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PODCAST TRANSCRIPT: GABRIEL WEINBERG

INTRO: Businesses grow by getting traction. Without it, a brand will easily lose market share and eventually implode with a whimper.

But how exactly do you gain traction?

Gabriel Weinberg, a millennial entrepreneur who achieved the unthinkable feat of challenging Google at its own game -- and surviving -- will show you how. Gabriel co-founded the search engine upstart DuckDuckGo in 2008 to provide a Google alternative that doesn't invade your privacy. The company grew from an informal launch on a community website into a popular search engine option on Firefox and Safari, with more than 3 billion searches processed in 2015 and millions of dollars in revenues.

The Philadelphia-based entrepreneur recounted his experiences in a book entitled *Traction: How Any Startup Can Achieve Explosive Customer Growth*.

In this talk, Gabriel will share the story of how he discovered and addressed a specific pain point among search engine users and leveraged the solution as the core offering of his business. But in the digital economy, having a useful product won't take you very far. So Gabriel will also share how his team iterated DuckDuckGo multiple times to consistently gain traction.

What does it take to keep your business sustainable? You need to have a message that resonates with a niche audience and keeps them in hyper-engaged mode. You also need to send that message through the right channel. That is traction. And you need it all the time.

Whether by attracting additional funding, reeling more profits, or testing the viability of a new product, traction will help you scale your business to the next level.

Matt: Hey! Matt Hunker here and I'm with Gabriel Weinberg who is the co-founder of DuckDuckGo and author of the amazing book *Traction*. Gabriel, thanks for being here.

Gabriel: Very good.

Matt: Dude, I'm so stoked because you and I connected a couple weeks ago in Philadelphia. There's an awesome startup community there in Philly and you've grown an amazing company that has gotten beyond traction in such a magnificent sort of way. I'd love it if you could kind of talk about the initial idea conception of DuckDuckGo. What was the problem that you were trying to solve and how did you know when you'd finally reach traction?

Gabriel: Yeah, okay. So, DuckDuckGo is a search engine [inaudible]. My story is a little weird. It may not be [inaudible] was I had a previous company that I sold in 2006 and I did [inaudible] like that product very much. I was interested in it. So, I realized that whatever I wanted to do next, I wanted to do it for a long time or be able to do it for a long time because I was interested in it but when I brainstormed on what that might be, I [inaudible] myself very hard time assessing that founder market fit the [inaudible]. So, I literally started a bunch of side products like a dozen, like a lot of [inaudible].



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Matt: That's a lot of things.

Gabriel: Which is two-year period really [inaudible] and I founded a lot of things with all my work and just what I was interested in. It weren't necessarily business type [inaudible], just things.

Matt: Really? Can you give like an example of maybe one that wasn't DuckDuckGo?

Gabriel: Yeah. Interview show I started for TV kind of thing. I started a competitor [inaudible] .com called [inaudible].

Matt: That one didn't work out. Probably we would have used it.

Gabriel: A lot of [inaudible] out of frustration [inaudible] and I was a little frustrated with [inaudible] experience [inaudible].

Matt: Totally.

Gabriel: The [inaudible] probably it's going to be surf related. Two of them worked through [inaudible] 2007 to really expand the comment parts and also [inaudible] answers at the top. I kept going on Wikipedia, iMDB, what I've created [inaudible] links. And the third was this idea that random people in their head had better [inaudible] in a lot of cases that Google [inaudible] ask you like [inaudible]. You have better answer [inaudible] than what Google was recommending that [inaudible] category. So, I started [inaudible] projects and a year into that or so I [inaudible] and ones that I was [inaudible] to do were like data algorithms. So, I said "Let's [inaudible]. Maybe I'll try [inaudible]." So, I kept at it at that point because I was still doing some products but I started to launch some of them. So, I launched DuckDuckGo, not real launch. I launched it to Hacker News just to see if there was any demand there at all. So, if there wasn't a demand, I would stop, do something else but there was some demand and I was excited by it. So, I just kept [inaudible].

Matt: That's awesome. So, it really all came out of launching it on Hacker News and saying "Hey, I created this thing. What do you think?"

