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

*So today's episode of the PublicBeta podcast is Brennan Dunn, founder of Planscope. Planscope is a SaaS application that is project management software built specifically for freelancers and consultants. In this episode, Brennan shares stories about how he found the first customers for Planscope 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 Brennan Dunn for PublicBeta today. Brennan, thanks for taking the time to speak with me and help share some of your experience and advice related to how you found your first customers for Planscope.

Brennan: Yeah, no worries Jack.

Jack: Awesome, awesome. Well we can jump right in to the interview then. And my first question is, kind of could you tell us a story of how you found your first customers for Planscope?

Brennan: Yes so I built up an announcement list before I'd even written a line of code. And what I did is the landing page that I was using to collect email addresses was very much focused on the problem and the solution. So I don't have any screenshots because they didn't exist.

Jack: Yeah.

Brennan: I didn't know what the product would really do but I knew what problem had to be solved. And I did the kind of typical long-form sales page where the call to action was. If you want to be the first to know about this product when it gets released. I think I had a name. Yeah I had a name. It was called Projector at the time.

Jack: Okay.

Brennan: And I just had an email opt-in form but one of the things that I did which I'm sure we'll talk about in a bit is I emailed this list probably once every two weeks at least or once every other two weeks. And kind of kept them up-to-date not only with—they didn't care about the internals but what I wanted to do was to kind of start building up that kind of like educational authority angle where I would talk about when running my agency these are the issues I had, this is what I'm thinking, this is what I'm working on building. If you run in to these issues with your own consulting business, I'd love to hear more insight. I got to know a lot of people that way, too. So I did a lot of that.

Jack: Okay. And then kind of, when you launched the product, did you kind of send out an announcement email to that list you had been building up kind of saying, here it is, you can check it out at the URL or

Brennan: Yeah so what I did is I didn't—way too many companies, they'll have that like we're live email.

Jack: Yeah.

Brennan: And you don't even know who they are anymore. Right?

Jack: Yeah so you kind of kept the communication going?

Brennan: Yeah. So I mean people knew it was coming. And at least a few times a month from me, so they knew pretty much when to expect it and when I launched, I had customers day one.

Jack: Okay that's great. That's great. And were you funded or bootstrapping at the time?

Brennan: The only money I've ever taken has been customers'.

Jack: Awesome, awesome. And so your first customers were paying you immediately, and kind of what business model were you using? Was it—yeah.

Brennan: It was the typical tiered SaaS. It still is. The pricing's just gone up.

Jack: Okay.

Brennan: Yeah. No, there were no transactions on the first day because everyone had a 30-day trial. But within 30 days of launching, I had credit card transactions.

Jack: Okay great. And so kind of to build up that pre-launch list, what were some strategies that you used and kind of what were some other strategies that you used in finding your first customers for Planscope?

Brennan: So what I did is because my sales page or my landing page, lead collection page, whatever you call it was very focused on not about software, even though I was building software. But it was focused on like this is a client communication and transparency is a very hard problem to solve. And what I did is I had a blog that was associated with that landing page. And I would go through like message boards and forums. And I got actually this strategy from Amy Hoy's course that I had taken 30x500, but you know I would go through these forums and I would look for kind of like problems that people kept having again and again. And the thing about a lot of these message boards is the same people keep asking about how do I charge, how do I have clients, what do I do with scope crepe. All these things would keep coming up and what I would do is I would go in and blog about it. And I would respond like instead of going in and responding as a comment on a message board, I would write a whole blog post about it. And then I would respond to the comment on the message board. I'd write like a paragraph or two and say, I actually have something that is about this on my blog. And I would link to the blog post. And because these threads kept coming up like weekly I was in like kind of mix it in. So I got a lot of people who would go to the blog and then I would have a call of action at the end of each blog post that would point people back to that landing page to collect their email address.

Jack: Okay great. Great, great.

Brennan: Totally not scalable but it worked.

Jack: Yeah definitely. And so you mentioned that you kind of kept in contact with your list while you were building Planscope. And they kind of had a very good idea of when Planscope was going to launch, and what was coming. I guess kind of the question would be when you were keeping in contact with them, did you kind of send similar value-based emails to kind of

Brennan: Oh I mean I would have never sent an email that was about me and what I'm building. That doesn't matter to anyone.

Jack: Yeah.

Brennan: My rule of thumb, I mean even in this day, is even if I “m going to sell something in an email, even if I'm opening up registration or whatever, the email should be valuable without that. Like somebody should get to the end of that email and be better off than they were before they started reading that email. Yeah I mean it was all very them-focused. Focused on wanting to serve them basically like I'm a consultant, you're a consultant, this is the assumptions I'm making about a problem that I constantly battle with my clients. Here's how I'm thinking of with the software I'm writing, here's how I'm thinking of solving that but I want to know from you, am I on track, is this something that makes sense to build. But I'd get a lot of email replies, and I could start having conversations with people. And again the software was just kind of like the elephant in the corner. It wasn't really like the focus of any of the stuff.

