

Building Trust Text

Episode 3 – Startup Survival Podcast

By Peter Harrington

May 2020



Meaningful relationships, business or personal, are all about trust.

But as I'll be sharing, trust disappears in a heartbeat if one side has to play detective...

According to the acclaimed and bestselling author, Stephen R Covey...

Trust is the glue of life. It's the most essential ingredient in effective communication.

It's the foundational principle that holds all relationships.

Starting out in business is a struggle in part because trust can take years to build, yet seconds to break.

Therefore, everything you do within your startup venture must nurture trust with all stakeholders, especially if you have plans to grow or scale.

Nurturing trust means always doing what you say you are going to do and then doing it well, ideally beyond expectations.

Nurturing trust is all about being consistent with actions and acknowledging that actions always speak louder than words.

And all bonds of trust must be nurtured with colleagues, clients, partners, suppliers, investors, shareholders & more.

Starting and growing a business also means reaching out and meeting new people.

Yet you know that in any search for meaningful connection your shoulders will carry those worrisome and most annoying of twins.

He, the worry of being ignored

And she, the worry of being rejected

At worst these concerns can be so debilitating that some startups never venture into unknown areas.

And as a result dreams that were once fuelled by hope and fire, crumble to despair and dust.

Of course, some startups only see opportunities when seeking new connections.

Such is their self-confidence, they have little time or concern for the twins of ignorance and rejection.

But their self-confidence can also be their own undoing.

Because in their crusade to persuade they prioritise themselves and thus ignore one of the fundamental principles of building trust, which I'll be talking about later.

Their dreams too become despair and dust.

Before this series examines the issues of communication and sales in the next two episodes, we need to first unpick the saffron strands of trust.

This means understanding how, as a startup you gain, develop and sustain quality relationships with the people you meet and/or trade.

And with insight I want to help you make sense of your startup world, so you can progress your entrepreneurial ambitions.

This means developing skills and powerful ways of working that will stay with you forever.

Whatever your venture, this episode all about trust is designed to help you.

Remember, there are no quick wins and easy solutions. Change takes time and focused work.

So let's get going.

My name's Peter Harrington and this is your Start-up Survival podcast.

And this episode focuses on building trust in turbulent times.

Back in the autumn of 1983, I woke very early, packed my rucksack and put on my boots before leaving the comfort of my overnight stay in a Lake District Youth Hostel.

My destination? The town of Keswick at the head of the Borrowdale valley.

Even with a full pack, the three mile walk in the crisp, sunrise air and cloudless blue sky was a joy.

My plan was simple. Catch the bus from Keswick to my home in Nottingham.

But when I arrived at the bus-shelter my heart sank.

According to the timetable the 160 mile journey from Keswick to Nottingham would take 9 hours. Sacrilege on such a beautiful day.

Then slowly an idea dawned. The forced change of mindset was turning disappointment into gold and opportunity.

Swinging the rucksack onto my back once more I set off at pace. With fresh purpose and genuine excitement I made my way through the deserted streets to the outskirts of Keswick.

Or rather to the A66 – the main road out of town.

And once there, I found a place where cars could pull over safely.

And then I simply followed the fundamental law of hitchhiking and stuck out my thumb.

In that moment life became life for a seventeen year-old. I had started a travelling love affair that would last a dozen years.

And I was asking people to trust me.

That first day of hitchhiking remains etched on my memory and I'll share the details and outcome a little later.

But for now, let's dig deeper into the issue of trust and let's understand how trust, particularly in business works, or doesn't work.

When people lived in small, local communities, they typically knew each other. If you misbehaved and became untrustworthy, word spread quickly.

You were accountable because the social fabric of a close-knit society held your behaviour in check.

But in our globalised world, those local customs don't apply.

Seth Godin whose book 'This is Marketing' I referred to in the first episode, says trust for businesses has become an increasingly scarce resource.

According to Seth, whilst the Internet thrives on affiliation the forces that prefer dominion have created waves of distrust.

In other words fake news has made people far more wary.

Unfortunately, since startups need to share their ideas with people they don't know, their job has just become more difficult.

Seth Godin also refers to something he calls 'Pattern Interrupt' when people present new ideas to others.

Think about the last time someone you didn't know suggested something to you. It may have been as part of a meeting, a phone call or an email you received.

Pattern Interrupt happens when we experience something unfamiliar, something the mind cannot draw on from a previous experience.

And when human beings are faced with Pattern Interrupt, tension is immediately created. And that tension is magnified if the person suggesting the new idea is also not known.

