



COMMUNITY

How To Start,
Grow and Engage
Your Community

Zack Miller

About Author

Zack Miller is an award winning entrepreneur, author, business and community leader challenging himself and others to solve complex problems quickly and grow their businesses through lean marketing and non-traditional proven business startup and growth techniques. Rather than focusing on the what if's, Miller focuses on the what can you do now.

Miller is the Founder of Hatch, an entrepreneurship and innovation accelerator for millennials. Miller has created a number of initiatives and companies in Norfolk, including Start Norfolk and The Pitch. Zack has been awarded the Visionary Award from Lead Hampton Roads in 2014 and Impressions in Print Leadership Award from the Hampton Roads Chamber of Commerce in 2013. In 2012, he received 3 awards, "Entrepreneurial Champion" and "Top 40 Under 40" from Inside Business and received the CIT Gap 50 Award for being one of the top 50 entrepreneurs in Virginia. Zack is also a Regional Champion for Startup Virginia, under the Startup America Partnership, where he helps connect startups across the Commonwealth.

Zack began his entrepreneurial career at the young age of 10, when he started his first company, "A Guy and a Rake." He continued his career years later, becoming a head coach for a community swim team and helped create another local swim team in his final year of coaching. Miller studied Broadcast News at West Virginia University, and anchored the universities sports department, WVU News. After graduating, he moved to Norfolk, VA to continue his career in TV News, but fell out of love with the business and became Chief Operation Officer of technology agency, We Are Titans.



Chapters

- Introduction 3
- Getting Started..... 3
- We’ve Got to Start Somewhere 4
- Definitions..... 6
- Serendipity 7
- Serendipity Doesn’t Really Happen. Wrong. 8
- Microbreweries 9
- Meetups Create Serendipity..... 10
- Regularity Creates Repeat Attendance 10
- Choose a Format..... 11
- Identify Motivators and Mentors, not Speakers 11
- Create Serendipity 11
- Location 12
- People..... 13
- Education 13
- Pitch It..... 14
- Prototype, Not Plan 16
- Grassroots 17
- Networking..... 18
- Meetups..... 19
- How a Case of Beer Produced 900+ Paid Customers 20
- Luck of the Irish Part One 21
- Start Norfolk..... 23
- Activity and Mentors..... 27
- Be Different..... 28
- Big Company Case Study..... 29
- Events 30
- Growing your List 31
- Pitching to the Media 32
- Gotta Start Somewhere 33
- Luck of the Irish Part Deux 34
- Start Norfolk Summer Accelerator—Hatch 36
- Connecting to the Rest of the Community..... 38
- Restaurants and Food..... 39
- Working as a Country..... 40
- Let’s Organize a Big Conference..... 42
- Asking for Help is Easy, Finding Those to Ask is Hard..... 44
- Lock Yourself in a Highly Visible Trafficked Location 44
- Timeline of Events in Norfolk..... 46
- Additional Resources 47
- Bibliography..... 48

Introduction

You can create a community. You can influence people to organically change their lifestyles in which a community can be built. You can become an authority.

This is the story of entrepreneurship in Norfolk, Virginia. An area not known for budding entrepreneurs but grew into a hotbed for startups. All organically. All by the community.

If you asked someone three years ago to define Norfolk in a word, they may have responded with military, tourism, ports, old money or service providers. Norfolk, the second largest city in Virginia, has historically been behind the curve in innovation, losing its top talent to more progressive lifestyle markets.

Today, Norfolk is continuing to grow, innovate and retain its top talent rather than lose it as it has in the past.

Getting Started

Planning your community is a huge mistake. Grow it organically.

The greatest entrepreneurs spent countless hours, 18-20 hour days, for weeks, months and years just to get a blip on someone's radar. Starting and building a company is one of the single hardest things to do, but what about creating a culture in a city where startups and entrepreneurs aren't the norm. Norfolk-Virginia Beach, Virginia, home of the country's largest Navy base and one of the top tier resort cities in the country.

How do you create a culture, an ecosystem, that never existed? It's not the Field of Dreams affect either. It can take long days, weeks, months and years to just get your community noticed. If you are looking to launch and grow your city to the next level, whether it is just getting started or is in full effect, this book will prepare you for creating or growing your identity.

Problem: Norfolk loses talent, due to its lack of innovation and creative thinking.

Solution: For Norfolk to grow, retain and attract, it must think out of the box and allow its youth to help steer its future.

Traction: Dozens of startups, weekly and monthly meetups and several large conferences along with millions of dollars invested into the community in cash, services and office space.

*Are you questioning
whether your city is the
right fit?*

“Are there five companies in your city that you would go work for?”

—Tim Cheadle—

This can happen anywhere and communities are being grown all across the world.

Don't try to be another city. Be YOUR CITY. Often, someone asks me, “you're trying to be like San Francisco or Washington, D.C.?”

No, those cities, and every city in the world, have been created due to unique factors. Each are different and none can be recreated, no matter the amount of time and money spent. We want to build Norfolk around the talent and lifestyles it has grown from.

We've Got to Start Somewhere

I was working at a startup web agency for six months and after several meetings with potential clients, decided that it was too hard to move into the market the way we were because it was primarily Department of Defense, Port and Tourism based economy. I would speak with some of the largest companies in the area and explain that we built web and mobile applications, most took that as we did web design (we did do design, but we were building software-based companies). I knew there was a problem, we needed to diversify our economy.

How could we educate the businesses we wanted to work with?

We were building several web-based startups for companies all across the world, which led me to search what other markets were doing to grow their communities. I started doing research on startup communities and the two things that continued to come up were university involvement (talent) and downtown dense urban areas.

Since early 2010, I've set out to educate those in my community, while building the Norfolk startup community at the same time. I've learned from the top startup cities across the world. While each are different, there are similarities at every level no matter the size of the market.

Successful entrepreneurial community's around the world need to be in a location where lots of people go and where the probability of serendipity is higher. The people who surround and frequent these areas are the entrepreneurs, students, mentors and leaders that are looking to learn from one another and through events and workshops. These people must have the desire to give back for the betterment of the community.



4 *elements that
every community needs*

Location. Density. Urban and Population. University. Serendipity.

People. Students. Mentors. Leaders. Entrepreneurs. Talent.

Education. Growth and Learning Options. Meetups. Events. Online Seminars. Jobs. Office Hours.

MicroBrewery.

This can and is happening in places other than Silicon Valley and New York City, as long as your market has at least one entrepreneur who wants to grow their business while also growing their business community.

This is not the only way to start, grow and engage your community, but it is a roadmap that we used in Norfolk along with stories from other cities across the world. So, why am I doing this? It's pretty simple I've been absolutely blessed with the opportunities in Norfolk and I want to give back to the city and tell the story of how we got here.

The simple answer is long hours, eating really bad food, drinking way too much (from events and stress), hustling and passion. Without passion, none of this would have happened. And a lot of luck.

Years from now, I hope folks will read this book and say that I had something to do with not only creating Norfolk's vibrancy and forward thinking, but also in helping others to build their communities across the world.

We knew (whether people want to admit it or not) that the ship was turning in Norfolk and that something must be done to create a new cluster, to innovate its current industries and to thrive at building a culture that is creative, loved and busting at its seams.

Definitions

You will read a lot of terms in this book that you may not understand. These definitions are how I define each. All other non-common words will be defined throughout the book.

Startup: A new business in any vertical or industry

Solopreneurs: A single founder of a company not looking for a partner or employees, typically some form of service provider (ex, SEO Consultant)

Market: The city in which is being referenced

Advisors: An individual who works and listens to entrepreneurs, but guides them and typically has a vested interest in the company (ex. minority stakeholder in company or board member)

Mentors: AKA Coaches, an individual who will listen to entrepreneurs and gives advice. Mentors do not typically have any stake in a company or receive a consulting fee.

Investors: An individual who physically invests cash into businesses

Community: The total population of individuals, initiatives and companies encompassing the entire city in which you are involved

Meetups: Smaller monthly gatherings, typically with an educational format (ex. Startup Night or Drinks Downtown)

Leaders: Not assigned, rather individuals who take it upon themselves to grow their group or community

Microbreweries: A location where people come together. In most cities this will be a local brewing place, but in cities that lack a brewery, this will be a coffee house or local pub

Hackfest or Hack-A-Thon: An event, typically over one weekend that brings together similar skill sets to develop and solve complex problems in a short period of time

Hatch: Mentor based, four month accelerator program and seed fund

Start Norfolk: Weekend long startup competition

Serendipity

Serendipity is defined as a “happy accident” or “pleasant surprise”; a fortunate mistake. Specifically, the accident of finding something good or useful while not specifically searching for it. [7]

Where can the most serendipitous moments happen? The answer is anywhere. However the probability is highest in dense locations such as downtowns and university settings. We have seen this is the case in such locations due to the similarities of people looking for one another. Where a collision or result happening without planning it to happen. The more dense a location the larger chance of the result happening.

As an entrepreneur, business person or anyone looking for a specific result, you are looking to define your target market and land there. Whether it be online or offline, once you know who and what you want to surround yourself with, you place yourself in those areas. Giving yourself a better probability to find your end results.

Density is defined as the average number of individuals or units per space unit. [8]

Most entrepreneurs are looking to surround themselves with other entrepreneurs, which is one reason why they flock to large metros where the entrepreneur per square capita is higher. [9] Entrepreneurs are looking for this because they tend to be wired a bit different than the average human. These individuals understand the rapidly changing market and look to discuss and share their company, product and service with others like them.

“Little seeds are planted from unexpected sources and big things bloom.”

—Thor Muller—

Startup Genome [10], a location based startup tracker, pulls multiple startup layers and places them on a world map. Each layer can be defined as a startup, an individual advisor or mentors, locations startups can use, investors and funds and events. As you can see in this image, and more specifically zoomed in, entrepreneurs and business resources are surrounding themselves in downtown urban environments and when they can pull talent from a university in that town, the numbers continue to climb.

In Austin, TX, they use a mindmap to learn about all the resources in town[11], pulling out all of the critical elements to the growth of the Austin startup community. This is important for new people joining the community to immediately learn the landscape and for those entrenched to make similar connections.

Using both Startup Genome and a mind map will allow your community to consistently verify all levels of your community.

Serendipity doesn't really happen. Wrong.



Back in November 2011, I was walking from one meeting to another (this is important, when everything you need is close enough that you don't have to get in your car) and I saw a friend sitting outside at a coffee shop. I stopped and said hello and he introduced me to who he was meeting with, Ian Taylor. Ian was an economics professor, but was looking to become a developer using Ruby on Rails. I said that's awesome and told him about Start Norfolk[13] happening the next weekend. He then mentions he's moving to Washington, D.C.

Bummer, we exchanged cards and I think another good one lost.

A few emails were exchanged in the coming months. He received some grant money from his school to take a Ruby on Rails workshop. We were hosting a workshop and he got his start. After he got his start, Ian asked if he could come down for Start Norfolk 2.0 and I said yes. He was on a winning team and they applied to Hatch[14] and got in. I didn't want the team to be physically located in different cities across the world, but Ian told me he and his wife were moving back to Norfolk. Yes!

Ian and his team, Our Care Direct, went through the program and once done, Ian and I stayed in touch from time to time.

I didn't realize at the time, but had I not walked the way I walked and seen a friend in a meeting and stopped, this serendipitous moment would have never happened.

You are looking to increase the probability of collaboration and serendipity. Although both will take additional steps, putting the pieces in place is the first step. Where in your community do you find the most serendipitous moments?

Although Ian was a founder of Our Care Direct, it



wasn't his original idea. Instead, his idea was to start a bicycle courier company in downtown Norfolk. The most dense location in the southeastern part of Virginia. He took what he learned from his Hatch experience and prototyped Carry Norfolk at Start Norfolk 3. He used his cell phone and asked those in attendance what he could deliver to them for five bucks. His main assumption was that people tend to forget stuff and are too lazy and busy to pick them up. He was right and used his service over the Start Norfolk weekend to produce \$250 in revenue. Carry Norfolk's main feature is the immediacy factor. You can request something (food, office supplies, beer) and receive it within an hour, usually much faster.

Ian is still working on both startups and has recruited dozens to join the startup community.

Serendipity matters.

Microbreweries. Seriously.



Microbreweries give people a sense of location, passion and love for their city. Like the RVA brand in Richmond, it's a sense of pride and people circle around that and go to bat for their team (or city). The RVA brand was a campaign to identify Richmond, VA in which the letters R-V-A were put together as the identity of Richmond.