Jack: Okay great. Did you also do any paid acquisition to help build up that list initially? And kind of is that something you've started to do with your list or

Brennan: I do a lot of paid acquisition now but I don't drive any of the stuff I acquire to anything, any stored product pages. I pay for people to go to my newsletter or my email courses. I don't have any paid traffic. The only thing that I'd pay for to bring people to any of my product pages are via re-marketing. I don't–.

Jack: Interesting. And were you doing that initially kind of when you were looking for your first customers or initially was it all kind of building up the list from blogging and kind of sharing that content?

Brennan: Yeah. I mean it was all through I guess it would be called content marketing, right?

Jack: Yeah.

Brennan: None through anything paid.

Jack: Okay interesting. And so kind of what would your number one tip be to prospective entrepreneurs out there about how they can find the first customers for their business?

Brennan: What I would do is presumably you're doing some degree of validation. Like you're talking with people about a problem and you're coming up with like really all that's happening is once there's consensus around a problem. The solution is really just the inverse to that problem. So it's raining out, getting out of the rain is the solution. And the product is just the path that gets you from point A to point B. So what you're doing is you're selling the path or you're selling the solution but you're trying to validate that the path is the right path.

Jack: Yes.

Brennan: You find people who have that problem because if you know what the problem is, you just inverse it. It's like it's easy to figure out the solution. So you find the people with the problem, one thing that I did a little later, I didn't do it at first, was I would Google for like other project management tools and I would Google like Basecamp sucks or Pivotal Tracker sucks or…

Jack: Interesting.

Brennan: I wanted to know not only like who was having issues with clients and project management. But on top of that, how were they describing these issues, like how did they talk about them. And then that made it really because then I could really make all of that into the marketing site. So it would show to people that I empathize with their problem. Like I understand what their issues are. And yeah I mean what I would recommend is really make sure you know what the problem is, make sure that there is consensus. Make sure that it's a problem people will pay to solve. That's another big one.

Jack: Yeah.

Brennan: I'm a big proponent of B2B products and it's easy if you can make a business more money or help them lose less money than almost always pay for it, if the math makes sense. So yeah the safest path I think is find a business problem that businesses have, come up with a path that gets to a solution either partially or fully as quickly as possibly even if that means not writing any code. And sell that path to people. And then come up with the ways later on. I actually think it was kind of a mistake for me to go full-fledge into it. Like head first into SaaS is my first thing, I probably would have done something different if I was starting today. But I just think once you find a common problem and you can either through asking people to pay for it up front or as a pre-sell or I mean I know people who pre-sold software. I pre-sell products all the time these days, money is the ultimate validation. Like if somebody says yeah I would pay for that, but then you ask them to pay for it and they don't, that's them just trying to be nice.

Jack: So would you say pre-orders maybe it is also kind of a way once you've kind of established that there is a problem and that there's kind of a consensus that among there being pain and you've kind of figured out what the opposite of that pain is or the solution. Would you recommend people kind of adding pre-orders to a marketing site?

Brennan: What I would do is like once you know… Here's what I would do these days. Once you know what the problem is, and the problem I'm always tackling with Planscope is client communication, client transparency, scope crepe, everything else, I would try to find a way where instead of collecting like when I collect I would still bring the same content strategy that I had before where I'm kind of driving people to these educational articles and getting your email addresses.

Jack: Yeah.

Brennan: But I would promote something that has a very short feedback loop. Like a group webinar that's paid or maybe later like an e-book or some. If software is one path that can go from solution, or a problem to solution, like there are other ways to get to the solution either partially or full.

Jack: Yeah.

Brennan: So I would come up with, well what can I teach somebody to, forget about software, what could I teach somebody that they could do different workflow-wise, in their own business to be more transparent with their clients. And if I do that as a group coaching webinar, Google Hangout thingy, I could charge for that. And then I would have real-time communication with the people in it. So it's unlike with a book, There's no feedback mechanism really built into a book. But with a workshop there is. And that's a way to validate that you can connect problem with solution and then what you do later on down the road is come up with more automated ways of getting or more turnkey ways is a better way of putting it. Turnkey ways to go from problem to solution. And that can be software.

Jack: Okay that's a great last piece of advice. And I think with that, we can probably end the interview. So thank you so much Brennan for taking the time to do this interview and help share a lot of this great advice about how you found your first customers and how entrepreneurs out there can find their first customers.

Brennan: Awesome. No problem, Jack.

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