

Meeting notes

Paul Sciarra – founder of pinterest
Background in philosophy, venture capital
Product of the NJ school system
Left to join an investment company

Q: earliest stage of the development process

- worked at a VC firm after school, but more interested in t consumer internet. 2008: cofounder Ben moved to NY and started the company
- first product very different: wanted tot take paper catalog browsing to the iphone (fall 2008)
- took a long time to raise \$
- one thing stood out... an afterthought feature of ‘dog-earing’ pages and sending them back to users in a visual grid
- started thinking about collections and what they mean as a part of human expression – not that many long-form writers, pro photographers, but many people curate the world around them (furniture, music collections, etc.)
- reformed the company around this idea

About Pinterest

- wanted to avoid a text-based feed... saw plenty of them already went to a visual display of info
- real-time was very big, wanted to explore this
- collections are less temporally sensitive than tweets, so boards (collections of items) sat outside of time (bookshelf analogies, the books you have read in the past tell you a lot about who you are now)
- older content is rediscovered, with a board outside time
- people at the core of the product
- lots of algorithmically-driven recommendation (google’s black box etc.), but recommendations from trusted people are almost more important than the particular item under recommendation
- launched the site in early 2010, not an overnight success, took a long time to get going
- core users found a lot of value, that cohort had very high engagement numbers, we assumed there would be more of them, so targeted that cohort and oriented the growth of features for that group
- on the internet ,people are always ‘one click away from something else’
- the product did not change markedly during the exponential growth of approx.. 18 months

Q: what was the purpose of the early meet-ups? Blending of online and offline?

- aspirations were that the product’s items would impact everyday life (recipes, crafting, etc.)
- when seeding the site, the sense was that building the best product wuld drive users, but it was much more about marketing.

- In-person meet-ups were hugely valuable
- What excited him was that people who didn't know each other outside of pinterest knew a lot about each other
- Site grew organically from this user base

Tony (prof, urban ed): Q: blending the online and the personal experience, and 'learning analytics'. Any comments?

- a shift over the history of the web towards individuals' having a more realistic identity on the web. At the beginning of Facebook, self-identification with one's real name was jarring/intense
- keen to tie into this. 'real name', 'real identity' helps to ensure real sharing
- will see more and more of this as shift to greater mobile content creation/consumption continues
- algorithms v. people: people are realizing the limitations of algorithms to help discover new things, recommendations, etc. a blend is best where computers crunch the data and spit out the results, and a human being puts out the results
- a la Netflix explaining why it makes the recommendations it makes

Evan (IRT): Q. because pinterest content is so visual, have they gotten hit by content/copyright trolls?

- doesn't speak for the company but it will be an ongoing issue. Content creators do a valuable service but they also have an interest in making sure their content is seen by many viewers, inviting possible problems.
- Gratification of seeing the product used by many folks
- An ongoing compromise to make sure content creators are appropriately compensated, whether by traffic or other means
- Social media marketing that can't be bought when someone recommends an item and makes it part of their identity in an authentic way

Aaron (NML): pinterest as a social network run by individuals who didn't use others. Q: is this true? Were there any design considerations/decisions that facilitated this?

- designing the product they didn't overtly target women
- not discussed fact is that women are drivers of a lot of content production and consumption (FB, twitter)
- Not a goal, still some legacy of the way the community was seeded has a legacy (eg Started in the interior design, fashion, food, recipes, travel verticals)
- Over time, diversity should increase

Sarah (Urban Ed): Q: funding. How does pinterest make its revenue?

- Not focused at all on monetization, but the next 18 months will see it.
- Weren't technical so they had to raise \$ from VC's
- Company stayed small, could iterate quickly

Steve Brier (NML, ITP) Q: did they rely on metrics, etc to understand site usage? Algorithms, deep immersions? The focus on meet-ups sounds like the face-to-face was the evaluative mechanism.