Drinks Downtown is an event I created to bring all these people together once a month to meet each other. No speakers, just people meeting people.

Shortly before kicking off, I reached out to a few cities who had a drink meetup. Many looked to add cities, so I asked if they'd add Norfolk. I'm not sure why, but they said no. I put my thinking cap on and decided to have a meetup like the Startup Nights, but geared towards young professionals, not entrepreneurs and startups.

I bought the domain, drinksdowntown.com and built a website and updated it monthly with a location and date. Super simple.

Find the common denominator when looking for those to invite, search keywords and reach out to those who frequent those groups.

After a year of organizing Drinks Downtown, I decided to let Byron Morgan, founder of Vinylmint take over and start organizing. Since he took over, he has seen tremendous results. One example was after Morgan took over. He was looking for the next location to host an event. He polled the Facebook page and asked where people wanted the next

event. A staggering amount said O'Connors, a Norfolk microbrewery. While talking with the team at O'Connors, they asked Morgan what type of business he was in. He told them about Vinylmint, a crowdsourced sound platform and O'Connors was interested, since they were looking for a jingle for the latest fall beer, Punkelvis. Vinylmint ended up running a contest for O'Connors.

The one place I've seen that was able to bring all the elements together with all different shapes and sizes is local breweries. This local atmosphere does much for its community, it puts the city's name on its beer, (example: brewed in Norfolk, VA) which is huge for external brand recognition. In Norfolk, I'm constantly telling people it's all about how you can get your product out of Norfolk. How can someone in Colorado Springs, CO learn about your company. With beer, people love to follow the microbrew craze with over 1,200 US microbrews. [14]

MicroBreweries bring together people of all ages and all income levels, 21 and over. It's where you can serendipitously run into the mayor of your city or employee #15 at a local startup.

Drinks Downtown launched in August 2011. We hosted meetups once a month, typically on Thursdays from 5-8 at a local bar. Two weeks before Start Norfolk in November, we hosted a Drinks Downtown to push the big event. We didn't make a formal announcement and we never do at the event. Rather allow people to meet others. One of the attendees was Noel Miciano, a designer at local power house Dominion Enterprises. Noel had heard about Drinks Downtown and a few of his friends asked him if he would be going to Start Norfolk. He was on the fence, but after Drinks Downtown, he decided to go and signed up that night.

At Start Norfolk, Noel joined a team TutoriALL, which made it to the finals. Noel joined the team because he had seen team lead, Brian Wells before. They

weren't close, but worked for the same company and had desks a few spaces apart. They had never talked, but were familiar due to working at the same company.

Start Norfolk pulled these two together who normally would not have and pushed them to build quickly. On Sunday night, TutoriALL won ten thousand dollars and first place at Start Norfolk.

I didn't know until weeks after the event that both Noel and Brian worked together at Dominion and didn't know each other and the Noel decided to come because of attending Drinks Downtown.

The more momentum and excitement around compelling events, the more likely to have the collisions and outcomes desired.

Not every city in the world has a brewery, but most do have a local pub. Find it, people watch and see the magic happen.

Meetups Create Serendipity

Byron Morgan

Through organizing community meetups, a company can learn about their customer base first hand through well-planned, targeted efforts at their customer segments. As an example, if you are a music tech company, organize a local concert at a brewery for lovers of vintage hip hop. Include a small caveat that encourages them to use your product. Meetups are a great way to get direct engagement with your customer base, feedback on product features, and leads for new opportunities.

First things first, there are a couple things that you should consider when organizing a meetup and maximizing its potential. Follow these rules to organize a successful meetup:

Even in if you have a raw startup verses if you've made a million dollars in sales and as you grow your company you will transition in your mentors and how you look at things and who's walking beside you at that point.

—Lisa Fourier—

Regularity Creates Repeat Attendance

Regularity is important for repeat attendance. Try to have the event at the same time every month, on the third Wednesday of each month. Keep the time consistent and set a regular schedule for your events in advance so your audience can make a habit of attending.

Drinks Downtown, a meetup I started and now Vinylmint organizes, starts at 6PM. This allows people to come right after work and have drink, unwind, and meet people in an informal environment. It is hard to trade off having it start too early and having it start and end so late that people don't want to come. So an organizer must find a middle ground that works for the majority of attendees.

Choose a Format

Before looking for speakers, musicians, or a venue, you need to choose a format for your event. There are a number of formats that I have seen used that include:

- Meeting up for drinks to bring together diverse audiences who don't interact on a normal basis
- Incorporating spontaneous acts of creativity into an event where people are drinking or meeting up (e.g., bringing blank canvases and paint to a bar where a meetup is being held and encourage conversation around the canvases through art work)
- A single speaker on a single topic (e.g., Jeff Bezos speaking on Two-sided Marketplaces in e-Commerce)
- Multiple speakers on one or more topics in the form of a panel, debate, or round table discussion (e.g., The Changing Landscape of Digital Music Distribution)
- A "unconference" event, where the audience chooses topics and speakers volunteer on the fly (e.g., Start Norfolk)
- A "TEDx" event, with multiple lightning talks, similar to Ignite Hampton Roads
- Hack-something events that focus on teams collectively building something and struggling through ideas together (e.g., Code for America's Civic Hackathons' or the Global Game Day Initiative)

Identify Motivators and Mentors, Not Speakers

Invite the most influential people in your life to the meetup and by them a drink or meal. Whatever gets them there, loose, and talkative. If their insights have been an inspiration to you, then they will certainly be an inspiration to others who share similar ideas and opinions. Put these motivators and mentors in the right settings and they become the life of the party, and more importantly new additions to the Rolodex of the people who need them.

Create Serendipity

Organize a meetup with an outcome in mind. Will this lead to an introduction to a key figure in the community, will it win you brownie points with an executive who you are trying to impress, will you tap into a user base you sought to reach, or will this serve as a ploy for more awareness about your industry or market segment? Choose topics, venues, speakers, and projects that resonate with the objective of the meetup.

Meetups create serendipity. After a few events, you will soon realize that you will gain access to a target audience, learn more about your products effect

on a market, and even win customers. The other side of the coin is that your community gets a sense of the companies personality, culture, and people who are moving and shaking the company to its ideas of success.

Lastly, in the beginning you don't realize that you created an audience, and that therefore, this audience serves as a reasonable guide to your fulfilling your company's objectives. Don't spend time trying to figure out what everyone else wants, because you will discover the audience you attract typically shares an interest in the same things you do.

Location

Density is created in many ways, when building your community look for the location that is dense in population and in an urban environment, mostly found in downtown cities and college campuses.

Norfolk, population 245,000+ sits in the heart of the southeastern Virginia region, population 1,700,000. A region that is split, politically, geographically, philosophically, you name it. The Hampton Roads body of water splits the area in half, which some have referred to as the Mason-Dixon line. Southside folks won't go north and Peninsula folks won't come south. The Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) ends in Virginia Beach, a cul-de-sac of the Mid-Atlantic without a major highway connecting cities north to south. This has severely hurt our economy because there is no cohesion, no structure and to some, no hope to ever work together. And for the most part it's true. Ten cities, six counties and one town make up the Norfolk region; 17 different municipalities, 17 different police departments, 17 different trash departments. Instead of working together or combining forces, each city independently goes after money and in turn, hurts its residents.

I'm not here to bash the way the past was created. Rather I'm here to show how we reengineered the way our region works. Instead of going from the outside-in, we took the city, Norfolk, with the downtown and grew out. Norfolk has the region's highest density (population and urban) and most universities per square mile. We grew the region by educating the public through events, creating startups and engaging the existing industries into our future.

Population density is a measurement of population per unit area or unit volume; it is a quantity of type number density. It is frequently applied to humans. It is a key geographic term.[2]

“One of the key connectors in all of these ecosystems is that they all latch on to an identity. You have “Keep Austin Weird”, Nashville is very centered around country music, southern comfort kind of thing.”

—Billy Ekofo—

Urban density is a term used in planning and design to refer to the number of people inhabiting a given urbanized area. As such it is to be distinguished from other measures of population density. Urban density is considered an important factor in understanding how cities function. Research related to urban density occurs across diverse areas, including economics, health, innovation, psychology and geography as well as sustainability. [3]

I think of Norfolk as the “Research Triangle” of Virginia. Four colleges within four miles of each other, two public universities (one of which is an Historic Black College or University), one medical school and a community college. Geographically, downtown Norfolk is only 49 blocks[4]. For the sake of this book though, downtown will be the distance between Old Dominion University[5] and Norfolk State University (roughly 4 square miles)[6]. Norfolk is broken up into several socio-economic pockets; a checker-board of upscale to lower class families. Millionaires to the poor. Working with all facets of life can be a challenge, we focused on the business world.

People

Entrepreneurs, Leaders, Mentors, Students and Talent, each play a wildly important role in your community.

I'm sure you see a trend. Communities work best, when the people can all come together and find specific elements to growth. And it's not one specific type of person, rather a variety of people.

I think education plays a part in the fact that a way for us to be successful is to allow those top talented entrepreneurial founders from other countries to come here.
—Danny Boyce—

Education

Think of education, not only as the college setting, but also the willingness of your community to learn. In this section, we will discuss multiple ways for learning. Examples are workshops, mentor sessions, office hours, hackfests and meetups.

Events have been the lifeblood of the Norfolk community and thinking ahead about which events to have is crucial. Shane Reiser created Startup Genome, a startup community location tracker that plots variations of resources individual startup communities have. This includes, startups, events, accelerators, universities and mentors.

Reiser says, "There are a few mechanisms to get people thinking about entrepreneurship. Events are important. I think every city has to have a nice event program schedule. If you look at a community like Arizona, they think deliberately about their yearly schedule. They get together without the partners in the town and say the beginning of the year were going to have inspirational events to get people out and get them thinking about entrepreneurship. And then we're going to have educational events

for those who get inspired enough they want to learn more and then we're going to have hands on activities like startup weekend after startup weekend we're going to have accelerator program after accelerator program demo day and then.

They understand that it's a conveyer belt, they assemble the pieces in order throughout the whole year. There's a path and entrepreneurs can see the path and they can decide to get on it. Depending on what stage they're at they can hop on a conveyer belt any time. If you're in a city and there's big gaps in the conveyer belt, it's hard to see that it's possible. It's hard to look at any stories or people that are following a conveyer belt and saying you know what, I can follow that, and I can do that. So you start looking at other communities or you give up." Shane Reiser, Startup Genome [12]

Pitch It

Norfolk has four to six Fortune 500 companies and several other large companies that do well, including Smithfield Foods, AmeriGroup, Dollar General and Norfolk Southern. In February 2011, The Hampton Roads Partnership (HRP) pitched an idea to host an entrepreneurs only meetup. The partnership, a public-private nonprofit organization formed on May 15, 1996, represents ten cities, six counties, and one town in Southeastern Virginia, equaling nearly 1.7 million citizens. Marty Kaszubowski was spearheading the initiative that hosted about three dozen, solopreneurs, small and mid-size business and a very local agencies. Marty had been involved in the Norfolk startup community for decades, including roles as Director of the Hampton Roads Incubator, Tech Council and other various roles with startups.

Basic networking happened and then an introduction to everyone in attendance, that's it. Those in attendance, continued to meet and greet, but nothing was planned to continue. I saw this as an opening, that the folks who came and those who could not, would want more of these entrepreneur only meetups. Instead of having to go to a happy hour, coffee or luncheon, where unless you are selling insurance or real estate most people don't get business, you could come to these meetups which I would curate, and those who come, learn from their peers, from other entrepreneurs who actually understand what you are saying, rather than the random insurance broker who wants to pass out his business cards. I've always wondered if they have a quota or a price per card rate. Anyone know?

The Hampton Roads Partnership, a mentorship-driven group, consisted of past, present and future entrepreneurs. We focused on the non-solopreneur consultant type to start, so the 60 year old SEO wizard, who doesn't understand SEO, couldn't come. Every month, I'd send out a quick email giving time, place and topic. We would supply the beer and some months we would have it sponsored by another company or entrepreneur. One attendee, a new entrepreneur, Mark Scavillo had his wife make sandwiches too. I wish she would make us food every month, German pretzel ham and cucumber sandwiches. Awesome.

I had asked Marty to help me grab a group of past and current older entrepreneurs so I knew the current younger group, I wanted to ensure that we had a great mix of ages, experience and talents.

