

Taking the Scary out of Startups

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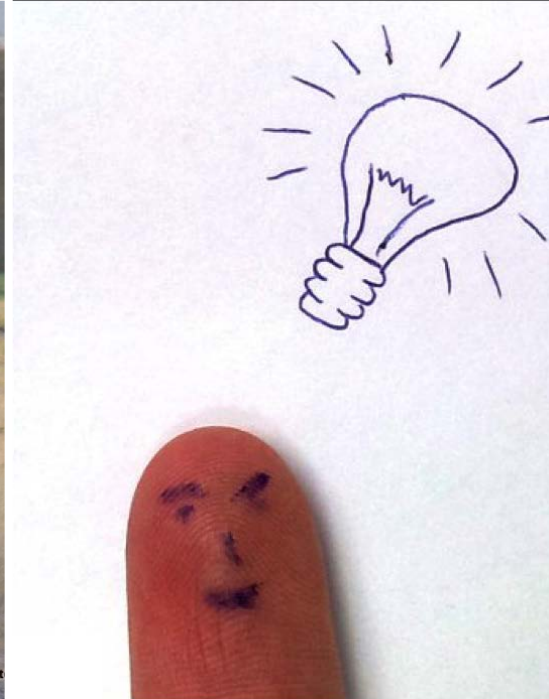


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Executive Summary

Paying it forward and sharing lessons learned with entrepreneurs and startups comes naturally for all the Trakers. Why keep all this knowledge to yourself?

We are far from being an early-stage startup in many ways and we have taken a road less travelled in several cases. Notably, several of our team members are “seasoned” including myself as Traklight’s Founder and CEO. We also have the help from our state in terms of creative bank line funding. Regardless, the challenges we have faced were the same when we started up, when we launched our software, and when we re-launched our software.

With that in mind, I decided to expand upon the following list of important topics in hopes that you may learn from our challenges and improve your business.

Problem: Remove Real Pain

As a mentor and a judge, I have seen some ideas that just do not solve a pain point or problem for the customer. A funny example is a patent for a bird diaper. Really? Is that needed? Solve a real problem.

Leader = Vision + Passion + Unending Drive

Having passion or vision is just not enough. It’s persistence, both professional and personal, that is necessary for success. As the leader, it all rides on you. You set the tone and pace.

Team = Key

One of our Trakers has espoused the concept of “loyal to the soil,” and that is what I think is essential for a team member. Putting the company first but knowing when to put a hand up and say that help is needed is vital. It’s not about background, experience, or age—the best team members are those who roll with it and are open to all opportunities.

Advisory Board and Mentors

Bring them in early and do not be afraid to swap them out as you grow. People are often flattered to be asked, and it’s about the mentorship and the connections, not the money that they may invest.

Culture as a Touchstone

We model ourselves after the giants: Zappos, Southwest Airlines, and our own customer, Infusionsoft. When there is a sticky situation (which can be often in a startup), we use Hubspot’s mantra: team over self, company over team, and customer over company.



Company Formation

It's not just a formality. Operating without a business entity can put your personal wealth and assets at risk. Always seek professional advice.

Contracts Matter

Although this may seem like a boring legal concept, contracts actually make or break your venture. Do not operate on a handshake. Lock each arrangement down with a contract that is clear about who does what when, and particularly who owns the work product at the end of the day.

Ideas Are Just the Start

If you never tell people about your ideas, you will not get far. It is good to be prudent about Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) but there is a time and place for that type of protection.

Identify and Protect Your IP

Startups and particularly software or service companies do not have many, if any, tangible assets. Thus, identifying all the potential intellectual property at the beginning, especially trade secrets, will shore up chances for success.

Plan and Focus

Start with the end in mind and work backwards. This is somewhat challenging for a startup because things change, but you have to have a focused plan to get to your ultimate goal whether that is lifestyle, business, or complete exit.

Competition is a Good Thing

Being first to market is scary and requires you to raise awareness for the product or service. Having competitors is validation of the problem.

Roadmap

Critical path differentiates a plan from a roadmap. Understanding the dependencies and priorities to translate your plan into a well thought out roadmap sounds like a lot of work because it is. But, it's critical.

Become an Expert

No one wants to consciously purchase from the second best company! Become an expert in your area and pay it forward by speaking, writing, and spreading the word on your industry. This concept is not to be confused with selling.

Content is King

Blogging, speaking, and creating great content is paramount to thought leadership and developing a presence. We learned first-hand how much your traffic drops without a daily blog.

Relationships Matter

We can trace every great thing that has happened to us back to a connection or relationship. It is not about leading with the ask. Do good and you will do well. The power of the network is everything.

Have Healthy Skepticism

Not only should you make sure that you are always comfortable with saying no, but it is okay to question just about everything.

