

4 Startup Founders Discuss How Customer Engagement Has Changed

By Brent Leary

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It takes a great deal of time, effort, passion and commitment to create successful businesses today. Recently I had the pleasure of hosting Social Biz Atlanta 2013 where four company founders of inbound marketing and CRM startups discussed how customer engagement has changed in the past 5 years with the rise of social media. They shared a number of their experiences and insights leading them to create successful businesses, which eventually were sold for a combined total of \$250 million - and led them to begin the process all over again with new startups.



Kyle Porter, Founder of SalesLoft leads this Q&A with T.A. McCann, Founder of Gist (acquired by RIM), Jon Ferrarra, Founder of Nimble, and David Cummings, Co-founder of Pardot. Below is an edited transcript of their on-stage conversation. You can see a video of the whole session at the bottom of this post.

Kyle Porter: T.A., from your first businesses and your early entrepreneurship to now, how have customer expectations changed? How has your understanding of customer expectations changed in the market place?

T.A. McCann: One is on the customer experience side. People's tolerance for a product that doesn't work or doesn't look like it works very well is small and getting smaller. So you have to hook them very quickly into some sort of value before they'll make a choice to move on to something.

Second, the engagement models. When we started Gist in 2008, Twitter was just starting to happen. The engagement model, certainly from customer engagement and supportive engagement, we wouldn't have thought about that at all. How a big portion of our engagement, both in terms of marketing and support, happens on primarily Twitter, followed closely by Facebook and LinkedIn. Twitter, I think, is the most interesting part of that change over the last few years.

Kyle Porter: Jon, when you all built Nimble, how did you account for the way that the customer wants to react? How big a role did that play in the products creation?

Jon Ferrara: One of the things that I learned early on when I first got into sales, is that sales people don't work in a vacuum. They work as part of a larger team and everybody on that team is part of that conversation. I think that in today's market place, it is more critical than ever. What is going on is that the whole customer journey and experience is radically shifting where customers are doing their own homework. They are making their own buying decisions. Then

they are starting to yell back at companies on every channel they want to, whatever department they want, and they expect an authentic and relevant response in a timely fashion from that department.

Most companies aren't prepared for that.

Kyle Porter: David, your business is known for its culture. Can you share some anecdotes about Pardot? How does this air of transparency, openness and personality come out in your messaging and your branding, and in customer relations?

David Cummings: We were really struggling with how to differentiate ourselves from the main competitors in the market. After going through that for about 6 or 12 months, we realized that the market at the time, this was back in 2007/2008, was very much traditional enterprise software.

Pricing wasn't published, two year contracts were common place and salespeople were pushy. It was just a very traditional enterprise software model. We said, "What happens if we flip this on its head? What if we made our pricing totally transparent? What if we had all month to month, no contracts at all? What if we take all of our knowledge base, all of our on-board materials, even our forum, and make it totally public online? What if we really put everything out there?"

One of the things that we would frequently say internally is, "The best form of sales for us is to educate our customers."

The best form of sales is really education, knowing that if we educate them as well as we could, providing everything that they needed in a self service manner, at the end of the day they would have a better customer experience.

[Read the full post and watch the video](#)

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