7.7: From the Field- The Journey from Listening to Leader

Chris Dell

Contest funding helped Chris Dell to get his venture, Go Baller, off the ground, but the road to sustainability involved some pivots.

Pivot #1 – From Listening to Questioning (2006-2010) “The College Years”

During my undergraduate years I had seemingly every person in the world telling my classmates and I that we had picked the wrong career path. It was a four-year-running journalism joke that forced about half of my class to change majors between 2006 and 2010. My college professors would literally go on hours-long rants trying to convince us to leave the journalism field for something else, whether it be public relations, marketing, economics, or something more “financially friendly.” I took it personally, more as a challenge to succeed against all odds. In a profession when many others were getting fired or quitting altogether, I added it as a chip to my shoulder and started asking questions back. Why were people always asking me “Do you think newspapers will die?” It wasn’t the right question to ask, yet so many remained stuck on it, as though there were no other options to consider. The answer was easy. Just like I had realized about my resume and bachelor’s degree: A piece of paper means nothing without results clipped and attached. Resumes won't die with paper. They move online to LinkedIn. Storytelling and news won’t die with paper, either. They will move to Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and the next craze. It’s crazy to think storytelling could die or news could die. This motivated me to wonder why these old ways of thinking even existed in the first place, and how much pushback was needed in the media industry against this legacy media mindset.
Pivot #2 – From Questioner to Practitioner (2012-2014) “Grad School”

In 2012 I left my family and lifelong home in Florida and moved to New York City to pursue my M.A. at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism. It was a decision that not many around me endorsed. Less than a year earlier I told my favorite undergrad professor of my intentions to pursue journalism in grad school, and he swiftly “sat me down” for a talk. So much for validation from others, whether that meant my professors, parents, or even best friends back home! I had to trust my gut. I wasn’t simply going to NYC to get another degree – this time there was a purpose and a strategy, a “light at the end of the tunnel” so to speak. This light was the Tow-Knight Center for Entrepreneurial Journalism, which for me meant three semesters of grad school before I could even be eligible for the program.


It is now spring of 2014, and at the Tow-Knight Center each week we visit budding tech startup offices and new media company headquarters all throughout NYC, often sitting down with their CEOs and top C-level leaders (executives like CEOs, COOs, CTOs, etc.). A month later I attended a Google Startup Weekend NYC pitch competition, and my “idea” received the minimum amount of votes (six) out of all the pitches needed to move to the next round of the “team-building phase.” Then, the minimum of two people (out of hundreds) actually decided to join my team and work with me for the weekend on “Baller,” a new sports app that aggregated viral sports content in one place from every social network. After Google Startup Weekend, I applied for and was accepted into “3-Day Startup,” an invite-only startup weekend unlike Google’s where anyone could attend. I took this as my next challenge to better improve my pitch and vision for “Baller” as a future tech CEO. My new pitch earned more team member requests (seven) than any other pitch that Friday night at 3-Day Startup, just a month after the Google event, and we hustled all weekend to put together a final pitch, survey potential users, and receive mentoring from top marketers and tech founders in the area. “Always be pitching” is the motto I adopted from the founder of the program and a future advisor. A few weeks before 3-Day Startup I had also applied and pitched successfully to General Assembly’s “Client UX Projects” program where they choose startups to partner with their students and UX designers to build a prototype and new product design. I took this mobile app mockup into our 3-Day Startup weekend/pitch and also leveraged it to apply to Bizdom, a seed fund accelerator specializing in sports and entertainment technology startups owned by none other than NBA owner Dan Gilbert of the Cleveland Cavaliers. The only reason I even knew about Bizdom was from my friend Brendez, whom I had met at 3-Day Startup when she was the first to join my team and then actually pitch with me on that Sunday. Brendez told me about her organizing an entrepreneurship event in Columbus where there was also a “Shark Tank” open casting call pitch happening that same weekend. Not being able to afford a roundtrip plane ticket and hotel room for the weekend (I was still living off student loans at the time during the Tow-Knight program!) I bought a roundtrip bus ticket instead, arriving there at 5 a.m. and leaving at 5 p.m. the same day, using my friend’s hotel room to quickly shower and change/practice between pitches. Little did I know my pitch would bomb in the sixty seconds I got in front of a table trying to convince one of the Shark Tank “TV show producers” of my app’s potential. Little did I also know that following my bombed pitch, my new friend and colleague Brendez would introduce me to an investor who would sit down one-on-one with me to hear my pitch. Then after passing on my idea (it was too early stage for him) he recommended that I apply to Bizdom and said he’d personally recommend me to their team. Two months and a rugged application process later, and I had been invited as a finalist to Cleveland to pitch in front of the Bizdom accelerator/investor team at the Quicken Loans Arena, home of NBA’s Cleveland Cavaliers in hopes of earning $25K for my startup “Go Baller,” which had undergone a name change and product pivot in becoming “a social discovery app for sports fans.” Go Baller become one of ten startups to join Bizdom’s 2014-15 cohort, and a month later I was loading a Penske truck moving my entire life from...
Brooklyn, New York, to Cleveland, Ohio.