What the initial meetup validated was that there were entrepreneurs in the Greater Norfolk area. Whether or not they were interested in working together in a collaborative manner, to better new startups and existing businesses was left to be seen.

I'm the type of guy that does not like to be told I can't do something. In high school, I was lazy at times and during my junior year I was an all-state swimmer, who forgot to study for a couple of tests in Chemistry. Because of this, I was ineligible to swim in States I was pissed. When being told I could not do something, I quickly take that as motivation. Although I ended the next semester with a 96 average in Chemistry, I was still ineligible to swim. I went on to my senior year and finished with a 3.7 GPA for the year and broke four records for Potomac Falls High School. I showed the doubters.

Hours before the meetup, I wrote a speech, I typically don't write speeches. or give them for that matter either, but I wanted to collect my thoughts on what I wanted the group to do. I ended up not using the notes, rather just speaking from my heart.

My notes were:

Imagine yourself in an area where culture is booming, where people are talking technology and where people actually leave networking events thinking to themselves, "Wow, I think I actually learned something tonight."

Does that sound like this area? Probably not. So, how can we fix this?

Not competing against the area's already established incubators, businesses or communities but allowing the local entrepreneurs and startups a place where they can not only learn how to start and continue a new business, but can also participate in a weekend long 48 hour challenge. Sound exciting? Startup Weekends, Riots and Digests are booming across the country, funny thing, this area is receiving absolutely no attention. Believe me I've been trying to get on board with this groups/organizations. So why can't we do it ourselves? I mean (look around the room) it's us, it's you and me and all of us combined that can change the culture here. I don't know about you but I'm sick of just allowing people with no idea what they are doing making decisions for our area.

I recently was in Atlanta for SEVC (Southeastern Venture Capital), a venture capitalist convention geared toward startups not only finding funding but for them to massively pitch their ideas. Their ideas weren't just something coming out of their ass. Some of these ideas, where established companies with over five million dollars already raised. How does five million dollars sound to you?

So here's the plan. Lets get people who want to or have started companies in this area together to start a new culture. A culture that not only engages those in the area who are already doing this, but one for those who aren't into just sitting on their asses and want to kick ass and really make a difference. What are we going to do when the Navy takes the carriers out of here, try then? No, we must start now! I've

always been taught you can't just sit around and wait. Like Marc Cendeva, the CEO and founder of The Ladders said, "Do whatever it takes to get it live. I don't care if you have to lock yourselves into a room and not walk out for weeks, do whatever it takes to get your product live."

I'm not asking you guys to take on new jobs, but to use what you've learned in your experience to help out. Competition is a good thing, I'm sick and tired of meeting people in other metros across the country that are from here. They leave. Why? They say Hampton Roads sucks for business. There's no emerging companies. There's nothing for them to do here and they can't be all that they want to be.

Most of you either were born here or are stuck here because of family obligations. Why not stop sitting on your asses and make a difference?

Every three to four weeks we will meet officially. But we'll email, Skype and message each other in between with ideas and how to's on what it will take to ultimately get this area excited. Just going to Richmond and sitting in front of a bunch of suits isn't going to cut it.

The idea right now is 50 teams with 5-10 members per team, build a company in 48 hours. The winner gets investment money and their company on the local map. If we can get some of the local city governments to sponsor the winner, maybe we can fund their overhead for a year. Before and after the competition we will have workshops, but not like the chamber events or twice a year galas. Actual workshops with people who have done this themselves, not just read about it in a book. Then we can go home and say, "Wow, I learned something and now I can use it for my own business."

The Mission: Eliminate the obstacles that prevent innovative entrepreneurs from turning their ideas into viable business

Transform Norfolk/Hampton Roads into a hotbed of high tech startup activity.

Excited yet? We need your help, who's willing? "

The meetup was scheduled for a month after the HRP event. 25 people showed. Building up to this, I had asked a few guys I knew to come. They laughed at me and said this would never fly in our area and that I was wasting my time.

The night went well. 25 people showed up. 45 minutes of networking, a lot of the folks I had never met. I wanted to learn more about their business and how they became successful in town. We then sat around in a circle and I gave my speech, confession or push, whatever you want to call it. It was received well, one guy in the room, emphatically said, "I've raised five million dollars locally, I've been successful." He wanted more peers/entrepreneurs that he could go to and asked questions or voice concerns with. Two hours into the discussion, we all got up and moved to my conference room and went over specifics with four of the companies. What they do, what are their business pain points and what do they need to become more successful.

At the end of the night, at roughly 9:15, I asked if this type of group was something that folks would want to continue. The majority said yes, so we planned another event and topic.

We started a website, 757 Entrepreneurs, which would allow the group to continue to discuss in a more online discussion, similar to a forum.

Prototype, Not Plan

You may have heard of the Lean Startup Movement [16]. Just like building a startup, when building a community, don't put all of your eggs into one basket. Throughout this book you will read about several success and failures from Norfolk to Richmond and all across the US. Embrace failure. What's great about it, if done quickly and cheaply, it can save your business. Instead of producing a community business plan, make and take baby steps.

Take an assumption you have and then test it. If you want to host an event, post on Facebook what the event is and see who signs up. Set a goal and then track. Once you have the event, take some time to reflect on how it went, what you could do better and then, if wanted, expand the event. Send an email out to those who attended, or Facebook message, asking those who attended to invite others. If the event costs money, offer a discount code to previous guests and those they invite.



It's important to plan out what your ideas are, but don't spend hours or days thinking about it. Have a rough idea and go with the flow. Instead of setting up a new business account or naming your startup community, start by doing everything through your personal pages. There's no reason to add extra work until you know it's what others are looking for.

Grassroots Versus Top-Down

The top-down approach, or rather the government big business approach is very different than that of an organic grassroots model. By my definition, the organic grassroots model is produced and organized by those smaller startup businesses who are civically engaged and want to see their community grow the way they see it. There is not a nominated leader or board of directors, the community acts as one.

The top-down approach, by my definition, is the exact opposite. Led typically by a nominated official, it has a board to help facilitate larger ideas and initiatives without the drive and push of the local community. Both are important and the top down approach has its merit, but organically grown communities have the consensus of the city and will grow leaps and bounds and does not need to wait for committee meetings to vote yes or no.

You don't have to wait for someone to tell you that you can or cannot do something.

First, start with the why. Why should there be a grassroots models in your community? the how, who and what are your ultimate goals. What is your end goal, then take that and track backwards.

In Norfolk, the ultimate goal, which it still is to this day, is to start and grow more early stage high-growth technology companies. When first pitching the Norfolk startup community idea to folks in town, many told me to contact those who were very successful in town, in particular, the individuals who sold The Weather Channel and who were Landmark Communications executives. I did not feel it was appropriate to pitch the startup community to these folks, yet. The Norfolk startup community was just an idea and ideas are cheap, it's all about execution.

Without a plan, more details, or even a solid foundation, even if I secured a meeting, I would look like a fool. If I was to wait until metrics were created, then I could meet with the Norfolk success stories and show them what we had achieved and how we would incorporate them into the ecosystem.

There is also the psychology behind a big-backed initiative. Some work, some don't. It was my belief, and still is, that if we had approached the city of Norfolk and other economic development engines we would not have achieved the organic growth that we have. We have since leveraged several of these groups in some capacity, but to use them exclusively to grow something new does not have the same effect that building the community without them does.

It is more genuine and it is done without any of their dollars. Many are familiar with Lean Startup Methodologies or Minimum Viable Products[17] when developing their startup companies. We used these principles when building the startup community. In a nutshell, the basis is that you cannot assume anything and you must test with those who will be using your product. The same goes for the community, you cannot assume that the community wants a startup community.

What do you do then? Get up and ask. Organize smaller events, see what those in attendance need, how could they achieve those?

It can sometimes be easy to think that everybody wants what you want. But that couldn't be further from the truth. When researching, using lean startup methodologies, you will recognize that many ideas seem to be great on the surface, but once they are tested and verified your initial thought of the idea is that those you asked may have no use for the product or they do not understand your product or service enough to use it. I've found that when we take baby steps to validate an idea rather than going all out, it has helped Norfolk make tremendous strides.

When building your company, think of the pain points your customers are going through. The same goes for the community. What are they looking for? What is their struggle? In Norfolk it was assumed that people wanted to work for themselves or that they wanted to build products. We had to verify.

Question 1: Are there entrepreneurs in Norfolk who want to start high-growth tech companies?

Question 2: Are they looking for more community involvement or engagement?

Question 3: Would they get up and quit their jobs to commit full time to their company?

Experiment often and come to conclusions quickly, involve your team or staff to help come to these conclusions. Fail, fail fast, then pivot.

Networking

It's a scary word to many and an irrelevant word to others. Your network is your future. Without one you cannot grow.

Over the last three years I've grown my brands through several different companies, businesses and events. Most through in-person events. I've collected thousand of business cards and spoken hundreds of hours with those who I've met. Without networking and growing from those I've met, I would be nowhere.

Not one to do the networking thing? Are you on Twitter? Follow someone, or comment on LinkedIn or Hacker News. Networking is the same whether it's in person or not.

People ask me weekly how I've been able to be so successful at a young age. I say luck. While it's true that I've been lucky, there's more to it than luck. Hard work, being visible and standing out.

I didn't wear a suit. I was doing something most people in Norfolk weren't (startups) and I was different in age than 75% of the people who were in the space I was.

Be genuine to those you meet. Seriously. Care about those you meet and mean it when you talk with them. I love sports, roller coasters and young



startups. I tend to talk about those topics, not about selling my business to others. Why? No one really cares about your business. They care about the relationship they can gain with you.

Take a look back at the last 50 business cards or meetings you've had. Were they your targeted users? Meaning someone who directly would purchase what you are selling? My guess is less than 50% are. Off the bat, if you are pitching business rather than finding a common interest, your probability has been cut in half. Rather, ask what they enjoy outside of work or find something compatible to you. In my case, it's almost always sports. "Hey did you see that Cowboys game last night?"

Find the immediate connection!

Once you meet someone. Get their card. Have a card to give them and follow up via email and LinkedIn and tell them you enjoyed chatting about the game, etc.

Then don't contact them again until they post something on their network that was relevant to your conversation, you find something of interest to them, or have business opportunities for them. A great example of a follow up is, "Hey Johnny, I recently met up with Mary and she said you were partners, friends, etc. That's awesome, she/he were great. I hope you are well." And that's it. Don't be pushy!

Be specific. How many times do you meet someone and there's no interest and they hassle you nonstop. Telemarketers FTW!

Networking is like sales. The more you educate and help others who may buy from you later, the more trustworthy you become. Trust is what you are trying to accomplish. If you need to take notes during the conversation, do it.

Finally, attend and communicate as much as you can

through as many channels. But don't be salesy. Become a friend. Give them something for free. Rinse and repeat and be heard.

If you are one that doesn't like to go out and meet people in person, educate via webinars or blog posts. Don't know where to start? Go to twitter.com/search and enter the type of industry you want to focus on. Find someone of relevance and follow them. When you read something they tweet that's interesting to you, retweet it and comment back to them. This should cause them to look into your profile in more detail. In your posts, make it easy for people to learn more about you with a Call To Action. I recommend collecting an email in return for additional educational pieces. Think of it as passing out your business card as data in return for their email. Score!

The more active you are the stronger your network will become.

Remember, be memorable, be honest and don't be a used car salesman!

Meetups

You don't have to start with going after the big boys. The little guys can talk you up just as much. Example: Chandler Turner. Chandler is your typical soloprenuer. He runs his own content strategy consultancy. Chandler ended up praising what we were doing for the community. I think I met him at a local tech council meeting, which for the most part was sales guys and suits and not guys either building the technology or the lead guys behind a company. As myself and several others in Norfolk saw it, it was an old-school way of doing business, a way that was not in our favor.

Chandler, a self-proclaimed public speaker, had asked if he could give a presentation on cognitive theory. We let him, he spoke for about an hour and we had 30 people attend, no drinks or food, just a meetup with a topic in our warehouse of an office.

You may be asking yourself, why you should allow others to talk at your office? Well, for starters, you are bringing in dozens of new potential customers through your doors. You get a chance to announce the speakers and plug your company to those in attendance. In our case, most wanted to learn more about what we were doing and would then go tell their friends about it. If what we were doing was lame or the event was lame, the results we wanted would not have happened. Leverage others early and often. The power of the referral is unparalleled.

How a Case of Beer Produced 900+ Paid Customers

Just like a business idea, a community idea can work the same way. You are looking to fulfill a pain point in your life or maybe you want to grow a certain brand that is lacking in your community. An example, could be on the technical side, design or a group of business entrepreneurs, who lack a focus group of others that are similar to them.