Walk Before You Can Run

While it is tempting to scream from the rooftops about your new product or website, generally a slow roll is best. After re-launching our website in June 2014, we waited on the grand announcement for another two months until we worked out the last few remaining gremlins in our site.

Funding is hard

Bootstrap, self-funding, debt, strategic partners, or angel capital—it's all challenging. Make sure you are looking for money that has connections or synergies, so-called "smart money."

Have focused fun!

Traklight is no different than other places where I have worked in that it is great to have fun at work but we still have to remain on task. Fun is not folly and we have to know when to be serious and get stuff done.

#onwards

Problem: Remove Real Pain

As a frequent mentor and speaker, as well as a judge in various competitions, I have been introduced to hundreds of companies. The common thread amongst those with the more successful ideas is that they solve a pain point, or problem, for their potential customers.

Unfortunately, some ideas simply do not solve a pain point for customers—or worse, for anyone. A humorous example I learned from my professor in law school was a story about a bird diaper patent. Talk about the perfect example to show how utility patents are not always helpful for useful inventions! It was in this class that I had the idea for Traklight. My “ah-ha moment” came when I was working with entrepreneurs in a law clinic where I witnessed first-hand the mess that was made of their businesses simply because of misunderstandings and/or ignoring intellectual property at the beginning of their venture. My idea for Traklight was that it would solve that exact problem for entrepreneurs.

You may be thinking to yourself, “Is it really that necessary to remove my customers’ real pain?” Yes, it is. I attended a rapid demonstration event once and listened carefully to the judges’ questions. Demos where the first question was, “Why would I buy this product?” did not go well. It basically meant the end of any follow-up queries from the judges, who were also product buyers.

Solve a real problem.

Market validation can come in various ways—users, sales, or successful crowdfunding campaigns—but you must do some basic research before you build anything. In order to solve real problems, go talk to the people that you are solving for. This is a Steve Blank concept. It’s the idea that you have to get out of the building and talk to live people. However, those people should not be your friends, family, or anyone that you know too well; you are looking for honest feedback. While some of your family might enjoy giving you a hard time, they are unlikely to point out when your idea is no good!

In the early days of Traklight, we talked to approximately 100 entrepreneurs (about their challenges with IP) and attorneys (about their challenges with early-stage companies). After compiling, assessing, and learning from all that information, we used it to shaped our software.

It is a tough road if you have to convince people (your customers!) that they have a problem. Trust us, we know because our entrepreneur customers think they do not have any IP to identify or protect. But after talking to those 100 entrepreneurs and attorneys, we know exactly what problem we’re solving for our customers: we are helping them realize that in fact they DO have intellectual property, and provide a self-guided questionnaire to help them identify and leverage it.

Leader = Vision + Passion + Unending Drive



This topic is of particular interest because it is a bit of a misconception that all you need is passion. I believe it was Mark Cuban who talked about this requirement at an event in Washington, DC. He does not invest in passion but rather the persistence or ability to get things done.

It’s great to be a visionary and to have passion, but that will not get you over the line. You need to have drive and get things done. And that does not mean to toss things together and call it a day, but rather to have the right balance of attention to detail and knowing when to call it.

As a kid, my Dad always had Kenny Rogers’ “The Gambler” in the tape deck when we were driving (visit Wikipedia to see what I am talking about; remember, we’re a seasoned team!). Often when I am struggling with a problem, I have the song’s line “know when to hold them, know when to fold them” going through my head.

You set the tone and pace. It’s that simple. So if you have a day where you are not feeling that drive, suck it up and push on because your team needs you to be unwavering and determined. This is not be confused with perfect because that is not a startup goal at all. Get stuff done and give credit where credit is due.

Team = Key

One of our Trakers once described a fellow Traker as “loyal to the soil.” That saying is now part of our culture and as we grow our team, we look for people who fit that description.

The concept of “loyal to the soil” means that you are firmly entrenched in the company and its roots. Putting the customer and company above your own needs is also part of this concept. Since I frequently travel for Traklight, it is a relief knowing that the best interests of our customers are in good hands.

We’ve all heard about the weakest link theory (i.e., the group is only as strong as the weakest team member), but we’ve taken a different approach with Traklight. We all recognize that we have a blind spot or two; the trick is to stay in your lane, or area of expertise. Additionally, everyone is encouraged to put up a hand when help is needed.

As we grow, we have had to put in processes and developed a playbook to deal with team member absences. The dedication of the team to make our Traklight approach scalable and true to our values is part of the loyalty.

As you grow your startup, make sure you have a shared understanding of your version of “loyal to the soil” in place. It’s not about background, experience, or age—the best team members are those who roll with it, are open to all opportunities, and care deeply about your company.



