*Welcome to the PublicBeta podcast. My name is Jack Kaufman and I’m interviewing successful entrepreneurs about how they found their first customers for their businesses. Check out our book at yourfirstcustomers.com to reserve your launch discount.*

*Today’s episode of the PublicBeta podcast is with Ruben Gamez, founder of Bidsketch. Bidsketch is a SaaS application that helps you create professional client proposals in minutes. In this episode, Ruben shares stories about how we found his first customers for Bidsketch and gives some good tips that will help you find your businesses’ first customers. Here we go.*

Jack: Hi everyone! I’m really excited to be interviewing Ruben Gamez for PublicBeta today. Ruben, thanks so much for taking the time to speak with me and help share your experience and advice to entrepreneurs out there.

Ruben: Thanks for inviting me.

Jack: Of course, of course. So let’s see. Our first question is can you tell us the story of how you found your first customers for Bidsketch and also a little bit about what Bidsketch is?

Ruben: Sure. Bidsketch is a web application that lets people create client proposals. So it’s usually used by freelancers, consultants, and agencies. The other thing was my first few customers?

Jack: Yeah. So kind of the story behind how you found them.

Ruben: Okay. So the very first few customers were actually people on my email list.

Jack: Okay.

Ruben: The reason they were on my email list was because I put up a landing page and letting people know when I was building the product that a product was being built that did this thing which was create proposals, right, to make it easier and asked them to enter their email address if they wanted to be notified. I added an incentive, basically gave them a free proposal template which are very interesting proposals, right. That immediately increased email sign-ups by like a factor of 5.

Jack: Oh wow.

Ruben: It was a pretty small list. Like nowadays you hear of these lists of thousands and all that stuff.

Jack: Yeah.

Ruben: It was nothing like that. It was a tiny list of about 300 people.

Jack: Okay.

Ruben: And basically a lot of them came through both content that I had written, a research doing keyword research for stuff that people might be searching for, how to charge more. Like basically what would my target audience be looking for? I just did a bunch of research and then wrote blog posts for that and sort of routed that traffic to the landing page and from there got them to sign up. So there was an article but on the side there was a link to the landing page, and from there people signed up to the list. So it was pretty disconnected. It happened a long time before they actually became customers because I didn’t have a product, right?

Jack: Yep.

Ruben: Eventually it launched and then there was a product, and right after that when I opened things up to general public, I was just getting traffic from the content that I had written. But I also went out and did a bunch of like a manual stuff. Emailing, I don’t remember how many people, but like 30 plus different bloggers and asking for reviews of the product. Nowadays there are more of these like app directories and stuff like that. They were a few back then, so I did that too.

Jack: Yeah.

Ruben: But they were more like app directories and stuff that you can easily get started. So those are generally the places where my early customers came from.

Jack: Great. Were you funded or bootstrapping at the time you found your first customers?

Ruben: I was bootstrapped, still bootstrapped.

Jack: Great, great. Were your first customers paying you immediately or were they just users and what was your business model at the time? So was it freemium SaaS, a one-time purchase SaaS with a free trial?

Ruben: So they were paying pretty soon after they signed up for trial. There was a trial period, but after the trial period was over, they basically just paid. Actually the very early days and the first few weeks after launch, there was a free plan. I was doing freemium for about a month, and that wasn’t going very well. Most people were just going on a free plan and nobody was paying, very few people. I cut out the free plan and that helped a lot. Basically there was no option to go. Everybody just wanted to pay after that. What was your other question?

Jack: You kind of answered it on kind of what business model you had at the time. So starting out, it was a freemium product, but then kind of pretty quickly you got rid of the free plan and just had paid plans with free trials.

Ruben: Yep.

Jack: Great. Was one of the issues that you—kind of found just to follow-up with the free plan that besides having a lot of the people who were coming to your site sign up for just the free plan instead of a paid plan—was support also an issue with the free plan? Did you find you had more support requests from that plan or from the other services?

Ruben: Well, the only support request that were coming in were from that plan because people signing up to free plan.

Jack: Okay.