Before you go and start anything, I recommend perusing online and other communities around where you live to make sure that a group doesn't already exist. If another group is around, I recommend joining forces with them rather than starting fresh. If the group has a bad name for themselves, doesn't meet regularly and has lost focus, reach out to the organizer and ask to take over the group. The best part of an already existing group is there is most likely a list of people involved who just need to be educated and focused on one key point to start.

In February 2011 a local group of business leaders and entrepreneurs met at my office in an effort to put together a local group that would meet regularly, share contacts and business leads. Great idea to get these types of folks in the room together, but the concept and tactics behind it were wrong.

Instead, host a group of who you want to attend, have an agenda and produce great content. The content is why they are coming. In this case, great entrepreneurs tend to not have a lot of time for Chamber like events. It's not to say they don't want to, attend rather they are running and growing their business and it can be difficult to attend these types of meetups. In Norfolk, these occur first thing in the morning or around happy hour. If your intent is to get this type of person to attend, the value proposition has to be strong.

After the February meetup, I decided to continue the efforts, but in a more exclusive way. Instead of posting everywhere I could, I took the list of those

who attended the first event and reached out to them individually, inviting them to a similar get together, but instead of just drinking beer and hearing a 30 second pitch from each of the attendees, we would have specific topics that the group would discuss. Anything from hiring and firing employees, to getting their first customer and growing that.

That March 2011, was the first, "Startup Night", an exclusive monthly meetup of top entrepreneurs. 15 attended and I gave a talk about what we were looking to do.

I had no idea what I was getting myself into. It was just a meetup to better myself and surround myself with people who had been successful. I wanted to learn from them and thought that through meetups and events I could do that. When you are the organizer of an event you don't have to wait in line to talk to the speakers, they come to you. You become the source, even if you have no idea what to say or what you are doing.

Fake it til you make it.

One key point to make at every meetup; ask those who attend what they would like to learn. You can do this a few ways

- Ask the group at the event
- Send out a questionnaire
- Individually ask through email or in person

Before we go any further. Have you evaluated you are your community yet?

Take the next 10 minutes and write down as much about your community as possible.

Once you are through with that, take 10 minutes and write down what you want your community to be. It's good to start small and grow organically, however knowing the who, what and all about your

community are good as well.

It's been 30 months since that first meetup and the landscape in Norfolk is quite different. Don't think about your community's big picture, you will get lost quickly and won't be able to grow it. Think of your community as a project, as a newborn. What you teach it is what it will learn. Education is the key to the world and the way you present it to your community will determine the way it grows.

A Secret. I'm usually an open book, but when Startup Nights first started I had no idea what I was doing! Seriously. I would reach out to my friends, business cards that I had that fit the bill of entrepreneur and asked them to bring a friend. Take notes beforehand to make sure you hit on all the topics you want to. Engage everyone if you can and be sure to collect everyone's email. This way you can keep them in the loop for upcoming meetups.

A case of beer can go a long way. Along with an outline of what to expect, when talking to those potential attendees, tell them there will be free drinks. The first Startup Night, I bought a case of Miller Lite. I learned my lesson on buying shitty beer, don't buy it! If your meetup is in the morning, spend the fifty bucks and buy coffee, orange juice and some pastries. The last thing you want is to have people not paying attention because they are barely awake. The same can be said for your night-time meetups. Spend a few bucks, buy some beer and simple snacks to get your group through.

In the beginning an agenda was tricky because I was learning what the group should be doing. Have a hard start and end time and stick to it. If a speaker goes over, find a way to make that time up. People are busy and will respect the heck out of you if you don't waste their time and hit the times you say you will.

Luck of the Irish—Part One

You've got to get a little lucky. Finding those who either lead or are high up on the totem pole to tell your story will do wonders. Don't pitch the community yourself, execute and others will organically pitch it for you.

We were about a year into building the scene in Norfolk when I got the email that changed it all. I remember it like it was yesterday. Drew Ungvarsky had mentioned us to the Greater Norfolk Corporation (GNC), a group of over 100 businesses and leaders who are out to do better for the city of Norfolk. GNC is not run by the city, but to say the city doesn't endorse what they do, would be false. Now, Drew had been a friend of what we were doing in Norfolk since we began, and his primary

reasoning behind it was that he, as the CEO of Grow Interactive, a high-end digital advertising agency who works with clients like Google, HBO and Nike, were having trouble persuading top talent to move to Norfolk.

They could get the best projects in the world, have the best office in town, but they struggled to get the best talent.

Why? There's no competition. There wasn't enough vibrancy.

You would think the head guy at an agency wouldn't want competition. But Drew is different. He saw something in Norfolk, something that I admittedly, didn't recognize until more

conversations with him. At one of our first meetings I asked him, “Why are you doing this? For your kids?” He smirked and laughed and said, “I’m not that old, we can do this for us.”

I was hooked. I never looked back.

Okay, back to the introduction email. Drew had told Barry Bishop, Executive, Vice President of GNC, about some of the initiatives we were organizing. One in particular, Start Norfolk which was about 45 days away from launching. Start Norfolk is a similar event to ones across the country like Startup Weekends and Start Atlanta. The Atlanta version is where I got the idea from. You’ll learn about Jesse Maddox and Triplingo, the guys who got me hooked to the idea later.

The email read as follows: “I recently met with Drew Ungvarsky in my capacity as Executive Vice President of the Greater Norfolk Corporation, a business leadership organization here in Norfolk, to brainstorm in part how we might encourage the creation of new businesses in Norfolk.

Drew shared with me the exciting plans for Start Norfolk and suggested that we (GNC) might want to have you all brief our Executive Committee and/or Board. I couldn’t agree more, particularly since we had Tom Osha at our August Executive Committee meeting to principally speak to the New Innovation Foundation and Business Gateway Initiatives at ODU Innovation Research Park.”

I knew nothing about GNC, but quickly picked up the phone and gave Barry a call. I gave him a quick synopsis on Start Norfolk and he asked if I would brief the committee. Of course, I said yes. In college I was a sports anchor and interviewed people on a daily basis. But immediately after hanging up the phone I was nervous. Why? I knew this was the shot. My opportunity to engage with the top businesses in Norfolk and share with them not only why Start Norfolk was important, but how businesses could

be started in such a short period of time.

The night before, I sent my slides to a friend, Meredith Badali, who I had only meet a few weeks before, through mutual friends. She said the slides were great. She was lying. They were a mess, but effective.

One thing I am not big into is dressing up. I had just returned from a business trip to Japan where I had to dress “biz-cool”, which is khakis and a button-up dress shirt. Even that, is dressed up for a hefty former athlete like myself who was packing on the pounds quickly, working long hours, and making the networking rounds a reoccurring daily theme. Hey, it worked. I wanted to make a decent impression so I quasi-dressed up.

I was first up at the meeting About 30 folks, all suits, I got up and went through my 13 or so slides, not as cohesive as an investor pitch deck. The presentation lasted 10 minutes When I was done people had questions, smiles on their faces, and were encouraged about something they didn’t think was possible. We were getting the veteran business leaders excited about an event, a community, that they didn’t understand. Score! I stayed around for the rest of the meeting, commented here and there and then chatted with a few folks after it ended. I exchanged business cards and went on my way.

It may be common sense, but never miss out on an opportunity and always give it your all. That morning, I showed passion.

With a little bit of luck, and help from Drew, the Norfolk Startup Scene had the endorsement of the big guys -business leaders- who could have cared less, but instead jumped on board. GNC is now one of our biggest supporters. We have engaged with them on more projects since.

Start Norfolk—Weekend Long Startup Competition

Start Norfolk is an event that is geared towards creating and educating those into starting and growing their startups.

Needs: Venue, speakers, mentors, sponsors, press, social media, photographer, attendees(think this one through, who do you want to attend your event?)

Goals: For each event you organize come up with a few goals. It can be number of attendees, press coverage or startups created. As Start Norfolk grew our goals changed. Attendee numbers can be swayed the wrong way. Our number one goal has been to find the best quality participants rather than having a large amount of attendees.

The Pitch: Who, what, why, how. The “where” question is why you are pitching it. Remember to know your audience. I pitched to Tom Osha, president of Innovation Research Park at Old Dominion University, he was familiar with the idea, but very hesitant, because Startup Weekend Baltimore had run up some \$30,000 in damages to the facility. It just so happened that the company he works for was the same in Baltimore.



The pitch went something like this (and I'll preface this by saying, I was way wrong in what I said, but he liked the idea). “We are looking to bring together people with ideas and get them built all within a weekend. We will give them money so that on Monday after the weekend, they can quit their job and continue working on their company. Wouldn't it be cool to have 5,000 people come and start a company in a weekend?” Yea, 5,000 people to attend a weekend long company building competition is a bit high, but hey, it was a number, a goal, something to shoot for. Tom said let's grab lunch, which we did a few days later, to go over what I had in mind. I pitched to him at a wine networking event which he still hosts to this day, but much detail. The lunch meeting went great and we looked over dates. The first date we choose, we quickly changed, since a home football game was that day. But we found one that worked, November 11-13, 2011.

Website: A simple website was built that had a web 2.0 look. Site went up pretty quickly and included event basics such as what, who, when, where and why But I had a lot of work to do on the sponsorship, mentor and speaker side of things, not to mention getting people to sign up, which would



be harder than anticipated since this was a first-time event in Norfolk.

Registration Page: The registration page was similar to the website sharing the event basics. I've found that Eventbrite has worked the best for our events.

Speakers: I had a few ideas about speakers and had just gotten back from Atlanta for the second time in 2010. I had gone to Less Conf and met Matt Smith at one of the parties. Matt was a super rad, 18 year old Georgia Tech entrepreneur, who was working on his second startup at the time. I thought it would be a cool fit, so I tweeted him, "Are you looking to speak at Start Norfolk?" His reply was sure, let's hop on a Skype call to discuss. We caught up on what he had been working on recently and we talked about Start Atlanta and Start Norfolk. I told him I was looking to have 500-750 people attend. I had downgraded my number from 5,000, but was still at an absurd number. He told me, "Shoot for 50, these things don't typically get a huge crowd." Since he had been to a weekend long event before; I changed my goal to 50 attendees.

Matt said he would speak at Start Norfolk and would be a judge as well. Yes! Two birds with one stone.

I then reached out to four other local entrepreneurs and asked if they would be interested in speaking. They agreed. We now had five speakers. Speakers throughout the event is uncommon in most weekend long events because most teams are too busy developing their ideas, but I wanted to give them opportunities to go and learn from experienced entrepreneurs on their topics. It's a tough sell though for those who have to develop the ideas. Time is very valuable, so try and keep these talks quick so those who need to get back to coding and designing can pick the talks they want to attend. We had the talks in a separate room, across the hall from where the majority of the teams worked together.

Mentors: If your event provides education through coaching or mentoring you will want to find a variety of experts to coach teams through specific questions they may have. Our mentor list has grown from a handful at the first Start Norfolk to dozens. Create a directory of services that your community will need and then find the appropriate person and break them down into categories of mentors.

Once you have a list of those who want to be involved in your event, reach out to them and ask them to attend. Make this a win-win for you and them by giving them free access to the event and a way for them to meet with more potential future customers.

Keep this list for the future as your event is not the totality of your community.

Sponsors: The cost of the event was mostly for food, but we did give away cash prizes. Expenses would be raised through sponsorships. The number one thing I will say in raising sponsorships dollars is do it early in the year. These monies go very early in businesses budgets and they typically will not open up their next year's budget for events especially, first time events.



We ran into this problem early and often. “Love the idea, love the conference, but its August or September and all of our money is locked up into other events. We won’t have money until next year.”

The idea was money in increments of one thousand, three thousand, five thousand and ten thousand dollars. When it comes to pitching a sponsorship, people always pick the cheapest value. Continuing to pound the pavement we landed several sponsors, but only at the thousand dollar mark.

Pricing of the event: Pricing of the event was simple. We wanted folks to register, so we went on the cheap side of things. Fifty dollars for everyone except students who could get in for twenty-five dollars. This was a steal.

Reaching out to your audience: Nobody wants to have an event that sucks and there’s nothing worse than throwing a party and no one showing up. Ultimately, producing an event could be thought of as throwing a party. If the event is new and you haven’t been building up your smaller meetups, your reaching out could be a challenge. I recommend using momentum through smaller weekly to monthly meetups to help you grow your larger event.