Advisory Board and Mentors

Not only do we have wonderful Trakers who support our culture, but also we would not be where we are today without our advisors. And just like identifying your intellectual property and creating your IP strategy, you can never start too soon—finding your advisors that is. Also, as you grow and change directions your advisory board must do the same. Do not be afraid to ask your advisors to commit for a year at a time and revisit the fit each year.



Jennifer Lefere was our first advisor. I went to her with the idea for ID your IP®, our self-guided questionnaire, using my Turbo Tax analogy* in late January 2010. Over the first few years, we did not have a formal structure or regular meetings like we do today. Regardless, being able to reach out with questions over that informal period was valuable and helped us form our products.

We had the benefit of Brad Bertoglio’s expertise on the board as both an attorney and a successful entrepreneur. Brad’s knowledge of the intake process for a patent attorney and his careful review of our report lead us to create the IP Snapshot report (in our new version) to assist attorneys. Brad took a new role with another startup as a COO but we hope to collaborate in the future.

We just passed Dan Tyre’s one year anniversary as a Traklight advisor. It seems like we have always had Dan’s incredible energy around and it is contagious. Dan is an overachiever in terms of contribution—he is a sales guru, passionate entrepreneur, tireless cheerleader, and most of all he is not afraid to tell it like it is. Having someone who will tell you to focus, change gears, persevere, or that you have screwed up is vital to a startup’s success.

Look for advisors who complement your team’s skill sets and look for people who will be your company’s evangelist. Some startups insist that the advisory board invests in the venture (I can go either way on that) but given the choice between connections and cash, I will take the connections any day!

**ID your IP is like Turbo Tax in that you do not have to know anything about intellectual property laws or practices to use the self-guided questionnaire and create a custom IP strategy. It can either replace that traditional, first in-person visit to an attorney, or make it more meaningful while saving both you and the attorney time and money. ID your IP does not create patent, trademark, or copyright protection—only our Vault can secure your trade secrets.*

Culture as a Touchstone



Traklight has a stated set of core values that we reference frequently. We start our monthly team meetings with a culture share. This practice comes out of the mining industry where our CFO works, at which most meetings are started with a safety share – a team member shares a lesson learned or best practice.

Frequently our culture share is around our We are Geese value. A great example of this occurred in April when we had a share about helping a fellow Traker who was called away for a family emergency. We all decided we could help her by writing more blogs for our company blog so she wouldn't have to worry about it when she was gone. I think that is the nature of the startup. You need to have people on your team who can pitch in and pick up when someone else falters or asks for help.

That last bit—asking for help—is also something that makes for a great Traker. It seems so simple but it is critical. Startups have limited budgets and time is a precious resource, even if it is free or sweat equity. Getting off on a tangent because you are not asking questions is worse than asking tons of questions. There is no such thing as too many questions.

As a CEO, my job is to make sure that everyone is lined up with projects and priorities, plus I need to be available for questions. I prioritize my day based on my top three tasks plus make sure I answer everyone's questions so no one is waiting on me.

Company Formation



Once you decide to move forward with your idea, you must start forming your company. This should be one of the first stems, and is not just “nice to have.” Operating without a business entity can put your personal wealth and assets at risk. When I was in law school (remember I have a law degree but I am not a practicing attorney), our business law professor loved to say that any attorney who recommends a sole proprietorship to run a business sets themselves up for malpractice.

Always seek professional advice to decide which business entity is better for you (for example a LLC versus a C or S corporation). This is something that needs to be done and then followed up with proper information to allow you to operate. For example to open a bank account, you need an Employer Identification Number (EIN).

The HBO show, Silicon Valley, had a funny clip illustrating why this is definitely a first step. The founder of the fictional startup Pied Piper raises \$200K from an angel investor then tries to deposit the check. The check instead of being made out to him personally, is payable to the yet formed Pied Piper Inc. (and of course the bank teller refuses to deposit it). The founder leans in and asks the teller if incorporation is something that she can help him with!

So before you go out to raise money or promote your company, make sure you have a business entity and seek some professional help (not from your bank!). And it almost goes without saying to identify and protect your intellectual property when you are forming that entity.

Contracts Matter

If someone tells you that contracts are a waste of time and that only lawyers insist on contracts, walk (or run) away. Picture yourself sitting across from a potential investor or a large company who is interested in a strategic partnership—very exciting. Yet you feel very uncomfortable as they mention words like “due diligence” or concepts like “assembling all your contracts in data room” because you did not get paperwork done during the exciting startup phase.