Gabriel: Yeah, you go check it out. It was called startup [inaudible] like "SYC, what do you think of my research [inaudible]?"

Matt: That's awesome.

Gabriel: Well, [inaudible] if you read the thread, what you'll see is there are some people who'd started to get dissatisfied with Google results like I was or just interested in something news because it [inaudible] a lot. So, they was still like an early adopter crowd there.

Matt: Yup. So, what was it about? Was there something particular that you did with that thread that, you think, got a lot of people to comment on it or was it literally just "Hey, check this out. Here's the link?"



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Gabriel: No, I wasn't literally saying "Here's the link" but the community was way smaller at the time and I was [inaudible] at the time. I was in the top 100 and that kind of stuff. So, I think people did like what it was. So, you could say I created a massive community but it wasn't like a launched brand in the sense that I was trying a lot of traction from it. It was more like a [inaudible] brand – I am in this community, I want to see what happens [inaudible].

Matt: So, you've literally coauthored the book on Traction now and that word is used all throughout the startup community and even now and in some of the non-startup communities and business communities, this 'traction' buzzword. It's become a buzzword, right? So, is there a specific moment when you have reached traction like is that something that you've actually defined as "Hey, this is when you have traction but anything think before that, it's not traction" or do you use it more generally?

Gabriel: So, I think of it as [inaudible]. Our advice is whatever you're doing, you should define [inaudible] what's your traction goal. So, it's really a hard number or what you're trying to hit like when you're starting out, usually one of three things, usually how much [inaudible] you need to raise money or how much traction you need to be profitable or [inaudible] or how much traction you need to prove to yourself that this is like a project worth [inaudible]. So, that traction goal is really defined as an inflection point in your company. So, beginning that's one of those three things is usually where [inaudible] for sustainability or market share number. So, I think when thinking about it, I'd like to think of it as a specific point that you're trying to reach and say "Okay. Well, now I've [inaudible] that goal." I think you can say "I have traction [inaudible]" based on sustainable [inaudible] and this hints to the question of whether you should [inaudible] or not. We do [inaudible] "Well, if you have any users that are hyper engaged in your [inaudible], they're really [inaudible] response." You got to look at [inaudible] point and say "Okay, those people really get it." Even a small amount of those people is [inaudible] that you can build on because you can say like "Okay, those people are outliers, they're [inaudible] there and [inaudible] can expand on." If you don't have any [inaudible], then I will say [inaudible] and maybe you can [inaudible] or you can [inaudible] product or messaging. So, I do think that there is a binary point but I think that binary point is more around [inaudible] and less around people normally which is "I have enough traction to raise money" or [inaudible] significant in the market.

Matt: So, in order to get to that point where you can be something significant whether that's to raise capital or find that next big client or even the next big hire for the team, how do you get to that point of traction? Are there some core principles that you outline in the book that you can actually walk us through here or are there a couple of key pieces for finding those first couple of bright points as you call them or bright spots?

Gabriel: Good thought [inaudible]. So, in the book we present a framework called 'Bull's eye Framework' and the idea is you hit the bull's eye [inaudible] find the one traction channel that will get you to your goal and there are many [inaudible], different marketing channels. So, [inaudible] Adwords and [inaudible] and there's literally 19 that we have just like the universe [inaudible] but we have all that [inaudible] taken off. It's one of those that's the core strategy that's working. Now, it might be [inaudible] or strategy but they're really focusing on one say [inaudible] or email [inaudible] or [inaudible] and the goal is to really [inaudible] to figure out which of those channels to do and we really advise because you don't really know what channel it is, you got to have some structured approach to figuring out what channel it is. [Inaudible] based on structured approach whereas [inaudible] all people



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do is just kind of [inaudible] around, try a few things and then kind of give up. Our approach really is very simple and it [inaudible] all IT channels because you don't really know which one's [inaudible] be successful and you try to think of task you could run and we offer a bunch of [inaudible] things that you think might be [inaudible] didn't work and then you run [inaudible] parallel and it should take no longer than a month to really get some basic data on. And then one of those is successful and you double down and focus on that as your core strategy and you focus on it and figure out how to make that strategy get you to your goal [inaudible] basically re-run the thing, make sure you can [inaudible], you're still accurate, run some more tasks and then hopefully [inaudible] channel that works.