After you have the details of your event completed, begin promoting your event. Before you mass promote, find a few of your closest friends to buy

tickets and begin to promote on their own. If your event has organic reach you will see a higher spike in ticket sales. Select a Twitter hashtag for your event and use consistently throughout the promotional and event times.

You most likely will have at least two types of customers, attendees and sponsors. Each one is different, but is looking for similar results. Attendees are looking to meet new people and receive education. Sponsors are looking to grow their companies by adding new customers and getting in front of their target market. Collect an email from everyone interested in the event.

Use MailChimp and collect their name and email while promoting the event. Then throughout the process (six weeks out, three weeks out, one week out and one day out) email those who have signed up. Most events sell the majority of their tickets within the final two weeks before the event occurs. There are a few ways to try and avoid this; early bird tickets, group discounts and selling out. If potential attendees are worried about selling out, they are more likely to purchase.

Give out free educational material; videos on starting a company, an interview with a local entrepreneur, or tips on developing an online product. Find user groups and meetups that fall into your target market and ask them to allow you to make a presentation on your event. The group organizers may not immediately say yes, so create incentives for them with free or discounted tickets to the event along with a discount for those in their group.

When promoting your event through social media, we have found when you attach a relevant image along with a strong Call To Action (link to click, early bird ticket prices) our conversions were higher than when we simply had a link to the event or told people to sign up.

Needs: Sleek-Looking Website



Bio and Headshot of all major participants, speakers, mentors, organizers, judges. This is a total pain because you are always waiting for this material to be sent. One thing I recommend is for you to write up the bio for each individual and find a headshot online.

Social Media: Don't go overboard here since there are hundreds of social networks. Start with one and grow as your event does.

Logo: Your logo will define your event, find a local design intern to create one or run a contest with your local design group to find a winner.

Media: Send the media a press release six weeks out and then personally follow up with a phone call one week out. Media can be the hardest part to attract, especially during first-run events. You can always tweet them until they respond. We did this during the event and attached an image with each post. If the media does not attend, send them a follow-up note after the event and try to receive coverage of the event after the fact.

Keep your event organized by a few, not an army. This will ensure that those involved can keep control.



"If you're on the fence, email your 20-50 closest friends and say, 'I'm thinking about throwing a conference on 'x' day, at this kind of angle. Would you buy a ticket for 'y' dollars?' If you can't sell a ticket to your friends, then you can't sell it to a complete stranger. If you do buy then, build the simplest little splash page. I'm talking a logo, a date, topics, and email 10 sponsors. If you can't get a sponsor to give you money, then don't go do it. It's no different than lean development, it's all the same thing with events. But think of your event as a business. If you don't think of it as a business, it turns into a charity, and none of us have time to run charities."
- Allan Branch, Less Everything

Activity and Mentors

There are several different categories of mentors. I've broken them up into four different categories; entrepreneurs (previous or current), consultants/ service providers, advisors and investors.

Entrepreneurial mentors are those who have started, grown or sold their company. Entrepreneurial mentors must be innovative, understanding of a minimum viable product, scaling, knows how to get to proof of concept quickly to not spend an extended amount of time or cash resources.

Entrepreneurial mentors have experience in building boards, sales, marketing, prototyping, raising capital, growth and strategy.

Typically entrepreneurial mentors are trusting, passionate, inspirational, caring, understanding, willing and must be direct and blunt.

Consultants or Service Providers are typically attorneys, lawyers, accountants, social media experts, marketers or solopreneurs. Solopreneurs are single owners of a company, typically selling a service.

Advisors will work with entrepreneurs in specific areas, give guidance, have limited availability due to who they are, often times a C-Level Executive.

Sometimes referred to as "grey hairs". Could be investors. They tell their story on how they helped grow a company with their industry expertise.

Advisors often have a big portfolio, network and a loaded Rolodex. Advisors are the conduit to all investors and others entrepreneurs.

Advisors come in polish and select particular pieces to each company to review.

Investors: Angel and Venture Capital Investors are two similar but vastly different individuals. Angel investors are typically individuals investing in a pre seed to seed round of funding, where traditional VC's invest starting in Series A.



Be Different



One thing that may be a challenge is to be different enough, yet still have the cause in hand. At one of the initial meetings I had for a university led initiative, there was a state employee whose vision was the same as 60 years ago- bring in suits and tell them that we can help! Boy oh boy was I excited to work with him. There's no problem with what he proposed. Think about it, it's what's kept him relevant for all these years. But as we are thinking into the future and trying to retain and attract talent, you must keep in mind and think about your target audience. What would they want, how could they benefit, etc?

I of course said, "Everything you just pitched won't work with college students. They want and can be a part of the culture, but you must cater to them. Think about what they would want from it, how we can help them, but in a fun way." After some quick brainstorming, we decided on a mini-version of Start Norfolk. Or more realistically, a quick business idea pitch competition. Twenty students would pitch their concept for 60 seconds, with the opportunity to get in front of hundreds of peers, startups and local business owners to get feedback. Winners would receive a free ticket to pitch to the next Start Norfolk. But the big push here is the energy it would bring to college students who before now were not openly given the chance to pitch or even think they could start a company.

There are three pillars to the economy in Norfolk; Port, Tourism and Defense. Pretty sexy, huh? These combined bring in 85% of the regions business. If you look deeper into these three, they are industries

that just appear, that folks can just use and not have to grow their companies in a typically high-growth way, more of a contract by contract basis. Nothing the matter with this approach, but it's something to remember throughout the book that this is the Norfolk economy, and its business leaders made their money in those 3 pillars and real estate deals. During a lot of my early meetings, one question continued to come up, "What is my guarantee?" I didn't understand why they thought there was a guarantee. It was an "investment" right? But, even if the deal went sour, they would still have the land and building, not the occupant.

What are the pillars of your community? How can you disrupt, tweak it and grow it? Turbo Tax is a great example of intrapreneurial activity. Which grew internally from Intuit.

I knew we had to tweak the model and engage our youth and top talent. After organizing several smaller meetups, the idea of Start Norfolk happened.

Some six months later after we announced our second Start Norfolk. I'll admit, I was nervous and I was worried. How many people would show up? I was wrong. About 300 people showed up and 73 different business ideas were pitched. Along with the weekend long competition we gave out \$25,000 in cash and over \$100,000 in prizes. Additionally, nine speakers from all across the country presented on topics such as venture capital, prototyping their venture and growing their company.

Big Company Case Study

In Norfolk, a tech scene was unheard of. That's not to say tech wasn't around, but there wasn't a conscious effort to push tech. At first we didn't encourage tech only, but did foster topics around developers. Talks on ruby gems that we used for a projects or features on side projects.

We would try to have these events every Friday at our office to encourage learning for the company, but we also brought in others outside to company. This did several things.

1. **Increased Exposure**
2. **Community Education**
3. **Finding Talent**

This would be instrumental in the growth of the community. Many of these developers would come from Dominion Enterprises (DE), the largest tech company in Norfolk. They run sites like homes.com and BoatTrader. With over 800 employees, they had a huge piece of the talent pool in the market. A pool that we wanted to become active in our educational series.

As more weekly meet ups occurred, the more developers from DE would attend. We held these at lunch and provided pizza. Incentive.

The developers were great, interacted with us, and validated that we should continue. To grow the overall community I saw the need to get their executives involved. I didn't know any of them, but asked a few of the developers if they did. They mentioned Joe Fuller, CIO, who was active in company culture at DE. I asked if he was interested in being a judge at Start Norfolk, but he said there was a scheduling conflict.

I later found out through Fuller, that at first he didn't see why the DE juggernaut should be getting involved in growing the local startup community.

Fast forward a few months to March 2011. It was National Civic Hacking day and the Code For America team organized an event to build off of local civic data. A few projects were built, including a bus tracking app that the region uses today.

Fuller attended and saw talent. DE is always growing and hiring which in Norfolk can sometimes be a challenge. But if DE became active in growing the scene, they would have access to finding the talent at any stage of the community's growth.

I asked Fuller to judge again and this time he said yes. He enjoyed being a judge and was able to get in front of 300 potential DE employees. It was a win-win.

Find the company in your community that is in the niche you are looking to start with. Contact employees there and invite them to your events. You may get lucky and get the executives first and they tell their staff to attend later. Either way, you want both involved.

If there aren't any companies in your city that are in your niche, look for the founders of those companies. Founders tend to enjoy meeting other founders. If they blow you off, you can find founders in another city and create an event around their presentation. Ask your chamber for help promoting and grow your name.

At the beginning, focus on one Case Study with a large company. DE isn't a Fortune 500, but they are a recognizable local company, whose president is on the Top 75 Area Leaders list.

Once you have validated large companies are willing to participate in your community, look back at what you have provided for them, growth in numbers and see if they know their counterpart at another local juggernaut and if they will provide an introduction. It then becomes a win-win-win for everyone.

Events Educate People

Organizing events increased our sales by over 800% in 14 months, growing at a number over 2 million dollars and adding nine employees.

When deciding what style of event to have, I recommend starting with an intimate crowd, specifically targeting those who can be educated on the niche topic you decide. And who are also the decision makers of a company. Decision makers make up their minds a lot faster than having to do the run around with the sales team and the ladder of approval they have to send everything up.

Niche events are focused on one topic around a specific type of customer. In our case, we built our meetups around growing entrepreneurship. A broad topic at first glance, but if you segment out the service provider entrepreneurs and real estate contractors, you have a tighter knit group of people. Being exclusive counts and if the group is filled with people everyone knows the same will happen. The magic happens when you bring together those who are unfamiliar with each other and can learn from each other.

Have you put on an event yet? What is your focus/topic? Email me back and let's chat!

You know the topic(s) you want to educate your group on, but you don't know how to grow your events. There's two key parts to this, 1) Don't let your event suck and 2) Ask others to bring a guest. It's up to your guests to decide whether or not your event is worth it, but if they feel that you are making good of their time and educating them, you will find that many are willing to tell others. Referral networking 101!

We invited folks we wanted to do business with to our events (without directly saying it) and gave them way more value than expected and then asked them to find someone in our niche (entrepreneur tech business owners) and invite them.

Quickly, our 15 person meetup turned into a 2,500+ email list of attendees. This allowed us to learn about our potential customers in more depth. Customer Discovery through this educational series gave us the appearance of an authority. At the time, we knew about our industry, but organizing an event, we were very novice in.

When we had paid events or were selling our services, it was easier because people knew us, respected us and trusted us (comfortable with giving us cash in return for our services).

When in doubt, just ask someone. It goes a long way.

- You have your event idea. Check
- You've been able to grow it by having awesome topics. Check
- You are educating your attendees by introducing them to resources other meetups have lacked. Check

You may want to take your event to the next level, start charging and creating a bigger name for yourself in the community. This is precisely the action we had. We took our entrepreneur only meetup and grew it into Start Norfolk, a weekend long business hackfest.

Our smaller meetups allowed us to grow a list of potential people to come to the larger event, but what it helped with most was visibility into the community; the community of businesses that we wanted to do work with. We were quickly rising up the business ladder and were able to get meetings and accounts with top executives in our market and several across the world. Small events are awesome for an educational series, finding talent and growing your network. Organizing a larger (not as exclusive) event will get your community talking, potentially bring the media in and give your company

expanded awareness, credibility and authority.

Think about ways you can pull similar verticals into a larger event.

Really quick, here's the three things we've covered that will grow your company and make you become an authority in your community.

- Start an event, Pick a niche topic
- Hand pick your attendees
- Grow the event into a larger community focused event

“Everyone thinks that the goals of a hack a thon are to build something awesome. I think the goal should be to increase community exposure and to have fun.”

—Brett Fisher—

Growing Your List

Collect an email from everyone that attends your events.

Look at other emails you receive that mass-blast out events and create your own. In our information emails, we'd make it easy for those to know what's coming up, hot news, press, jobs and we'd showcased a startup of the month. This gave that company recognition others might not have heard about.

The list originally went out monthly, but grew to weekly. Curate the events to the best of the best. You want your emails to be consistently read.

- Name of event
- Date
- Location
- Time
- Why you should attend

When creating a headline, stay relevant and recognizable. If your content is consistently creating value, your open rates will grow.

Plug in a call to action, asking to forward the email and promote to their networks. Add a Call To Action to your website to sign up for email updates.

Be visible. Be relevant. Be valuable.