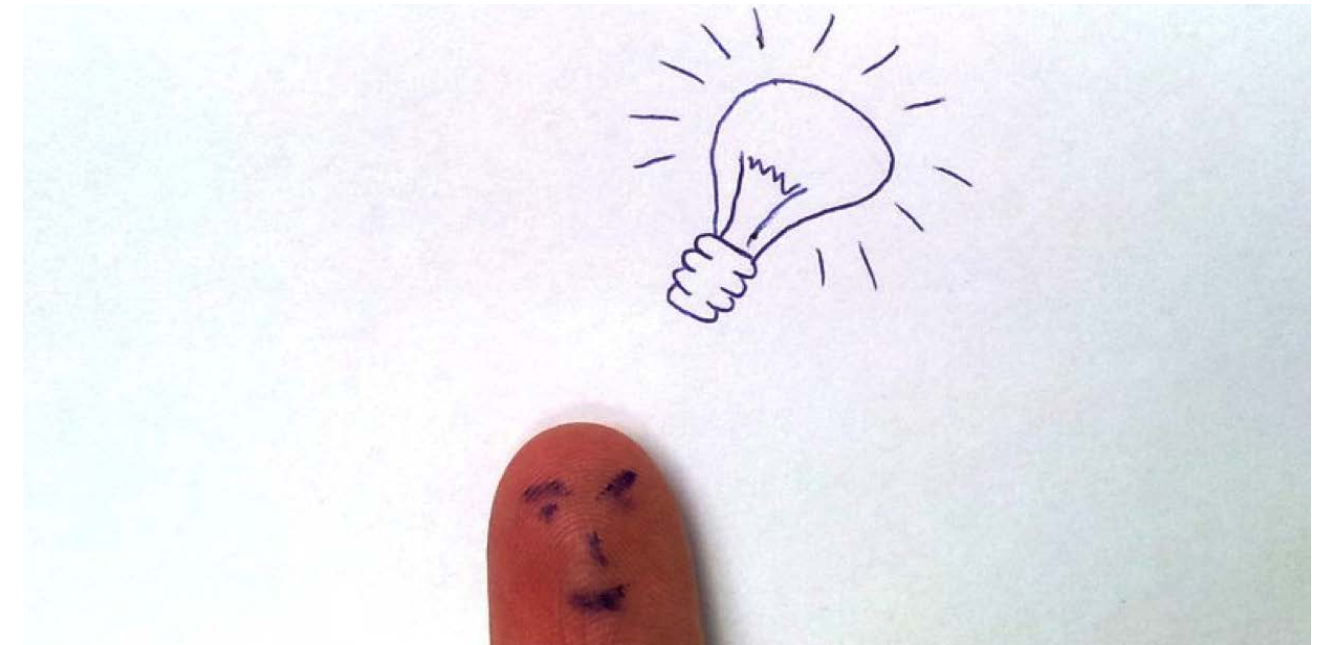
One of the most frequent mistakes entrepreneurs make is thinking that their idea and developing the prototype or product is the most important first step. Other than forming an entity for your business, taking control of your idea development has to come first. That means identifying who is going to do what for you and finding the appropriate contract for the situation.

Getting a contract is just the first step. Make sure you will own what you are paying for and have a professional assist you with your contract. Are you going to bring this person in as a co-founder? Co-inventor? Contractor? If you did not have the product rights transferred properly in the first place, it is often too late to get them.

Location is not just for real estate but also for your contracts. Do not go out on the Internet and grab a contract. Many startup lawyers will give you a break on contract pricing, and sometimes large firms offer free documents. Check out this cool resource from Orrick’s Startup Forms Library (also on our [Resources page](#)).



Ideas Are Just the Start



If you never tell people about your ideas, you will not get far. Not only do you need a great mentor or advisory board, but you will also need a team or at least some outside help at some point.

At Traklight, we firmly believe that products and services need to be developed with customers’ input. This means not only a beta test but continuous feedback and new product development should be done with customers as testers. Sounds great but some might think, “No way am I telling anyone about my idea and sharing a mockup, beta version, or prototype.” This may be a case to have your potential customers sign a NDA, and the perfect example for why contracts matter. Like other legal documents, you should not just grab one off the Internet, but instead seek professional help.

It is good to be prudent about NDAs but there is a time and place for that type of protection—check out our blog [To NDA or Not to NDA](#) for more explanation. We are not suggesting you post your ideas online without protection. Instead we are suggesting that you are cautious and take care but still find people you can trust to provide feedback.

If someone will not sign a NDA, you need to evaluate your risk and weigh that against moving your idea forward. There can sometimes be creative ways to evaluate partnerships, such as using 3rd parties or presenting some of your idea and leaving some secret bits out.

Identify and Protect Your IP

Identifying and protecting intellectual property are not just “to-do’s,” they’re “must do’s.” But this is not an area where you would think that we at Traklight would have needed help. From day one, we have had advisory board members that are attorneys, and identifying IP to protect it is what we do.

We were cool with the identify step but when it came to protecting it we decided to go the do-it-yourself route. We were very small at the time (and extremely shortsighted) so we filed several trademarks on our own. We experienced the “no do-over” policy first hand. We did not pick the correct classes for several marks and could not make corrections. Instead we had to completely resubmit those applications, including paying the fees again. Ouch!

