

Bidstack, enabling developers to monetise their games and empowering advertisers to engage gamers

As part of our quick founder questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to James Draper, founder and CEO of Bidstack about disrupting home digital advertising, connecting brands with gamers and the importance of innovation and inclusivity.

Temps de lecture : minute

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I founded Bidstack in 2015 after 15 years in various commercial roles in motorsport and advertising. The catalyst for launching the company came when I saw a clear product-market fit for someone to disrupt how out of home digital advertising was being transacted. It seems crazy to say, but back then digital advertising was being bought in much the same way as print advertising, so there was an opportunity to enable more flexible and reactive advertising with a platform that allowed brands to access digital spaces without going through media owners.

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

Bidstack has evolved significantly since its inception, when our initial focus was digital out-of-home advertising. In 2017 we pivoted Bidstack's tech to focus on the video games industry, after spotting that advertising billboards in games were difficult and costly to update with real brands -

and therefore weren't generating much revenue.

Our goal is to enable brands and rights holders to deliver targeted advertising and messaging within games, creating a more immersive and realistic gaming experience by injecting this seamlessly into the gameplay. Our partners and customers have traditionally been video game publishers who can monetise their games better with in-game advertising, and consumer brands who want to reach gamers at scale while they're enjoying playing games. We're proud to work with legendary publishers such as Sega, Ubisoft, Miniclip and to have produced award-winning campaigns with household name brands like Marriott Bonvoy, OneFootball and Doritos.

How has Bidstack evolved since its launch?

I've covered the move into video games, but not how this happened. Funnily enough, it all started with a chance encounter with a member of the team from the legendary *Football Manager* franchise at a party. Since then there have been plenty of milestones, from listing on the London Stock Exchange, to hiring key team members across the globe, to recently partnering with a great company called Venatus who are selling our in-game advertising inventory in various major territories.

At the beginning of 2023 we launched Bidstack Sports, a division of the company that licences our tech to sports games, teams and rights holders. This summer, the NFL's Washington Commanders became the first major sports team to use Bidstack's virtual advertising technology. Bidstack Sports has achieved a huge amount of interest from game publishers, sports teams and leagues and will be a key focus going forward, in some ways bringing us full circle back to 2017 where this journey began.

Tell us about the working culture at Bidstack.

At Bidstack, our working culture is rooted in innovation and inclusivity. We prioritise efficiency by eliminating long, unproductive meetings and introducing shorter, more focused ones where every team member contributes. Throughout the various iterations of the company we've ensured each department is empowered to contribute to our overall output. The company can't be driven by one team/department (e.g. finance or sales), it needs input from all sides of the business to truly win. Socially, we also foster a sense of community through regularly hosting shared activities like gaming tournaments. Many of our staff are technology and gaming enthusiasts, so we want to continue fuelling those passions where we can.

How are you funded?

At the very beginning I received funding from friends and 'angel' investors. Since we went public in 2018, the bulk of our funding has come from retail and institutional investors, while in 2022 we received our first strategic investment from Irderto. In total we've raised more than £30M in funding, and if you were to compare Bidstack to a private company, we probably sit somewhere between Series A and Series B.

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

One of our biggest challenges has been maintaining patience while pioneering something entirely new. We've had to ensure that everyone is aligned and believes in the project not just at the start but throughout the various hurdles that inevitably come when embarking on building a new industry like we are with In-game advertising. It's a delicate balance between technology and commercial aspects, and sometimes one

outpaces the other so team changes are needed. We've also been quick to adapt when things haven't gone as planned with an effort to not dwell on major changes. This has ensured we remain on track to forever alter how brands, teams and rights holders communicate with gamers, and improve how publishers monetise their games.

How does Bidstack answer an unmet need?

Bidstack addresses the unmet need of brands wanting to connect with gamers. Previously, there was no technology that could easily and seamlessly facilitate this connection. We provide brands with not only the ability to connect with gamers but also provide access to valuable and relevant in-game player data and analytics, allowing them to engage with gamers more effectively. We've also evolved the publisher model, creating a platform that generates incremental revenue throughout a product's lifecycle. For example, in the sports gaming sector, our platform empowers publishers to negotiate strongly with rights holders, providing hyper-targeted engagement with fans (who opt in). We see this as a win-win model as it benefits everyone involved - game publishers, fans, clubs and brands.

What's in store for the future?

Our focus for the future is on maturing the in-game advertising (IGA) market, which we essentially helped build from scratch. We're leveraging a network of third parties, such as Venatus, to outsource the ad network side of our business. We're increasingly concentrating on the technology aspect, particularly in the sporting arena, giving more accessibility to publishers licensing our tech to enhance their offerings.

What's one piece of advice you'd give other founders and future founders?

I'd advise other founders and future entrepreneurs to view their journey as a marathon, not a sprint. Try to stay continuously detached and keep yourself energised. Don't be overly anxious about micro-pivots; make decisions and move forward with speed and purpose where possible. For me building a business is akin to the English football pyramid - different people, strategies and finances are needed depending on the company's progression. Initially, you need people who are great for that stage, and as you grow, onboard more experienced individuals whom you trust to propel the company to the next level.

And finally, a more personal question. What's your daily routine and the rule(s) you're living by at the moment?

My daily routine involves spending time with people who can help me look at challenges from different angles. I prefer in-office interaction where possible rather than working remotely because face-to-face communication with employees of all levels is still crucial for growing a business. Building those personal connections and fostering a sense of unity within the team is a fundamental rule I live by at the moment.

James Draper is the founder and CEO of [Bidstack](#).