Pitching to the Media

Press isn't that important of a deal when building the ecosystem, but it is vital that they know who you are, what you are doing and how to reach those in your community. Having a news background, I knew what a typical newsroom would do with press releases and for anyone who only sends press releases, don't be shocked when the news never shows. An email or fax comes in, they print the release and file it on its date of occurrence. Now, some news rooms are different, but the ones I've been in will only check the folder of releases every once in a while and if the release is not that sexy or for really good reason, example, Special Olympics, Boys And Girls Club, etc., don't count on the media to attend.

The trick to getting press, is find someone who has had press on them previously and have them introduce you to the reporter who did the story. This way you have an in and its not a blank email with a subject line of: Hey, this is a good story, please write a story on me! Press isn't that important of a deal when building the ecosystem, but it is vital that they know who you are, what you are doing and how to reach those in your community. Having a news background, I knew what a typical newsroom would do with press releases and for anyone who only sends press releases, don't be shocked when the news never shows. An email or fax comes in, they print the release and file it on its date of occurrence. Now, some news rooms are different, but the ones I've been in will only check the folder of releases every once in a while and if the release is not that sexy or for really good reason, example, Special Olympics, Boys And Girls Club, etc., don't count on the media to attend.

The trick to getting press, is find someone who has had press on them previously and have them introduce you to the reporter who did the story. This way you have an in and its not a blank email with a subject line of: Hey, this is a good story, please write a story on me! Once the introduction is made, give a quick synopsis on what you are working on and ask to meet with the reporter

to discuss not only that story, but how you will be able to help them find more stories in the future. Reporters are always looking for great lead sources and if you can show them that you are in the know, they will call, email and tweet you to keep up to date.

I pitched the Virginian Pilot the idea of Start Norfolk months back, with no prevail. Here in Norfolk, we have 2 newspaper, Virginian Pilot and Inside Business, its sister paper, with primary topics on local business. Start Norfolk being a new event, my guess is the folks over at the Pilot didn't understand. When pitching an event, remember that most newspapers or TV stations don't cover events, but when they do there needs to be substance. Months later, I found out that they did like the idea, but didn't reach out because the event hadn't occurred yet. This is typical, preview of events is unlikely. I did get an email from Phil Walzer with the pilot.

Phil was looking at doing a story on six local business in the IT or technology related field. Phil interviewed Brennan and I at Titans and I gave him a few other companies to look into. Walzer also mentioned Start Norfolk, he had heard about the event, because I had pitched it to the paper months back. Talking with Phil, he mentioned because of Start Norfolk, they began to discuss local tech related companies that were stimulating the economy and that the paper wanted to do features on several of them.

Phil said he would be at Start Norfolk to do a feature. The Monday after Start Norfolk, the event was on the 3rd page of the paper!

I did make it apparent that I had worked in news and I think that helps. I know not everyone has that on their side, but show that you care and that you will make the reporters job easier and you

have the in.

After Phil did the first story, I continued to email him stories a few times a month, usually a quick, “Hey, hope you are doing well. X is happening this week or have you heard of this new technology? It’s being built in our backyard.” One thing I’ve seen work better is when you approach the reporters closer to when the actual event and/or when they can physically do a story. Example, don’t pitch someone a new tech company, if no work is done on the software side. This is bad for two reasons, 1) once you get the press, no one can check the site and 2) the reporters want to grasp their minds around your company, so expect to give the free access.

Note: Sometimes you will have an opportunity to pitch to large media just for an FYI to them. This is good, you may not get the story written, but you are in their minds. Think about what you pitched them, if it did not go as plan, write down what you said and polish, so the next time you don’t do them again. It is okay to have a script when presenting to press to maximize the pitch.

Creating Your Own Press

With dozens of new startups popping up at a rapid pace, we wanted to ensure that we could feature their story in a way that would be positive and give the exposure if the local press would not. In May of 2012, I came up with the idea of having a site that would feature the startups and initiatives in Norfolk. After months of writing stories, designing logos, and distributing material, we launched Silicon Anchor News. At that point, we moved all of the events under that, Start Norfolk, Start Coffee, Startup Nights, Hatch and many more. This way there was a centralized place that our residents could find at all times, while also being able to learn more about the startup scene in town.

Once we decided to move everything under this, instead of the agency, it worked a lot better for accounting reasons as well. Silicon Anchor News, became the port for all things innovation, entrepreneurship and community in the Greater Norfolk area. Along with the website, we created Facebook and Twitter pages and started recruiting writers, salespeople, student interns and a new team to work together to create the community. They are Keith Privette and Kristin Fitch. Later on, we would recruit Melvin Brown as well.

Gotta Start Somewhere

Until you actually try something, you have no idea what the result will be. Practice may not make perfect, but it sure will get you closer.

The idea of fostering startups for a three month period was something I had never done before. I had read a few books and blog posts on what accelerators and incubators were, but I had never been to one, let alone run one. But, how hard could it be? Ha.

During the first Start Norfolk, Joel Nied and I were talking about how successful it was. Something, that many people told both Joel and I would never work. What I like about Joel’s responses to those who said it couldn’t be done is, “Well, what are you going to do instead? Are you going to even try? Zack is out there at least seeing what will work.” I’ll be the first to admit that some events, and meetups have worked and some haven’t but until we tried, we didn’t know.

Joel and I talked about how we could take the Start Norfolk model and expand it over a longer period of time and investing cash in each company was something that had worked in other cities and

could work in Norfolk as well.

The adventure began. Nied and I did some research on incubators that had been run out of Norfolk and ultimately, that was a model that we both believed wasn't for Norfolk and would hurt our growth rather than help. After spending a month researching the accelerator model and talking with those involved in other markets, the decision was made to launch Hatch, a mentor based accelerator program. Hatch would last three months and invest in each company it selected. Hatch had an application process and looked for growing companies in Norfolk and around the country.

There are a few main difference between accelerators and incubators.

Accelerator(Private Funded)

- Intense 3-4 month program
- Large Mentor Based Network
- All Can Apply
- Selective
- Equity Stake Taken
- Seed Funding
- Entrepreneur Support
- Resources/Perks
- Weekly Reality Checks
- Demo Day

Incubator(Real Estate/Government)

- Not Intense, 3-8 Years in length
- Less Mentors
- Looking for local Particular Companies
- Typically Not Selective
- No Equity
- No Funding
- Entrepreneur Support
- Some Resources
- Every Once in a While
- No Demo Day

One isn't necessarily better than the other, but in our case, we wanted rapid fire.

During our research we spoke with organizers of accelerators, those startups that went through and mentors that participated. What was fascinating is that each gave a different aspect of what the program actually did for each startup.

The number one thing that came up was mentorship and their networks. Meaning the relationships that they were able to help facilitate.

Luck of the Irish—Park Deux

I've mentioned a number of times that you have to get a bit lucky in the process. During a campfire event on a friends roof in the middle of winter in Norfolk, Norfolk City Manager, Marcus Jones, came to hear and learn about what Norfolk could be doing better for its residents and its future.

There was a crowd of about 40 up and coming young business people in the group. Jones, who I met a few months back at Start Norfolk sat and listened for two hours on what the visionaries were looking for in Norfolk. Business came up and new business to be specific. I was a nobody at the time, not that I am somebody now, but I had only put on one event and most people hadn't heard of the startup community yet in Norfolk.

Jones asked, what can we do to bring more businesses to Norfolk. You know I started smiling. It was like the Grinch when he saw presents to steal. Good thing I had been researching accelerators for months and quickly added, just give me four walls and I can do the rest. I described that the new fad of tech startup businesses were accelerators. Jones was intrigued. The group chatted about this for a few minutes then went on to a new topic.

The night was getting late and I saw Jones getting ready to leave. I made my way out as well, as I

knew this was a premium opportunity to see how serious he was about letting us use one of the cities spaces to host the program.

Did I mention it was pouring rain and Jones and I talked for 30 minutes under a canopy that may have been leaking?

He kept saying is it really that easy. My response was constant, for you it will be. The next day, his assistant called me to setup a meeting to discuss. Wow. I made an impact.

I emailed both Joel Nied and Kaszubowski letting them know about the opportunity. We developed slides for the presentation and met around 10am, the morning after my redeye from San Francisco. Waiting for the meeting to begin, both Nied and Kaszubowski said they had been in meetings like this before and they did not move forward. I was confident and said don't worry, this will work.

My ears had yet to pop and I couldn't tell if I was yelling or not. I semi-dressed up, khakis and a sweater. I remember Jones saying, "I'm so glad you aren't in a suit."

The slides were presented and within 15 minutes of the meeting, Jones called his facility manager to show us spaces. We chatted about next steps, basically that we would continue to put the program together and the city would give us access to a space for the three month period.

We left the meeting with the facility manager and looked at two spaces, one in an arcade, which was nice, but only 800 square feet. We walked to the second space on Granby Street, the main street in downtown Norfolk. It was at the end, where it met Main Street. The connection of talents, creative and business and across the street from the newly built Plot Park.

I stepped in the building and said, "I think we found

it!" It was 4500 sq feet a few rooms and fairly wide open. Paperwork was drawn up and we were able to use the facility for three months, rent free, plus utilities and internet.

Looking back at why I was able to convince Jones to give us access to a space were a few things; 1) I had met him before through someone who was credible, Drew Ungvarsky. Jones had heard of Start Norfolk and stopped by. 2) The marketing behind starting new companies is huge to any community. Startups and jobs are what can pay their salaries so, they love it. 3) I made it easy for the city of Norfolk. All they had to do was say yes. All the leg work, finding companies, involving the community and leveraging the local angel investor and business markets to fund the investment side was out of their hands.

It's really easy to talk and stumble through things but when you commit to doing something, whether you succeed or fail, specifically in the startup community we all need to be able to embrace that, it's just a matter of do it, learn from mistakes, learn from your successes and keep growing.

—Larkin Garbee—

Start Norfolk Summer Accelerator—Hatch

I had sent a few feeler emails, but this one the email I sent to those who I thought would most likely invest.

“Dear <Insert Name Here>,

A lot of people talk about generating new high-tech jobs in the region and attracting fast-growing startups to downtown Norfolk and other parts of the region.

We're done talking. This summer, we take action.

On June 15, the visionaries who created Start Norfolk and brought Tech Crunch to Granby Street are launching Hatch, an 11-week long startup accelerator. Hatch will put a handful of teams from around the Mid-Atlantic region through the crucible and create new companies.

We know this will work because we've already done it. The two weekend long startup marathons known as Start Norfolk resulted in the formation of 19 companies. Many of them have already launched their products. And that was just two weekends.

Imagine what we can accomplish with 11 weeks. This time, however, we can't do it alone. The startup companies can't quit their jobs or put them on hold for 11 weeks and still eat and pay rent. That's why we're raising \$25,000 for each team. As a result, we need \$200,000. We are asking you to put \$10,000 into Hatch.

What do you get for \$10,000? A cornucopia of payback. First, publicity. Hatch will be a very public event. The City of Norfolk has contributed the Design Center, a retail space near the corner of Main and Granby Streets (directly across the street from the new urban park, The Plot). People walking and driving by will see the companies working around the clock (and your logo on the storefront window). The center, which has great meeting space, will become a hub and hangout for area entrepreneurs and their service providers all summer. Also, we're great at getting press coverage. Here's what we got for a couple of weekends and the TechCrunch event. Imagine what we'll get for an 11-week event.

<http://hamptonroads.com/2011/11/entrepreneurs-gather-norfolk-spawn-startups>

<http://hamptonroads.com/2012/04/hatch-norfolk-aid-firms-growth>

<http://www.inc.com/jeff-haden/how-an-accidental-entrepreneur-found-a-big-idea.html>

http://techcrunch.com/2012/03/28/dc-richmond-and-points-south-lets-plan-the-first-tc-mini-meetup-in-the-virginia-area/?fb_comment_id=fbcomment_10150645653272842_21587251_10150645963302842#comment-box

<http://techcrunch.com/2012/04/02/the-first-of-the-tc-mini-meet-ups-dc-norfolk-and-richmond/>

<http://youtu.be/Ptl-DZb3u0sh><http://hamptonroads.com/2012/04/regent-worker-wins-business-prize-d8nightcom>

<http://techcrunch.com/2012/04/16/aeir-talk-gives-a-fathers-autistic-kids-a-voice/>

<http://www.altdaily.com/features/news/what-can-happen-in-a-weekend-start-norfolk.html>

http://www.wavy.com/dpp/news/local_news/norfolk/entrepreneurs-gather-for-start-norfolk

<http://insidebiz.com/news/its-techcrunch-time>

Next, you'll also get equity. We're forming a fund that will get equity in each of the teams that is accepted into Hatch and receives a \$25,000 stipend.