We now have a family of trademarks and we had an attorney review all the classes to make sure we are protecting our IP properly.

We do a lot of presenting and we love humor. We licensed some funny IP cartoons that were only available for education and not to be posted online. Therefore we had to be very careful that those slides were not posted on Slideshare.net.

We did inadvertently pull several pictures and put into a different slide deck to present without checking if we were allowed to use them. There were several that were not permissible so we had to pull that down and redo the deck on Slideshare.



Plan and Focus



Planning and focusing are two words that we try to use every day at Traklight. Not only in the big picture context of starting with the exit as the end goal and working backwards, but with our daily tasks. Each week we make a list of our top three priorities and check with the team to make sure we are aligned.

If I had a dollar for every great idea someone gives me to expand our services, we would easily make our revenue target every quarter. Do not get me wrong, I love these ideas. In fact, many of our current product features have come from customer feedback. I am referring to the ideas that would be a diversion into another product, service, or another subject matter completely unrelated to intellectual property. On a regular basis, I have to channel [my chat with Darren Hardy](#) and politely explain that we are focused on making our current products even more successful.

I recommend adding the word “no” to your vocabulary and to have a parking lot for good ideas. Saying no is not being rude; you have to guard and jealously focus your time until you have a repeatable, scalable sales process and revenue stream. You can only reach your goals if you stay on track. Internally, we call out other team members to “focus” on a regular basis.

This start-with-the-end-in-mind approach is somewhat challenging for a startup because things move and change so quickly. You must have a focused plan to get to your ultimate goal whether that is lifestyle, business, or complete exit within a short time frame.

Competition is a Good Thing

When you do not have competition, you basically have no choice but to evangelize like a madwoman to get your company's name and products out there.

First market advantage?

Being first to market can be scary for a startup but it is truly the best/worst problem to have. While it is great to be a category or market killer as you work on attracting investors—people get excited about the endless possibilities when you own an entire market—the responsibility for raising awareness with your customers then rests on your shoulders and yours alone, a daunting task that requires determination and resources.

The concept of being first to market can also become the same double-edged sword for investors. The need to raise awareness for the product or service can frighten off investors who are worried that some bigger company with more resources can jump into the market. This is of course where identifying and protecting the intangibles or intellectual property can become your competitive advantage.

Validation through competition

It's a simple concept: having competitors is validation of the problem. As we discussed before, you need to be solving a real problem. If others are trying to solve the same problem, it means you likely are on to something.

The existence of competitors will likely help with investment which in turn provides you the resources to go to market with your product or service. And sometimes even if that competitor is a big company, that may be just fine because a startup can be extremely nimble to bring products to market quicker and iterate faster to meet customers' needs.

Bonus tip: Even if you have zero direct competitors, you must identify indirect competition because you lose credibility if you say that you are alone without any competition.



Roadmap



Sometimes I think that if we plotted out the path we have taken so far, it would be scary to see how many times we went in circles or backwards. But that is just part of the startup process.

When you're developing a roadmap, it is important that your roadmap is different from a critical path. Your roadmap must always be set with the end in mind. In other words, the same overall planning principles apply but it's important to check out the following topics, as they also impact that roadmap.

- Resources – “Cash is king.” It's with this monetary resource that you should ensure your roadmap and runway match (a function of time to market, or revenue).
- Accountability – make sure someone is tracking the progress on the roadmap versus the resources and timing!
- Critical path – Understanding the dependencies and priorities to translate your plan into a well thought out roadmap sounds like a lot of work. It is! But critical path is a fundamental step to the success of your business—it's what makes or breaks a startup.

It's a game to make sure you stay on the roadmap, and to have the critical path sorted out correctly. The winner of the game is the one who can make the most milestones on that roadmap (particularly milestones that lead to revenue) before exceeding your cash reserves.

Weekly meetings and progress reporting are important, but make sure you sit back and lay out your roadmap at least quarterly. Take a big picture view to ensure your sales team or go-to-market strategy matches up with the dates on your roadmap.

Become An Expert

No one wants to consciously purchase from a second best or third tier company! You need to step up your game in order to dominate as a thought leader.

Why care?

When I was first told to become as an expert in my area, I laughed it off and actually thought that it would be completely ridiculous to be an intellectual property expert. I'm not even a practicing attorney! Yet, only having a law degree has actually helped me because I carved out an expert niche translating legal concepts into stories and lessons learned for entrepreneurs. You need to find your niche.



If you are passionate about something, willing to do the hard work, and want to help others with your knowledge, you can be that “go-to person” in your subject area. When I hear IP related horror stories or tales of missteps taken, I ask questions so that I can understand the legal pain point and relate that to the challenge for inventors and small businesses.