Ruben: I did have paying customers, so some support was coming in through that. But yeah, the majority of support was coming in through free. But I think about it, it wasn’t as much support as you would expect for the amount of sign-ups that I was getting.

Jack: Okay.

Ruben: But at the same time, it wasn’t a good use of time or resources especially since I was small and just getting started.

Jack: Yeah. Definitely. So you mentioned that you use an email list to help find your first customers and kind of built up that list and launched to that list. Was that the main technique that you used or did you use any other strategies?

Ruben: You know, I just had another thought about freemium that I think is kind of important to mention because I don’t think a lot of people mention it. But I just remembered that the other really important part of that was the feedback that I was getting from the freemium users was different than the feedback that I was getting from the paid users.

Jack: Interesting.

Ruben: So for the freemium users, they wanted the product to do more. So they wanted invoicing and they wanted all these other like they wanted a full suite of products built in.

Jack: Yeah.

Ruben: Because it was free, right? So like the more they can get out of it, the better. While the paying customers wanted better features. So they wanted the things like the core, right, that it would do. So that was the big, pretty important difference.

Jack: Interesting.

Ruben: So your question was the email list the most important? Well, kind of but you just can’t have an email list, right?

Jack: Yeah.

Ruben: You just can’t have an email list, right?

Jack: Yeah.

Ruben: You just can’t put an email list sign up. That’s the way of capturing the traffic. After you get it, you still need to get traffic.

Jack: Yeah, yeah.

Ruben: So the most important things were the organic search. So basically doing that keyword research and putting up content and templates and guides, anything that my customers were searching for or potential customers would be searching for. And the other thing which is kind of manual emailing and reaching out to these blogs, that was tough in the beginning because most people you would never hear back from.

Jack: Yep.

Ruben: So I did like okay, I guess I’d follow up and stuff and like alright, whatever. I guess they don’t care. Funny enough like after a while, some of then started doing a review and publishing a blog post and stuff like that just for some reason. I’m sure if I look at my email now, it could have been better.

Jack: Okay.

Ruben: There was sort of like this delay. So it did pick up. You still don’t get most of those people, but it did pay off.

Jack: Okay. That’s interesting that there was that delay where some people just didn’t respond or responded slowly, and then read a review or post about it. Just to kind of follow-up with the email list strategy, before you launched, did you do kind of any planned pre-launching engagement to your list or did you kind of send emails to build excitement and build kind of awareness that, you know, the launch was coming?

Ruben: Yeah. Actually, right around that time I had just met Rob Walling, I think he was starting the Micropreneur Academy and stuff and he was working through that and running some of the copy and stuff by me and I got to see the launch sequence for that. I loved the approach which was basically building that and stuff like that.

Jack: Yeah.

Ruben: So I totally just stole that from him. “Hey, I’m going to steal this.” I definitely took that approach. It worked pretty well for me.

Jack: Great, great. I just have one last question which is what would your number one tip be for prospective entrepreneurs out there about finding their first customers?

Ruben: About finding your first customers. So the number one thing is identify your customer, right, your ideal customer. To me, people are very general and say that it’s small businesses or something like that, but that’s too broad. It makes it really hard to find them, right? If you say, “Okay, well I need to go market and get small businesses.” Well, where do you start?

Jack: Yeah. It’s like…yeah.

Ruben: If you get really specific like let’s say designers, so you’d be more specific, web designers instead of graphic designers, right? Then that very much narrows it down so that you know, okay, I know the blogs that they visit. I know how to target them on Facebook, right? The forums that they visit. So it all starts to become really clear and then it almost answers itself like “Okay, well I know where they are. Which ways do I want to try and basically make my product known and convert them or bring them in?” Paid acquisition or whatever.

Jack: Great, great. So yeah, that’s a great last tip. Before you even start trying to sell to customers, making sure you find them and have a specific kind of demographic and customer in mind. So thank you for sharing that tip and thank you so much for talking with us today, Ruben, and sharing some of your advice and insights about finding your first customers.

Ruben: Not a problem.

Jack: Great!

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