- lean startup model (build small and watch the numbers) is not necessarily the best way to build
- numbers of metrics are based on the questions one is asking, so the decisions could not be effectively data-driven
- ton of gut-level decisions about what people wanted and taking a close look at how users were using the site
- no user-level metrics until 2 years in – was a lot more intuition-driven.
- When you are living and breathing the product, this intuition is easier

Marilyn Johnson (D Fellow, Philo) Q: how to use pinterest in a Philo dept?

- was surprised that a very visually-driven site had a ton of quotes (inspirational or otherwise)
- they advise the brands to do stuff they think is cool
- interesting approaches by a number of brands that have embraced it (retailers, institutions, etc.) and combined things happening in catalogs along with unrelated things that are still interesting in the topic area

Sean (library/MOOC): Q: Some libraries are using pinterest for readers' advisory, but academic libraries have a barrier that the platform assumes anyone can click – and academic libraries have closed resources. What is pinterest's view of this issue/application barrier?

- in the early days people asked for private boards for select people
- held off on this because of the technical limitations and privacy concerns
- rolled out private collections functionality last year
- White-labeling for internal use? No. Very difficult to productize for multiple installs/instantiations.

Shirley: Q: pinterest is exciting because of the fluidity and flexibility – thinking about the main streams (making things/creativity),(curating things you want to have/buy) in competition?

- this debate (limiting the content to readily buyable items) raged in the early days
- shopping as the core function? No, the goal was a way to share interests, not just buyable items. Eg if you are into cooking you don't just show your blender, you show your recipe, end product, etc.
- Looked at the evolution of catalogs: Sears Roebuck had a collection of widely different items, not compelling but the newer catalogs have a story about the brand, and the collection.

Steve Brier: Q: what's the user base?

- Secret but surprised/exceeded the initial expectations
- Internationalization underway

- The product is at its core a network, so the goal should be to provide the compelling content w/the fewest # of clicks

Erin (English, D Fellow) Q: first month? How did you get the word out? What happened? Why did you pick Int. Design? How do you keep track of the evolving subject matter areas?

- sent a link to a few hundred friends and family (poorest performing cohort)
- some of the interior design cohort were a result of an internal project (pin it forward) in which they took interior design bloggers, grouped them and had them work on a pinboard on a shared theme and then introduce the person next behind them online (eg blog roll).
- "What home means to you" was that theme
- Int. Design was a good place to start (physical analogies, etc.)
- This blogging community created a lot of link-backs, etc.
- The site design influences what content is shared, etc. so the feed can prompt the kinds of content that are posted (recipes, fashion etc.) are subtle indicators and nudge people into those directions
- Most exciting part was the unexpected ways (travel). A woman created visual tour guides of the cities in which she lived with interesting descriptions etc

Aaron: few sites have vernacular eg 'pinning'

- what thought process went into creating the vocabulary? Was it intentional, to tie it to a metaphor?
- Looked to how twitter did it as a model for building this lexicon (the vocabulary sidebar of twitter 2)
- Pinterest totally ripped that off in the first months to inculcate a set of words with the activity they were doing on the site.
- Reinforcing this set of words over time
- Names are really important (Instagram won because the title was so much better). Really helpful in creating identification with the behavior

Tony Q: What do you think of Second Life?

- great, not sure where it has gone recently (off a cliff)?
- The danger of creating wholly self-contained worlds (like digg, reddit)
- Insularity turns off new people... you want fanatical users but you also want people to join, be enthusiastic

Andrea V. (NML): Q: what is the future of folks who haven't brought their personal selves public?

- connections between users on the site look very different than offsite
- unlikely that there will be one social network to 'rule the world', several that are particular to certain individuals
- the audience you command online is very important re the content you want to share
- the barrier on Facebook has been raised, but more willing to put something on pinterest as people have 'opted in' on those sites

Chris Caruso: Q: is the problem with Facebook too ubiquitous? Young people who don't want to be on the same social media networks as parents and teachers etc.

- fascinated with snapchat
- as the networks 'ossify' there is a particular expectation of sharing