Finally, you'll get satisfaction. You'll be part of the solution to making Norfolk an even more vibrant downtown community, a magnet for technology startups, and a regional job-creator. Plus, you'll be the part of the first and only angel investor fund in the area.

Hatch is coming. Become a part of it today.

Cheers,”

Like most startups, during its first round, Hatch was run like the wild west. We moved in a week later than initially planned and we didn't really know what to expect. After all, it was a pilot program. I had emailed those who didn't make it a few weeks before the first date, June 23rd and gave keys to the founders a few days before opening day so they could start moving in. We had a launch party at a local bar, Hell's Kitchen, where we announced all five of the Hatch companies.

I had dozen of mentor workshops set up and about 50 mentors who were interested in helping throughout the summer. There was no classification of mentors and their was no education to the mentors on what to expect. Hell, we didn't really know how many of them would continually come back.

We launched that Monday and briefed the Hatch 5 (the name we called the first batch of startups) on what the could expect, the meeting didn't last long.

I think its so important that we didn't classify each mentor, rather we set up a lot of meetings and workshops and times for them to come by and work with the startups individually and in more of a seminar style. The first Hatch lasted roughly 9 weeks and ended with demo day. By the middle of July, we had learned a lot and started adding a more milestone and expectation approach along with the origins of structuring how the mentors would be involved in the problem.

Two of the mentors, Lisa Fournier and Kristin Fitch, and myself, got together to discuss who was in the ecosystem or as Lisa calls it the Stakeholder's Network.

At the end of an hour meeting, we broke the mentors into four categories; Past and Present Entrepreneurs, Service Providers and Consultants, Advisors and Investors. Each was not synonymous and some mentors were a collection of all four.

The biggest mistake we ever made with Hatch was allowing each Hatch company to have their own rooms. Instead of mandating that each company work in a collaborative open floor plan, we had five rooms and said, sure, you can each work in a room.

"A neighbor told me that seeing foxes in a neighborhood is a sign that the ecosystem is healthy - there is ample vegetation, resulting in a significant population of rabbits, squirrels, geese etc., which can support predators, which are at the top of the food chain. The same is true with accelerators - attracting out-of-townners to a local accelerator is evidence of a healthy startup ecosystem."

—Joel Nied—

Connecting the Rest of the Community

Twenty-two months into hosting startup night, a monthly gathering of entrepreneurs and like-minded creatives, we had our greatest attendance, 45 people. It was also, the first time we launched a product at a Startup Night. One of the Hatch mentors, Kristin Fitch, founder of Ziggity Zoom, developed a suite of applications. Rojo, her latest release, is a word game for the iOS marketplace.

After networking and introducing Kristin to the group, I looked back and saw a new group in attendance. We typically have 25-30 show up to the monthly event, hosted after hours at Hatch or a local startup and 30% are new each time and the other 70% are regulars, with 20% of those repeating each month. Of the remaining 50% who are regulars, we typically see them in a three to four month cycle or attending once a quarter.

Two reasons came to mind for the increase in attendance. One, we started adding a calendar to Facebook and Meetup.com, while also making a video telling our audience what they can expect. I like chaos, but have learned that structured chaos works best. Two, that we were reaching out to a new genre of folks to attend. Because Rojo was launching, the team behind the product was reaching out to their extended networks. We had 50% new faces, a whole new spectrum of individuals to join the community. The impact that the new individuals have on the expansion of the community is huge, without a 15-30% new continual conversion rate, the community will not grow.

If you set a standard date, fourth Thursday of every month or every other Monday, you build consistency. When creating new accounts for events on Meetup.com and Facebook, we knew that it would add additional time to setup, but the results were worth it.

Startup Night has never been about passing about business cards or “Hey, I’m a real estate agent, want

to get coffee?” Instead a group of like-minded individuals who are inspired by each other to create, engage and help each other start and grow their companies.

As the community grew, we evolved our ways and rolled out new ways to engage.

We used to only send an email invite out, we wanted the event to be curated to only past, present and future entrepreneurs, but after the first Start Norfolk we began to invite everyone who attended. That changed in the summer of 2012. We did encourage those who attended to invite others, but felt at the early meetups I wanted to keep the group exclusive. Why? Because, we wanted the group to be an elite group of peers who were going through similar situations, entrepreneurship.

How often should you roll out events? You don’t want it to become a non-event, but you do want it to grow so you can get new folks engaged. Startup Night has historically been on a Thursday night from 6-8PM, with the first 30 minutes being networking and the remaining time being a round robin talk about a few topics.

After attending, New Boulder Tech Meetup [15] in June 2012, we evolved our model and had two local startups pitch. We stopped the round robin and only did pitches, the group however missed the learning experiences with the round robin talks, so we pivoted back to the talks and went to one local startup pitching each month. This way, we showcased our local startups and still learned from each other. This is art and each event and region are looking for different tools and ways to learn from each other. We’ve found that this is our sweet spot. The event typically ends late and we have to roll people out to a local pub so we can clean up.

Rojo is a Start Norfolk success story. No, they didn’t pitch and win, rather Chris, the lead developer

pitched a different idea, joined a team and worked on that project. While working on the concept over the weekend, Chris met, Kristin, one of the mentors. Kristin saw the talent in what Chris had and they continued to meet after Start Norfolk. Without events that pull together the entire community, opportunities like Rojo would never happen.

When going to events, whether its a startup weekend event, developer meetup or a entrepreneur showcase, make sure to look out for talent. You never know what will happen, always be on the look out, because you never know how they can help or launch a company for you.

Everyone in the ecosystem is vital and without every piece, the community lacks density.

Restaurants and Food

When you travel to a city, what are the top five things you think about? Sports teams, large companies, universities, famous people and food! Food may not be the most important channel from an infrastructure standpoint, but if food is not easily accessible and appealing, there may be a lack of interest of those to stay in that city or visit.

Think about these cities and how food helps put them on the map.

- Seafood in Norfolk
- BBQ in Austin and Carolinas
- Beer in Colorado
- Chowder in Boston
- Pizza in New York
- Beef in Omaha
- Vegas....Food! (all kinds)

Don't forget about coffee shops. Starbucks has proven that the experience at a coffee shop is necessary and in some case the epicenter to the business community, as you find them on every corner in some cities. Jeremy Johnson, Chief of Product for Vinylmint says, "Food is the glue that keeps people coming back to an area. You will go out and eat a lot of food and that will create a lasting memory that you will try to recreate and bring you back."

Press isn't a business model, but it can help you grow awareness

It was early April 2012, I was sitting in my office working when a Facebook message came across from a friend, Adam Alphin. It was about Tech Crunch (TC), looking for a Mid-Atlantic city to visit.

John Biggs, east coast editor, basically put out a request for a third city to visit, on top of Washington, D.C. and Richmond, Va. I immediately posted to the link that TC should visit Norfolk. I then spent the next 13 hours leveraging my entire network. Asking to like the post, comment and to tell their networks as well. When you ask someone to help you, have each step as clear as possible, so no mistakes will be made.

I reached out to Biggz, introducing him to Norfolk and briefed him on the excitement we had been building. The community was young at this time, we had a few months worth of events and were about to have Start Norfolk 2.0. John said they'd be making a decision quickly and that I would know within 24 hours.

The next day rolled on and I contacted Biggz. Tech Crunch was coming to Norfolk!

John and Jordan (editor at Tech Crunch) arrived from a Washington, DC event the night before. I took them through a few local offices and then we kicked off the event. Mostly networking and product demos. 150 people showed up. It was an epic night, that lasted to the wee hours of the morning.

The outcome was great, TC ended up doing several features on Norfolk startups and Vinylmint ended up pitching on the TC Disrupt stage. TC Disrupt is an international pitch competition hosted by Tech Crunch in New York City.

When an opportunity like this happens, you need to drop everything and realize how important the perception of a large media company featuring your community can help. Press is not a business model, but it can influence your community's future.

Working as a Country

Like most folks, one of the first things I do in the morning is check my email. Typically, it's the same stuff, sites I subscribe to, some business emails and the random spam email, however one morning last week, I received an email from the folks at Startup America Partnership, inviting myself and a few other Virginia champions to the White House to meet with the administration behind job growth in our country.

Score!

Like anyone else, I emailed back as quickly as I could. This was an opportunity I did not want to miss. Not because I've dreamed about visiting the White House or that I wanted to check it off my bucket list, but rather because I wanted to showcase the Norfolk-Virginia Beach startup community. Something I cannot rave enough about.

For the past fourth plus years, my focus has been on creating and growing startups from the nations 43rd largest media market. We've been very successful in my mind, but those in our immediate region and across the country are just now noticing.

Given a chance to tell our nations leaders and startup leaders across the country about how we created and grew our community was something I was beyond proud to represent.

Many know about Start Norfolk in our region and more recently the launch of Hatch, an early-stage accelerator program. But, many do not know about the countless hours put in to the vision behind such a community. When I first came up with the idea of the startup community here, many and I mean many told me I was crazy, that it wasn't sustainable and that it would never work. But, with determination, and lots of execution, the startup community here is thriving.

Since the first Start Norfolk in November 2011, over 150 different startups have been pitched, over 100 different entrepreneurial and innovative events have occurred connecting like-minded business leaders, builders and creatives together. And we had just announced Drop Anchor, a conference connecting innovators, startup community leaders and entrepreneurs, with speakers from all across the country traveling to Norfolk, Va. in April.

The Norfolk startup community is my passion and starting and growing it to where it is now is so awesome.

We had a few calls with the Startup America folks to discuss logistics at the event and what to have prepared.

Keith Privette and I decided to go up the night before to meet up with some of the other regions. After tweeting to see who was in town (Keith loves him some Twitter), we met with Indiana startup leaders (Mike Coffey and Matt Hunckler) and discussed how both communities have grown. Indiana and Virginia have similar stories and lots of drive from their entrepreneurs.

We called it a night and woke up all jazzed for the jam packed day.

I dressed up, not a common theme.

The day was filled with a breakfast with Steve Case and the Case Foundation, to the Kaufman Foundations State of Entrepreneurship, the White House visit and then the kickoff of 1776, a new space in DC that will host the top entrepreneurs in the DC region.

I truly believe that the key to any startup community is awareness. If people don't know what's going on, how can they build kick ass startups?

On the bus ride to the White House I met Erik Mitisek, who along with Brad Feld and Jan Horsfall are leading the way for entrepreneurs in Colorado. While talking with Erik, I told him some of the shenanigans we were whipping up in Norfolk-Virginia Beach and said we were looking at doing a Norfolk Entrepreneurship Week. Erik goes on to tell me that he helped organize Denver Startup Week and it was a huge success.

This is why I go to these events, because you meet your counter parts in other cities across the country and they don't try to sway you off your ideas, rather help you in any way they can to help you succeed. {Insert USA chant here}

After going through two security check points, we were in. We walked up four flights of a crazy awesome spiral staircase and made our way into the Indian Treaty Room. Found a electrical socket, charged my

phone and grabbed a quick pic with the Startup Virginia folks.

Things got kicked off with a few introductions from Jean Case and Scott Case (still not related to Steve). Eleven regions were in attendance along with several administration officials to discuss the importance of fostering vibrant startup communities throughout the U.S. Representatives were from the Small Business Administration, Office of Science and Technology Policy and the Department of Commerce.

Hearing stories of action from the 11 different states that attended was beautiful. Fifty folks from across the country attend from Arizona, Colorado, Washington DC, Iowa, Indiana, Maryland, North Carolina, Nebraska, Tennessee, Texas and Virginia. All telling their journeys and how they will create the next mecca. But, instead of working individually, cities within each state and ultimately each state with each other, are working together to create our country as the leading startup community.

Each discussed their Big Idea, from Creating Things that Matter (Indiana), to Solving Real Problems (Nebraska and my personal favorite Big Idea) and Connecting the Commonwealth (Virginia).

We together are building the greatest country in the world, because 50 states is much better than just 1 city.

I think one of the things we've learned the past couple years especially throughout the economic crisis is profit for the sake of profit is no longer the norm.

—Billy Ekofo—

Let's Organize a Big Conference

Events are really important. They bring the awesome out of people. I've been a part of putting on about 50 events and meetups in two years, anything from, Tech Crunch coming to Norfolk, Start Norfolk or a student hackfest.

