

Some things are better left private, meet Tempest

As part of our quick fire questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Michael Levit, CEO and cofounder of Tempest about increasing online privacy, popularising private search and building a business with a commitment to Founder's Pledge.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Tempest was founded to give people control over the lives they lead on the internet. We share so much of ourselves on the internet, and we feel very strongly that this personal information should be just that, personal. The choice for people now is either mainstream search engines that don't prioritise privacy or private options that don't have a good enough user experience. My Co-founder Sean and I have been in the search space for a long time and felt that it was critical that people had a better option, so we created Tempest.

Tell me about the business - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

Tempest is an online privacy company and everything we do is about increasing privacy and data security for our users. We have a portfolio of privacy products including Tempest Search and the Tempest Browser, with plans to expand our product range to ensure user safety across every touchpoint online.

Our principal aim is to popularise private search. We've spent time

building the products to ensure that the user experience matches that of traditional search engines, without the normalised practices of tracking and collecting user data. In this way, Tempest's products do not capture & store Personally Identifiable Information (PII), are tracker-free and do not collect users' search history. We launched both the search engine and browser in March of this year and are excited to continue to develop them as our user base grows.

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

We founded the company in 2018 and since then have been building! We knew that we had to get the products and the user experience right if we're going to succeed and drive real adoption. During this time, we've been investing in the design & development of the products. Many variables are at play, but much of this comes down to a user experience that feels solid and familiar, while also respectful of a person's privacy.

We are at an interesting point in the journey, because we've spent lots of time getting the product right but really, we are just at the beginning. The focus now is on both reaching more users but also educating people on the value of private search and the ways their data is being used. We'll also continue to innovate, and as generative AI becomes further integrated into the search landscape, we will work to ensure that the future is private for those who want it to be.

Tell us about the working culture at Tempest

The team at Tempest is united by a shared belief that people should live their digital lives on their own terms. We have built a global team which is expanding quickly, and it is that collective aim that drives our business and our culture. We're remote-first and have presence in the United

States and across Europe. We have plans to grow our team even further bringing together many different points of view in our mission to protect the online privacy of our users.

On a personal note, I am pledging half of my shares in Tempest, which is equivalent to a third of the company, to a charitable trust as part of my recent signing of the *Founder's Pledge*.

How are you funded?

Tempest was founded using private investment from myself and my cofounder and we've financed growth through the organic growth of the business. We're very proud that we've got to the point where the business is already profitable, before having launched the Search and Browser products. Moving forward and as we continue to grow; we will primarily generate revenue by serving contextual or keyword-based advertisements.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

We have just encountered our biggest challenge, that of turning a brand and product that no one knows into something lots of people do on a regular basis. It's important to note that we are trying to achieve this in one of the most competitive technology verticals, with an incumbent that is monopoly through and through. We're not looking to overcome this by convincing people that Google is so bad or evil. Google's just asking people to make too big a trade off on data security and privacy, and the Tempest position is that you don't need to do that.

Tempest doesn't ask you to sacrifice UX for privacy or visa versa. Tempest delivers relevance and accuracy, provides responses that

incorporate rich content from expert 3rd party sources, has a presentation that is elegant and efficient. And Tempest does this while also ensuring that a user's privacy standards are met with rigor and an eye toward customization.

What makes all of this hard is the fact that people search for stuff on the internet every day, all day long. It is a behaviour that is deeply ingrained. How do we effect change within that? This is a big question to answer. People are paying attention right now, so there is an opportunity for things to be better and for us to expect more from the companies we rely on so heavily. In this way Tempest is an agent of change.

How does Tempest answer an unmet need?

The search industry has a privacy problem that is currently not being solved in any meaningful way by existing players in the market. This is where Tempest comes in, with a product that meets the needs of customers not currently served by either mainstream search engines and browsers or the current private options.

Currently, other private search engines like DuckDuckGo and Brave have failed to make private search mainstream, allowing Google to dominate. Tempest is here to change that; we've developed a product that is laser focussed on providing cutting edge private search tools via an experience that works for all internet users. Achieving this will take time and hard work, but we're committed to meeting those needs.

What's in store for the future?

The future for us is simple - make private search a real option for all people to be able to choose. Yes, that means gaining market share, but it is also vital that we educate people on how companies are using and abusing their personal data. We're confident that more people becoming

aware of the privacy issues coupled with a search option which matches the user experience they are accustomed to means that the future is bright for Tempest.

It's also going to be a hugely interesting time for the industry. There's no doubt in my mind that generative AI is going to change the game in search, but there are issues to address before we catapult into that future. We'll be working hard to ensure that the internet of the future works for the users.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders? (Michael's scale experience)

It's hard to boil it down because it really is about what works for the individual. But one thing I think is important is to always be in a state of "iterate and learn." This doesn't mean a business leader should ever knowingly compromise on product quality, but you should operate with the understanding that there will always be something to tweak or something to edit, and you can't allow a product or company to become bogged down in development cycles. Put in the context of going to market, when you're growing a business and bringing something new to market speed is critical, and therefore getting comfortable with learning as you go is likewise.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

I have various individual pursuits, but my daily routine tends to be family life and work life. I wake between 6 and 7am and get moving almost

immediately. I get out of the house early and ride my bike to the ferry, which takes me across to San Francisco and our office. Most days are filled with calls and meetings that involve direct operational influence and oversight on my part, both for Tempest where I'm the CEO, and in my other board and advisor roles. I am home between 5-6pm and spend the evening hanging out with my family. One of the interesting aspects of today's world of work is that it's borderless, that means that as a rule you need to be more flexible with your time to catch up in the evening with employees and partners from across the world. But I try to limit myself to only a couple night time hours of work before signing off - getting a proper amount of sleep is key!

Michael Levit is the CEO and Cofounder of *Tempest*.

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