Within a few short months my Go Baller pitch and presentation deck was completely ripped to shreds by the program’s investment team. My startup was a “ripoff of X company they had already invested in,” or “It’s just a version of X that doesn’t make money.” The feedback was brutal, and I took it more personally than I should have. Pitch after pitch I was denied the chance to appear at Demo Day, the end event of the program where we present to big-time VCs and investors in the area for follow on funds, etc. It was the whole point of doing an accelerator program in a sense, and I felt like a failure because I was only one of two founders in the cohort who weren’t allowed to pitch there. What I didn’t appreciate then was the direction in which those failed pitches would take Go Baller. The day after Bizdom’s demo day I won a $20K grant competition for new media startups from the NewU program funded by UNITY: Journalists for Diversity and the Ford Foundation. The same pitch trounced by Bizdom advisors was the same pitch that won us another $20K in funding. The rollercoaster took a turn for the better, right? With no revenue in sight as a free sports app and with limited cash on hand, we had to rethink our product and recreate our value point from a B2C to B2B platform, going from a standalone sports app to an enterprise social media software platform. On the app we aggregated viral sports social media content all in one place. On the platform we did the same exact thing, but for other businesses on their apps and websites. “Let’s do for them what we only wanted to originally do on our own app, giving others value, to put all of their social media/viral content in one place,” we decided.

Pivot #5 – From CEO to Leader (2016-Present) “Go Baller Media”

Soon after earning the $20K grant money for Go Baller’s pivoted pitch and new focus, the money had dried up. While we had secured commitments and non-verbal letters of intent from top players and teams in the sports industry, we did not have a finished product to integrate and could only beta test with them. Then reality actually sunk in. Money was gone. Rent was due. Then two months of rent were due. Those “888” collection calls started piling up and flooding the phone. I had to suspend all Go Baller operations, move to back to Florida, and live on couches while looking for a job to pay my damn phone bill. The struggle was real, both financially and psychologically. Had I failed in my quest to become the sports media version of Mark Zuckerberg? Unfortunately I had allowed myself to sink into negativity. A few weeks later I received a job as a social media marketing manager and a month later was promoted to the company’s digital director. A month after that I introduced two new revenue streams into this ad agency’s business model with mobile website development and A.I./logic-based digital forms to turn offline form processes into automated digital smartforms. The mental low I had hit only a few months prior to this taught me to be more self-aware than ever before. It taught me that it’s just as important not to get caught up in the hype of successes than it is with the hype of failures. In reality, they are both learning lessons and part of the overall journey of entrepreneurship. At Go Baller, we are now a mobile app-turned-media agency that helps brands on the go with mobile websites, mobile e-commerce and full-service digital strategies. We currently have four monthly agency clients ($2,000+ monthly recurring revenue in total) compared to our past life of being a pre-revenue sports app or a social media software company with a beta-phase platform and no cash on hand. “Pivoting” is not just about changing your revenue model or mission statement, it is most often about challenging your own ego, assumptions and ideas against the feedback of the world. It’s about thinking for a snap second, then doing and doing and iterating and iterating for the long haul. Patience and action must be at the utmost focus, in addition to the self-awareness needed to admit your own mistakes and change. If you can create value for someone and maintain that value, then you can truly build something people will not only want to use but want to pay you for, for a very long time.
Patience and action. Action and patience. They might appear to be opposites but are the true two skills you need to be able to constantly pick yourself up from failure and move on to the next day, to the next pivot. This what being an entrepreneur is all about.

Chris Dell is a veteran sports journalist and news editor turned entrepreneur. He has published work and managed news sites for the New York Daily News, The New York Times and Yahoo!’s Rivals.com. In 2015 he launched Go Baller, a sports social media app, with backing from serial entrepreneur Dan Gilbert and the Ford Foundation. Reach him on Twitter at @maddjournalist.