To release tension thought is needed to help decide whether the notion is worthy of consideration.

In most cases, as Seth continues, the answer is no because there are no previous patterns, time is precious and we all fear making a mistake.

So when your idea is next ignored and rejected, you now have a better idea of what's going on behind the scenes.

But how do startups work to overcome this trust problem.

As part of the research for this podcast I went looking for trusted sources of information and advice.

And in my quest to find meaningful answers to share with you, I came across Professor Frances Frei who amongst other things teaches at the Harvard Business School.

In her wonderfully crafted 2018 TED presentation entitled how to build and rebuild trust, Professor Frei (who if you'll forgive me Frances I'll also refer to as Frances) reveals fundamental and powerful principles.

In her presentation, Frances talks eloquently about the 3 component parts of trust, which are:

Authenticity

Logic rigour

And Empathy

And when all three elements combine they create a compelling case for generating trust.

Let's look at these individual component parts in a bit more detail:

When people sense another person is being authentic, they are being themselves, they are much more likely to trust.

When people sense clear and cohesive logic in a case being presented, they are much more likely to trust.

When people sense that empathy is being directed at them, they are much more likely to trust.

Importantly, Professor Frei also makes the point that if any of the three elements is as she says, wobbly, then trust is threatened.

Frances, goes onto say that the most common wobble of the three is empathy.

In other words, in our busy lives we forget to focus on the person we are talking to and they lose faith in the notion that we are in it for them.

For startups, the lesson is easy. Understand your customer and their problems first and only then focus on providing solutions.

But here is the snag.

The trouble for many startups often relates to their own business finances. Cashflow pressures, especially in the first few months and years, can dominate thinking.

The way to alleviate this problem is through seeking to sell services and products to customers.

But when the primary purpose of selling becomes the need to relieve our own financial headache, the chances are the customer will see through you and pick up on the fact you are not in it for them.

This is exactly what Frances is referring to when saying lack of empathy is the most common wobble.

To gain empathy in any sales situation requires us to focus on asking questions, listening to answers and ultimately presenting solutions that solve real customer problems.

And there's much more on this in episode 5.

Rachel Botsman is another person whose brilliant insight on the issue of trust I want to share with you.

But before turning to Rachel's work, there's one important final point from Professor Frei's presentation that I know all ambitious startups will appreciate.

If you want your venture to grow or scale, you will want your colleagues to trust you.

In his excellent book, *The Speed of Trust*, Steven Covey makes it clear that when trust exists within an organisation, achievement and thus success can happen at real pace.

But to generate that trust you as a leader need to be authentic, and as importantly, you need to allow all the people with whom you work to be their own authentic selves too.

Startup leaders who reject diversity, startup leaders who simply want people to do as they are told and follow in footsteps, prevent others from being their own authentic selves.

And as we know from Frances, if authenticity, as one of the three principles, wobbles, trust is threatened.

So if you want to grow your startup, demonstrating trust by allowing people to be themselves is a critical behaviour.

Earlier in this episode I shared the moment I first started hitchhiking.

And since that day I've had many adventures on the road.

And probably as many conversations with people who've said that hitchhiking is dangerous.

And that's why travelling souls like me are rare sightings these days.

But has hitchhiking and the world become more dangerous? And are we really less trusting of others?

Well digital technology collaboration and trust expert, Rachel Botsman, doesn't think so.

In her 2016 TED presentation, she asks the audience, who has used AirB&B, who has bought BitCoin, and who has used Tinder.

AirB&B, Bitcoin and Tinder are all on-line resources that require us to put our faith in people we don't know.

Rachel also uses another popular on-line resource to demonstrate how modern hitchhiking is very much alive and well in France.

Bla Bla Car, yes you heard it right, Bla Bla Car is a platform she says that despite the mantra 'never get into a car with a stranger' allows more than a staggering 4 million people to share transport with each other every year.

And it's far from being a shared ride to work app. The average Bla Bla Car journey is a staggering 320 kilometres. That's over 12.8 billion kilometres of shared and trusted time together

Rachel goes onto explain that she defines trust as being a confident relationship with the unknown. And she talks about how human beings are remarkable at taking what she calls trust leaps.

And according to Rachel, when it comes to digital technology, three key elements need to be in place for trust leaps to be made.

Firstly, people have got to trust the idea. The idea has to offer a clear benefit and work for them.

Secondly, the platform has to be trusted. Think how you've visited a new platform only to leave quickly and never return because its inconsistency meant it didn't function as promised.