Matt: So, I'm assuming this is a strategy that work for you at DuckDuckGo. Could you maybe talk us through what that process was like for you?

Gabriel: Yeah. So, we have [inaudible]. We're actually in the [inaudible] arrangement. So, we switched channels [inaudible]. So, we started with SEO, then content marketing first in a blog form and then micro sites. Then we [inaudible] social ads [inaudible] Reddit [inaudible]. Then we switched to PR first online and [inaudible] TV and then we switched to business development [inaudible] which culminated in [inaudible] iPhone and also Firefox and now we're literally rewriting the [inaudible] again with new types of goals [inaudible] and that's kind of important because with our new goals we're [inaudible] about 3 billion searches a year now.

Matt: Wow! That's incredible.

Gabriel: It is incredible but it's also [inaudible] because to grow now we need to do [inaudible]. So, where do we find that? Those kind of numbers, like everything that worked before [inaudible] variety of reasons, no longer work. So, all tasks had to have new scale.

Matt: What were some of those earlier ones that worked then but aren't working now, just out of curiosity?

Gabriel: Yeah. So, we could get a [inaudible] channel. Last week we [inaudible]. We were on the top of Reddit for the entire day.

Matt: Nice.

Gabriel: I did this Hacker Day's [inaudible] for the [inaudible]. Since I worked for the book, [inaudible]. So, I did this [inaudible] for the book and in it someone asked me about DuckDuckGo and if it was [inaudible] and I said it was [inaudible] which we had said before [inaudible] but you know what, it wasn't as visible. Somebody picked that up and made a press story about it. So, I posted that [inaudible] to Reddit and it got way more [inaudible] like 7000 clicks and it stayed at the top of Reddit for the entire day. So, that's the best content marketing we could probably get. It did not move our traffic numbers at all. You could not even see a lift [inaudible] and if that was three years ago, that would have been like amazing. That would have actually moved the needle but now it does not.

Matt: That's a really perfect example. So, it doesn't move the needle now. So, how do you design the test now going forward and how do you find and ideate those different 19 or 9 or 29 different ideas to



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then pick the five that you go forward with? There is a particular number of those that they need to pick down and you go forward. So, first of all, how do you get the number that you pick from and then how you do decide how many you can actually go after?

Gabriel: Yeah. So, the 19 is pretty [inaudible] awesome [inaudible]. So, that's like the universe. We recommend, from our experience, you only [inaudible] about three at a time because you can do them very well. You really have a go through them until you find something that works and that may be [inaudible] test, maybe change your product or [inaudible] if something's working but, yeah, [inaudible] until you find something that works. In our experience, in the past we had to run by the order of sets before we [inaudible] something in. This [inaudible] and that relates [inaudible]. When you're really small, when you're first starting out like a lot of people, the tests are much simpler and we [inaudible] examples of the book of [inaudible] channel and the reason for that is very simple. When you're spreading out, often you only have a few customers. And there's one thing [inaudible] the book. For example, speaking engagements often are excellent channel for any [inaudible] but if you go and speak in front of some [inaudible] the right audience even in your local area, that might get you [inaudible]. Most people are [inaudible] but that's [inaudible] chance for [inaudible] like we're [inaudible] working out for us.

Matt: Yeah you have to speak a lot.

Gabriel: You have to speak a lot too really [inaudible]. So, right now what we do is we [inaudible]. So, what we [inaudible] recent was a billboard task where we [inaudible] cities we saw whether there was a [inaudible] cities over time and essentially [inaudible] localize but experiment enough so that we could see some uplift and then [inaudible] see if [inaudible] results in three [inaudible] if we scale. Another challenge for us – and this goes to other people [inaudible] is cross [inaudible] – so it started out you're all looking for 10 customers even you're only getting [inaudible], you don't care if it costs you 500 dollars to get [inaudible] because you're trying to gets those first customers but for us now we can't or we're first [inaudible] we don't have [inaudible] to acquire them.