Being the expert brings you credibility which ultimately translates into sales. People buy from people they look up to or trust.

Pay it forward

The motto “Pay it forward” is at the heart of inbound marketing. Speaking, writing, and spreading the word on your expertise or industry should NOT to be confused with selling.

We often offer people guest spots on our blog and I have been surprised a couple of times by the aggressive sales approach sometimes taken by these authors. We ask guests to tone it down and focus on educating or raising awareness in their area of expertise.

One great piece of advice that I received early on was, “Do good and you will do well.” I think formatting your blogs and writing with a view to help others will leave the correct lasting impression.

Content is King



When I toiled as an auditor, accountant, and then as a CFO, the expression was cash is king. After spending hours writing articles on intellectual property before Traklight ever launched its software, I realized that content is the new currency. This was all before I even knew about the concept of inbound marketing from our friends at HubSpot.

Blogging, speaking, and creating great content is paramount to developing a presence or thought leadership role. When you start up, even before you have your product, get out there and talk to potential customers. Interview potential users and beta users—tell their stories and educate people about your problem. Do not sell!

When we talk about crowdfunding and best practices, we cannot stress enough that creating a great video and compelling campaign is extremely important. This content needs to be paired with pre-planning and priming the campaign with press, blogs, and social media to ensure success.

Look for potential blog swaps—offer to write on your area and reciprocate by posting guest blogs on your site. And it goes without saying that if you have a website, you should have a blog and write regularly.

If you do not believe us, check out the [blog on our plummeting stats](#) in early April 2014. We learned first-hand how much your traffic drops without a daily blog or any social media!

As a startup, no matter what industry, there is just so much noise. To improve visibility and trust, become an expert and create solid content.

Relationships Matter

“How do you know this person?” is a question that I am often asked. Sometimes, it takes about 12 degrees of separation to trace back to the original connection. More often than not, this triggers a great memory of how I met the people along the way and the wonderful business relationships that have been fostered.

We can trace every great thing that has happened to Traklight back to a connection or relationship where we did not lead with an “ask.” And the best examples are where we were helping people with zero expectation of anything in return.

The power of the network is everything and nurturing relationships are ingrained in Traklight. We are not transactional (and that may mean that some sales and partnerships take longer to complete) but ultimately it is about the overall value not the quick dollar.

“You have never lived until you have done something for someone that cannot repay you.” This quote, sent to me by one of our Trakers, was in a picture of a signboard on the highway. Our blog, webinars, and other freely shared knowledge is our way of putting our IP knowledge out there for anyone. Plus, we never hesitate to make connections that can help entrepreneurs and small businesses.

Relationships are not about what can be gained but rather about what can be shared or given. We never lead with “the ask.” I was recently reminded of this way of thinking by an email exchange with another company CEO. I had reached out concerning potential partnership and requested an introductory call. Instead I received a link for us to put on our site for their site in an email and he did not wish to talk to me. That link has not gone up.

Do not hoard your connections and knowledge. I am a firm believer in pay it forward and I never look back or keep count of favors. Do good and you will do well.



Have Healthy Skepticism



Healthy skepticism is not saying no to everything and everyone. You should be comfortable with saying no, particularly when there are ideas that would take you way off the roadmap and burn into your runway. But negativity does not belong at a startup; actually it does not belong anywhere, business or home, but that is a separate topic.

Externally, it is helpful to have a higher level of skepticism than with your team. When you are working on product development and interacting with potential customers, external beta testers, or just networking out in the community, you should be asking lots of questions when you receive any type of feedback. Remember that the outside world is not privy to your roadmap and plans, and don't always want you to succeed. Take feedback with a grain of salt but never disregard it completely.

As our CFO says, “Even a broken clock is right twice a day.” This saying applies to your team. Presumably your team can be trusted so you can relax a bit and not worry about motives; but you want to have a culture where it's okay to question just about everything. Set up a framework where questions are welcomed and do not shut people down. If you allow these questions to flow freely and then you also pose your own questions to people, your curiosity should not be seen as an overlord move.

Some of the best ideas come from tangents and healthy questions. The trick is to make sure that it does not spiral into a huge diversion. And it's not just the Founders or the CEO that can pull the group back to the task at hand. Empower everyone to question and rope the group back in. The results can be amazing!

P.S. Remember, if you are the Founder, you may have had the original great idea but without a team and their probing questions, that is that is where it may end.

