. If you’re all brilliant coders, salespeople or marketing execs then there will be too much overlap and result in mixed messaging.

The best formula is to have what’s called the 3 legged stool, ideally 3 founders that cover, Technology, Sales and Marketing 1 founder who is technical and can build product, 1 founder who is the sales/person/CEO with exceptional interpersonal skills and 1 founder who understands digital and social media marketing .

Although a solid team with a complimenting skillset helps onboard investor interest do not be afraid to go it alone. Some of the most successful startups have had solopreneurs at the helm. Another advantage of being a solopreneur is consistency of message, you can build the business on your terms and often this consistent vision shows in the startup. However in my experience you have a more likelihood of achieving success with a three legged stool approach and let's face it, with 90% of startups failing we all need the best possible start.

5. Bootstrapping for longevity

When it comes to startups you either sink or swim and cashflow is more often than not the catalyst for a sinking ship. However it takes as much time and energy building a good or bad startup in it's infancy.

> *Bootstrapping is hard work but it ensures you streamline your business to be profitable.*

Bootstrapping a startup means starting lean and without the help of outside capital. It means continuing to fuel growth internally from cash flow produced by the business. Many sizeable businesses started out bootstrapping. Some have just made it happen on their own. Others have eventually taken offers of outside investment. As you can't afford to not make money.

> *Bootstrapping often means failing fast and often and building your product until you're ready to raise funding.*

As tempting as it is to raise and the saying is “Founders are always raising” this might be true but you need to stop and ask yourself is raising capital really necessary to your pathway to success. Are there ways you can build product and scale to create revenue without raising? If the answer is maybe then it’s worth giving it a go. As giving away shares in your startup, although at the beginning is worth little, if you are to achieve success those shares will prove to be invaluable and your most important asset.

Bootstrapping a startup business can be a romanticised idea. It can also work if you’re passionate and willing to put in the hustle. For those that can pull it off, it may bring even more rewards. Though, that doesn’t mean there aren’t any downsides. Make sure you know the trade offs and which route is really going to get you where you want to go.

6. Partner up - "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

Forming strategic and mutually beneficial partnerships will be the driver to your growth. You may enter a market and look at your competitors are your arch enemies, when it actual fact they can be your biggest allies and if approached openly your biggest advocates. Finding the right partner and one that will truly bring you more market share in a truly mutually beneficial way is a force to be reckoned with.

These partnerships are described as non-competitive strategic alliances aimed at achieving mutually beneficial goals. For example, performance has to positively impact the startup and assist in gaining new customers and audience share. A partnership with an existing business can be a huge win for a startup. But just because a bigger, shinier company wants to be your new BFF, it doesn’t always mean the revenue flood gates will open.

Marketing partnerships can be super valuable but often an integrated partnership evolves from a simple partnership. I always say start off small, understand how it is to work with the company and build it up. Over promising at the beginning and finding it's for some reason not viable can set you up for failure. Instead start small and grow the partnership organically. But make sure the partnership is mutually beneficial - a one-sided partnership will end up costing you time and resources. Something no startup has excess of!

Here are some exceptional and memorable quotes from incredible business leaders

I've interviewed - for those that want to learn more about these people do check our my ParlayMe Power Players Podcast series available on itunes and Spotify

> *"Choose Yourself" - "Most things that you do, should fail. If you don't fail enough, means you're not doing enough experiments" - James Altucher, Entrepreneur, Investor and Author of the Wall Street Journal Bestselling book*

> *"Count the Days and Don't Make the Days Count, as a CEO, you know your solution better than anyone, because you've pitched it to VCs, to potential prospects, to future rock star employees and no matter how good the technology is, people buy from people and a company will only spend*

> *money to fix its issues" - Caroline Franczia, Author of "Popcorn for the New CEO". Author of "Popcorn for the New CEO"*

> *"There's nothing to it but to do IT" - Omar Rebhan - Founding Partner Saudi Angel Investors*

> *"Fighting through fear and knowing you're going to survive, fight fear head on and jump through it" - Alyssa Carson - Future Mars Walker*

> *"I think that everything you do in your career connects for a reason" - Joanne Wilson - Angel Investor*

> "*Whoever you are you should be able to create your own life and identity*" - *Viktoria Modesta - Bionic Pop Artist*

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