Events are the easiest way to bring new people into the fold at any given time. Because not everyone is always looking for a specific meetup, you can't guarantee that just because you are having an event that someone will attend. I advise you to have lots of meetups, even multiple meetups a week, a coffee meetup, specific web developer meetup, etc.

Get folks to sign up for your mailing list and send out a weekly reminder on what is going on, why it's important and then when and where each are.

When there are large events or conferences, promote those earlier on. Market your event into multiple channels, and then track them to see what does best. If you are getting more attendance and insights from your Facebook friends, you should think of that two ways 1, promote more on Facebook and 2, why aren't you achieving the same goals on Facebook that you are with your weekly email blast or LinkedIn pages.

Shortly after attending Big Omaha and launching Silicon Anchor News. There was a thought that a large scale conference similar to Big Omaha was something that we could not only pull off with huge numbers of attendees and ticket prices but also a way to really put Norfolk on the map. Keith and I got together and talked about what our event would entail. The consensus was that it would bring the best startups and entrepreneurs from Norfolk together with others from all across the country. We could bring 600 folks together and put them in a large venue like the Roper Theatre. We'd have a food truck lunch and an opening party that would get 800 strong at the Granby Theatre.

We would call it Drop Anchor. [18]

We put together a list of those who we thought could tell the story on entrepreneurship, innovation and startup community building and started reaching out to them.

Problem, we didn't define what any of those three were or what we wanted our attendees to leave feeling or doing.

Problem: We didn't ask folks if they wanted a big conference. (Note 1, several folks told me that during their time at Start Norfolk, they weren't able to listen to the speakers because they were coding and that a speaker conference would be rad. Note 2, We should have done a pool of who would go and actually started selling tickets then. Even if we didn't have a date a venue, speakers, etc.)

This isn't going well, can you tell? Well, we kept pushing.

I told several that this event, was something very risky and that I don't do risky, I bat singles all day and wait for momentum to bring me home.

Start Norfolk 3 had grown roughly 400% in 18 months, the level of 60 second pitches grew and a few of the final presentations were venture capital ready. It was the day before my birthday. Cloud 9, easily.

Then I woke up.

Got through the day, tired but excited.

My girlfriend sent me a note during the day, saying that we would be eating at a new restaurant in town, Chow. I was stoked! Around the end of the dinner, it hit me that Drop Anchor was roughly 24 days away. The conference on entrepreneurship,

innovation and community building was a first for the Norfolk area.

Keith Privette and I came up with the idea after I went to Big Omaha last year. It was epic. One of the most exciting conferences I had ever attended. Walking around Omaha and hanging out with several attendees and locals, I thought about how Omaha was very similar to Norfolk.

Talking with Keith, I told him that some of the critiques of Start Norfolk were there were awesome speakers, but not everyone could see them, because they were more focused on the startup competition part of the event, not the speakers.

Shortly after getting back from Omaha, Keith and I were working on launching the Silicon Anchor News website and thought about doing a similar event to Big Omaha. We should have seen it then, but just like any naive entrepreneur we moved forward with the concept, found a venue and starting finding speakers. Most of them I was connected to or friends with, so I reached out and asked if they would come out. We landed 10 amazing story tellers to talk about their journey. Thought: Why did we choose these speakers?

Ultimately, we didn't listen to our customers. We developed a conference that "we" would go to, not the majority of our community. Just like I do to everyone in our community, "you need traction and you need it fast", we didn't have proof of concept, other than Start Norfolk, we took too many risks along with too many assumptions and didn't pivot fast enough.

We thought Drop Anchor would have 600 people, 30% out of the area and that folks would spend 300 bucks to attend. We didn't tell a story, or give the who, what, when where and why. We would use buzzwords and a lack of them to tell the story.

3 Main issues:

1. Price
2. Day of Event, Thursday and Friday (should look at where you live, most have jobs and couldn't take off)
3. Didn't tell the story

Also, because we had other things on the table, Start Norfolk, Hatch and random events in-between, we weren't able to focus when we needed to for Drop Anchor.

I couldn't sleep Monday night and got out of bed and wrote an email to the four major individuals helping with Drop Anchor. The subject line was "Drop Anchor, wtf am I going to do". We met later that morning, came up with a plan and tried selling bulk tickets at a 66% off rate, we sold a few and knew we had to make a decision.

We decided to cancel Drop Anchor.

We learned a lot in putting this together and if we decide to do another, we will talk with our community more instead of doing what we want.

After canceling, I reached out to the community and asked; What types of things should we be doing with and for the community? What do you want to happen?

Canceling event sucks, having to refund ticket sales and losing money on non-refundable items really sucks. It's avoidable. Think smart and think fast. If you can get early ticket sales and sponsors, continue with you event, if you can't try something else. The biggest lesson I learned was just because I had one successful event, did not mean that I could have a second.

Asking for Help is Easy, Finding Those to Ask is Hard

Finding good talented mentors is hard. Getting them to help you once you find them is also challenging. But, the first thing we always say, is just ask.

Mentors, which I define as those who will give advice, feedback and help with your company with a zero sum game, meaning not being paid and no equity interest in your company. An advisor is one who can make decisions and give advice like a mentor but is typically being paid or has equity in your company.

Do not be afraid to bring mentors to you. Just because they may reside in another market, does not mean that they cannot support you via Skype or travel to your city to help mentor as well. Alex Lawrence is helping grow the Utah Startup Community and specifically the community in Ogden. "I'm 100% Skyping in the mentors. I'm not using any local mentors and I'm going to pay them if I have to. I'm just being intellectually honest saying you know what, we don't have up here the talent we need up here that we need to mentor these startups and I want to have the best people in the world and if I have to pay them or beg them or use my personal network then that's going to be different as well so if you look at Y Combinator and Tech Stars the real power in that is the mentor network and the alumni network that's really the power of those groups and in my opinion we don't have either one of those so I'm going to import it." Think about growing your community externally, rather than internally, meaning how can you get others in markets outside of yours to get behind what you are doing.

1. Find awesome entrepreneurs
2. Reach out to them and let them know what you are doing
3. Invite them to speak at an event of yours
4. Introduce them to people that will buy their products
5. Make them feel awesome and reward them
6. Thank them, a lot.

Lock Yourself in a Highly Visible Trafficked Location

My office is downtown, roughly 80 yards from one of the local diners in town, d'Egg, and when we first moved in at Hatch, I had heard that d'Egg was one of the places to be in if you were someone in town. I was looking to get noticed by its owner, Phil Decker. I decided I was going to try and camp out at the diner a few times a week to get noticed, I'd go for breakfast and have meetings with some of the startups in town, occasionally, I would meet with a few investors there as well. It didn't work, even though I would eat at the diner a few times a week, Phil didn't notice.

I had heard that Phil knew everyone in town and by watching him talk to those who frequent his restaurant, it was true. A few months went by and I never once introduced myself to Decker. Then one day, I had breakfast there and Decker says, "Hey, you are they guy in the paper today. Sounds like you really know what you are talking about." I didn't know exactly what article he was talking about, so I agreed with him, but asked what article he was talking about. He responded and grabbed the paper and showed me. It was a piece on the Norfolk regions future. I wrote, "Our region has

always had entrepreneurs, but never a collection of entrepreneurs working together for the betterment of the business community. I'll call it entrepreneurial density, a collection of entrepreneurs surrounded by entrepreneurs, who are focused, driven and collaborative.

With the recent push for entrepreneur-led mentor programs, we will continue to see early-stage, high-growth companies start, grow and be acquired.

With government funding on the decline and the potential for several Navy ships leaving in 2013, thousands of jobs and hundreds of companies will be affected. This could be devastating to our region, but because we have been forward-thinking, we have an already existing fourth pillar to shift to when/if that happens - high-growth companies, not just technology companies.

Chipotle is one of the fastest growing companies in the U.S. A company like Skinny Dip, based in our region, reminds me of Chipotle on how it's scaled and grown. Or local software company xTuple, which has doubled in 2012 from 17 to 34 employees and will continue to hire in 2013. Look for companies that have high growth potential to continue to spin up, create jobs and add multiple locations.

There is also an organic movement from several local businesses and individuals, to retain individuals/companies from the area and attract companies from out of the area. This is not being done by large organizations or with government-funded dollars, but rather by those who want to see our community grow to its fullest possibilities. And, with the addition of several funding platforms, both local and national including angel groups, seed-level funds, seed venture capital fund Pixides and crowdfunding, those entrepreneurs now have more ways to raise capital than ever before.

The key to economic gardening or mentor-based programs is the mentors - well-respected individuals, but also folks who have been there before. Those who have actually started, grown and sold or acquired companies.

In my mind, there are four sets of mentors - 1. Past and present entrepreneurs; 2. Consultants and service providers; 3. Advisers, typically your C-level executives at large companies; and 4. Angel/VC investors. All are important and play a key role, but the most important is the past and present entrepreneurs; without their role in the ecosystem, the budding entrepreneurs are learning from those who, potentially, have never started a company.

Mentorship, if active and engaged, can increase a company's viability, revenues and growth."

Decker knew it was me because there was a huge headshot of my next to the article. I learned a lot that day. I could have and should have just introduced myself to Decker months before. Since early 2013, Decker has introduced me to several key leaders in the city. Our relationship is great and he has become a great friend.

The moral of this story is don't be afraid, just do it. I wanted an outcome, but wasn't proactive in fueling it. I went half way in. You cannot expect results if you don't go all in. In this case, I expected I would be visible because I showed up a lot. How many websites, organizations and people do you know that walk in the door, but then just sit down. If you want results, you must go after them all the way.

Timeline of Events in Norfolk

Nov '10	Meetups begin
Feb '11	HRP Meetup
March '11	Startup Night
June '11	Ignite
June '11	Start Norfolk concept
July '11	Event to pitch Start Norfolk
Aug '11	Innovation District
Sept '11	Drinks Downtown
Nov '11	Start Norfolk
Nov '11	Acceleration thoughts
Dec '11	Startup VA and Startup America
Jan '12	Startup VA Kickoff
Feb '12	Accelerator pitch
Feb '12	Momentum announce Start Norfolk 2.0
April '12	Tech Crunch
April '12	Start Norfolk 2.0
June '12	Hatch Launch
July '12	Launch website for SAN
Sept '12	Continue Hatch
Sept '12	Drop Anchor Idea
Jan '13	Hatch 2
March '13	Start Norfolk 3
March '13	Drop Anchor canceled
April '13	Drop Anchor Conf
July '13	Hatch 3
Sept '13	Start Norfolk 4

Additional Startup Community Links

12 Tips To Building A Successful Startup Community Where You Live.

<http://techcrunch.com/2012/09/27/12-tips-to-building-a-successful-startup-community-where-you-live>

Startup Communities Are Up To The Entrepreneurs.

<http://www.feld.com/wp/archives/2013/07/startup-communities-are-up-to-the-entrepreneurs.html>

Your city doesn't have a startup community? Start one!

<http://thenextweb.com/entrepreneur/2013/07/06/your-city-doesnt-have-a-startup-community-start-one>

What It Takes to Create a Start-Up Community

http://boss.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/26/what-it-takes-to-create-a-start-up-community/?_r=0

The Best Startup Community in the World is...

<http://technori.com/2013/01/2929-the-best-startup-community-in-the-world-is>

Building Startup Ecosystems Outside of Silicon Valley

<http://www.instigatorblog.com/building-startup-ecosystems-outside-of-silicon-valley/2013/07/31>

Community Tools

- Startup Genome
- Startup Weekend
- 3 Day Startup
- Startup Digest
- Startup Revolution
- Startup America
- Meetup.com
- Startup Nerd

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urban_density

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http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Downtown_Norfolk,_Virginia

[5] Old Dominion University:

<http://www.odu.edu>

[6] Norfolk State University:

<https://www.nsu.edu>

[7] Serendipity:

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[10] Startup Genome:

www.startupgenome.com

[11] Austin Mindmap:

<http://www.mindmeister.com/24358308/austin-entrepreneurship-scene>

[12] Start Norfolk:

www.startnorfolk.com

[13] Hatch:

www.hatchnorfolk.com

[14] US Microbreweries:

<http://www.brewersassociation.org/pages/business-tools/craft-brewing-statistics/number-of-breweries>

[15] Boulder-Denver New Tech Meetup:

<http://www.bdnewtech.com/>

[16] Lean Startup:

<http://theleanstartup.com/>

[17] Minimum Viable Product:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minimum_viable_product

[18] Drop Anchor:

www.dropanchorconf.com