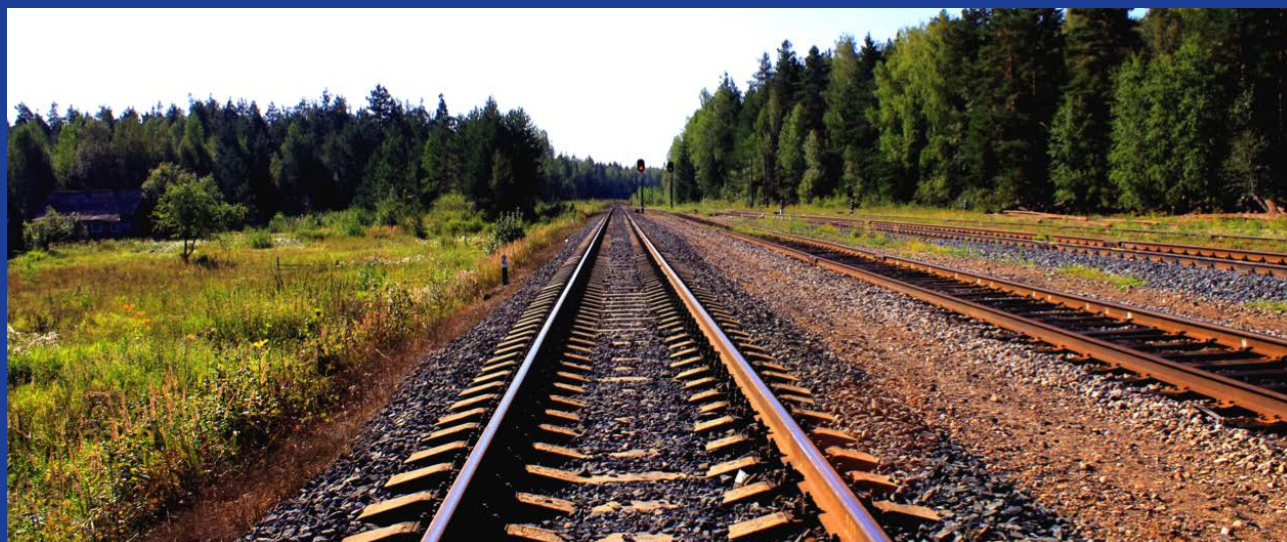
Walk Before You Can Run

While it's tempting to scream from the rooftops the day that you launch, we advocate a measured approach. Even with extensive testing, there is a risk of drawing too much attention too soon if something goes awry.

We re-launched our site and our software platform in Q2 2014 and quickly realized that our customers could not find their reports on the new dashboard. What seemed intuitive to those of us completely immersed in the testing was not at all obvious to our actual customers. If we had hundreds of customers in that first two weeks, we would have disappointed many because we did not (and still do not) have a 24/7 customer support team; it's still just a couple of us!

The same applies when you approach new markets for existing products. For a new group of customers, it is better to have a pilot or small sample to work with. Treat this like a customer lab or an experiment. I am not suggesting that work is done for free but rather that you do more customer discovery as an integral piece of your launch.

Be open and generous with those first customers. If you mess up, own it. If you get valuable feedback or ideas from customers, reward them. It may sound cliché but you created your company to solve a customer problem, so those customers deserve the most airtime.



Funding is Hard

Bootstrap, self-funding, debt, strategic partners, or angel capital—it's all challenging. It's a topic that is very near and dear to my heart as we had some very fun times last year with some angel group presentations.

I have spoken on a few panels about funding, and wrote about the experience for [SUCCESS magazine](#). What follows are my five tips for fundraising.

1. Find your crowd

Try rewards-based crowdfunding, if possible. You may not only raise money but it is a form of market validation. There are thousands of platforms to choose from, but the trick is finding your like-minded crowd. This also applies to angel investors. If you are female, go to one of the groups that champions female-led companies. If you have a bio-medical startup, find the crowd that is different from a consumer product or software angel group.



2. Check out your state programs

You may be surprised at what the various state agencies and governments can offer. In Arizona, we have a program that matches companies with banks for credit line financing.

3. Take smart money only

Make sure you are looking for money with connections or synergies (aka, so-called smart money). And if your gut says not to take someone's money, don't do it. Investors, even allegedly silent ones, are part of your team so if you do not envision yourself interacting regularly with the potential funder, stop the process politely and move on.

4. Eye on the runway

Finally, ensure that the person in charge of the runway calculations is separate from the sales or evangelist role. As startup leaders, we tend to talk ourselves into how "It will be better once this sale rolls in" or, "If only I could attend just this one important meeting" but that is not real cash. We need someone to tell us the straight facts, what our burn rate is, and when we're out of runway.

5. Be yourself

You likely started this business because of a passion or a mission. Show that passion! No one wants to back or fund someone who is not committed. A tired cliché, yes, but investors back the jockey (you), not the horse (the idea).

Never tone yourself down, change your personality, or compromise your principles for an investor. Not everyone will like you or your idea but you want to be free to be yourself so you can do your best work.

Have Focused Fun!