And thirdly, people have to trust the third party. In the case of BlaBlaCar, that's the person sharing the journey.

In the fourth episode of this series I focus on communication and how startups connect with potential customers. Linked to this issue is an understanding of how trust works.

For any startup the early weeks, months and years are a vital time to develop these meaningful connections.

And when events such as this pandemic strike, the need and urgency to make those connections only increases.

Unfortunately, many businesses I have known over the years have floundered at this point. Reasons for failure have come down to authenticity, logic rigour and/or empathy.

But I've also known many who deserved a break but just didn't manage to make enough meaningful connections with prospective customers.

So if you are struggling in the same situation right now, let me share the idea of trust ladders with you.

I first wrote about Trust Ladders on the Hitchhiker's Blog as a result of my Entrepreneur in Residence work with startups at London South Bank University.

Let me explain the principle.

Your startup business may be new to market and therefore prospects don't know you or trust you. But there are likely to be people who you do know who have more influence, connections and are happy to vouch for what you do.

These people are your 'Trust Ladders' and if they are happy to represent you will add much needed credibility to any message.

As a result, that elusive meeting, phone call or simple response to an email may suddenly become reality.

Because a trusted messenger has spoken for you.

And whilst it is your responsibility to handle the next stage of the relationship, a critical door has just been unlocked.

And I'll be referencing trust ladders again in the next episode.

For now let's get back to that Keswick to Nottingham hitchhike I mentioned earlier.

Without any sense of what was going to happen I stuck out my thumb to every passing vehicle for nearly half an hour.

Until a car pulled over.

It turned out my first lift was with a keen birdwatcher. We chatted continuously about her interest in ornithology all the way to the Morecambe junction on the M6 motorway.

Thereafter, 4 lifts all with various wait times allowed me to travel the length of the southbound M6.

Curious to understand the hitchhiking dynamic, I asked every driver why they chose to pick me up. And everyone said I looked genuine and the rucksack showed I was clearly travelling with a purpose.

I learnt an important lesson that day - Building trust is all about being consistent.

And I have since learnt that when we buy anything, we only ever buy a dream. But we expect that dream to become reality. Trusted suppliers create that reality and more time and time and time again.

But back to the hitchhiking - I suddenly realised I had been suckered by youthful naivety. Looking at my map I discovered I was now too far south and heading away from Nottingham.

I asked the driver to drop me off so I could walk the 4 mile stretch to Lutterworth. The plan was to then seek a lift northbound for the final 30 miles on the M1.

By the time I completed the walk to the M1 motorway, the October evening was becoming night and car after car, eager for home accelerated past me on the downward-sloping slip road.

With the darkness came doubt. And I started to question the original decision I made in Keswick.

But as you may have heard me say in the previous episode, life is a magnificent game of chance.

And without warning a car eventually did pull over.

In my excitement and gratitude I even offered payment, but the gesture was waved away.

Instead, I was driven at high speed and comfort to junction 26 (that's Nottingham if you didn't know) by what turned out to be the Veteran Driver of the Year.

And once at junction 26 my new-found friend, who had enjoyed explaining his car-title triumph, insisted on taking me another 5 miles all the way to my parents' home in Woodthorpe.

The trust I was shown that day will always be part of me.

And that's probably why I believe it's important to show a leap of trust now, especially with people starting out in business.

Even if it's only something small, showing trust and support for people involved in new ventures can make huge differences.

Finally, with every episode, I'm recommending a book to buy.

If you can use the extra time you have now to read or listen to the suggested text, I guarantee you will be better equipped to get wherever you're headed far more quickly than you thought possible when this crisis started.

And I really hope this recommendation brings a smile.

Because the book I want to share with you is aptly titled 'Believe Me'.

And it's by the multi-talented and legendary comedian Eddie Izzard.

I'm recommending this book because stand-up performers have to watch people ignore and reject them as they perform, as they seek to develop trust with an audience.

Building that trust takes time and requires the relentless pursuit of consistent excellence.

Believe it or not, Eddie was no overnight success. It took a decade before he really caught peoples' attention.

In the next episode I'm going to take a look at the subject of effective communication. And after that I'll be moving onto making sales.

Through all this mayhem your feedback is not just welcomed, it's needed.

Like you this is the first time I've ever dealt with a pandemic whilst in business.

So please, let me know your thoughts and questions. I'd love to hear from you.

My name's Peter Harrington

And this has been your start-up survival podcast.

Go well

Stay safe

And thank you.