Traklight is the second startup for me but the first I have founded. That being said, it is no different than other places I have worked in that fun at work is mandatory. However, I am not your twenty-something founder and I have no time for negativity or passive aggressive behavior any more than I have time for people who just think a startup is a place to hang out all day.

Get stuff done

The number one mistake I have seen with startups is the inability to follow through and GSD (get “stuff” done—insert a stronger word if you like).

Whether you are paid or working for sweat equity, remember that the founder and/or investors have put in real time and money. This is a business, not a social club. You still have to remain on task. Fun is not folly. It’s important to know when to be serious and get stuff done.



Culture

This gets back to culture and having values that integrate work and fun. I believe it is possible but it is not about balancing the two; it’s an integration of fun with work. For example, meetings can have funny moments but they cannot be huge chat sessions. We are trying to run our company like the sustainable grownup company as we scale.

We ran into problems earlier this year when a lot of time was wasted with people working together on projects all day long without an overall plan. This merely led to a lot of good-work effort being wasted. Also, remember during a big push, you must discard or say no to anything that is not core to your mission.

Meetings should have purpose. If you think that startups do not need meetings, then you may have some serious challenges scaling your business. Start with the purpose, have a list or agenda (it can of course be electronic or on a post-it), and do a next steps or recap after each meeting. You can adjust the level of formality for your culture.

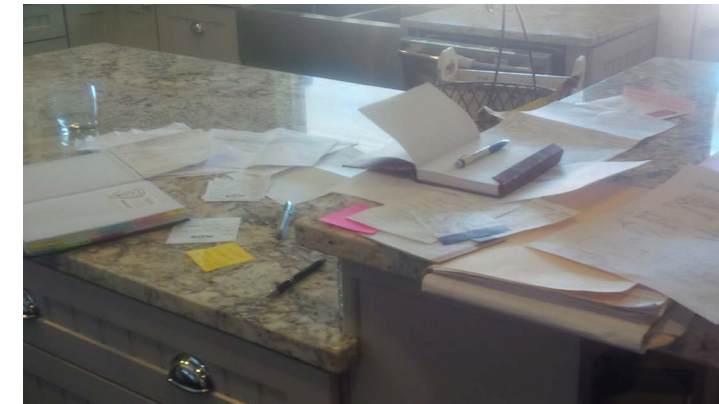
I have I have started only scheduling meetings (other than our product development meetings) for thirty minutes. Start with the intent of finishing early and honor others’ time by being on time. And never take calls or allow interruptions during these meetings. Focus or fail.

Startups are scary but so rewarding. I have worked in both corporate Canada/America for over 25 years but I have never had this level of enthusiasm for my “job.” I hope you can find that too.

Bonus: Give Me My Lists!

I am a big believer in always moving forward, and sometimes that comes out in my use of #onwards, the hashtag that I use a lot on Twitter and to close out my blogs. Often, I find the silver lining, am grateful, and move to the next thing. I recently found that unless I have my lists and my system there is no #onwards, just crankiness.

The lack of lists happened when I was on vacation, or “wocation,” which is my made up word for going somewhere beautiful (most recently Hawaii and Whistler) and integrating some work in the early morning before the day’s activities commence. It’s work and life integration, not a balance between the two. I just commented on a fellow entrepreneur’s Facebook post about working on the weekends. It’s a labor of love for me—not only growing my own company but giving back by writing these blogs, articles, and soon a book.



So on these wocations, whether on the cruise ship around Hawaii or in the Whistler hotel suite, there was no desk to set up my post-its, notebooks, and lists. As such, I ended up with notes on the back of maps, directions, and completely filled up hotel notepads tossed into a backpack. Each day I would try to work from memory or mini-lists on my computer and I had a growing sense of panic.

During the Whistler vacation, I relaxed by reading Richard Branson’s book, “Losing My Virginity: How I Survived, Had Fun, and Made a Fortune Doing Business My Way,” and realized that the lack of lists was impacting my productivity and my mood. The process of creating the daily list on a pad of paper and reviewing and paring down my post-its is a calming ritual that keeps me from tipping over. I also realized that not only did I have a mess of notes on loose paper, but I had also written in two different notebooks over whirlwind travel that was the bulk of my 2014. Some of the entries did not have names and it was not in chronological order. On top of that, I ended my vacation with hundreds of actionable emails and nothing entered in our CRM.

Fresh Start

This morass of paper and electronic overload led to the great email and note cleanup that took over twenty hours (see the picture). But that was not enough; I needed a new system.

I bought a nice new notebook and harkened back to my law school days by using self-stick tabs to divide up separate sections such as PR, Product, General To-Do for bigger projects (day to day, I still worked off of a notepad and placed urgent on post-its on my laptop), Introductions (power of networking is of course critical), and so on.

My new rule is to date and list a person with every page. I estimate one book per six months.

#onwards



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