Matt: How important is the branding or messaging around your startup or your idea in terms of getting traction because sometimes it's not even necessarily the tactic? If you're using a tactic and you don't have the positioning of the messaging right, you could still not hit that traction point. So, do you talk about that in the book and especially for a company like DuckDuckGo which is a search engine, most people have de facto search engine in their mind because they've been online for longer than DuckDuckGo has been around? So, how do you position against that with DuckDuckGo and in a broader sense why is the positioning of your product important in terms of achieving that traction?

Gabriel: Yeah, this is a very good point. So, [inaudible] things we try to get across. We suggest that people start running these experiments [inaudible] and the reason is twofold, again [inaudible]. So, if you can [inaudible] startup initially as a [inaudible], so when you first start [inaudible] product [inaudible] and you put customers at the top and they flow out. So, people think "I should not do that. I should wait until I get it all right and then I launch." The problem is that people never do that correctly because they're too close to the problem and their [inaudible] customers are also too close [inaudible], their original messaging and when they get into marketing, what generally happens is it doesn't resonate, they realize it's not [inaudible], it's still [inaudible] and they [inaudible]. So, if you [inaudible]



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experiments right from the beginning and get fresh eyes on your product right away continuously, you're going to spend a lot of money but you need to get continually fresh eyes, you'll actually [inaudible] but by doing that you actually get to test a hundred things. So, you get to test not only what channel it [inaudible], what channel might work for you but you test different messaging and test different niches and if you do this correctly, what you hone in on is what message [inaudible] eventual market, what messaging is resonating in most of [inaudible] and then [inaudible] which is [inaudible] incredible distribution set. So, if you do this ideally and you write [inaudible] right from the beginning, when you're actually going to launch you [inaudible] sticky and you know what [inaudible] and you know what channel that was on and you know what messaging works. That's how [inaudible] work. While you run these tests, you're also testing the messaging. So, if you're running [inaudible] social ads and you're testing Facebook [inaudible] while maybe you have several ads to test, you're testing your messaging, you're testing different targeting, different graphics and as you run these tests, you're realizing "Oh, I should initially focus [inaudible] people" or "people in urban areas" or they're responding [inaudible] and that's [inaudible] influence [inaudible] actual product as you go in.

Matt: That makes a lot of sense. Did you find that to be an effective strategy with DuckDuckGo? Did you change the product based on some of that early traction they you were getting and some of that early sign-ups or users?

Gabriel: Yeah. So, when I started [inaudible] book in 2009 after I was struggling with [inaudible], my initial efforts were [inaudible].

Matt: What was the most painful one?

Gabriel: So, there [inaudible] pain ones. One of the [inaudible] was I didn't have universal channels which was [inaudible] right now. What I do is [inaudible]. So, I'll ask [inaudible] SEO. So, [inaudible] search, I totally hacked that but I thought "You know, I can get SEO or if people go to Google [inaudible] search engine, they can get at DuckDuckGo." So, I did hack and it worked and I started [inaudible] on it but the volume just did not add up and [inaudible] did not add up. It's all like [inaudible] what's my goal [inaudible]. So, there were two states. One, I need to set a goal which is like [inaudible]. Secondly, I just blindly used SEO [inaudible] never going to get [inaudible] anyway but actually what I did do right was I didn't know what was going to work for DuckDuckGo, what [inaudible] message and what [inaudible]. So, I, immediately after we launched, just tried [inaudible], as I was discussing, tried different messaging. And this is an awesome part of it. We would follow up with anyone who said they were using that [inaudible] trying to understand why and what would it take to switch which is our main [inaudible]. And for that I worked a lot. I mean, initially I had some [inaudible] that the additional audience was [inaudible] really, really not people who were kind of dissatisfied with one aspect of Google [inaudible] but I also came [inaudible] that way as well. I mean, I was personally interested in it but I'd see it as something that [inaudible] that I started doing this.

Matt: That makes a lot of sense. It's cool to hear about your own experience using strategies and using those to gain traction with DuckDuckGo. What was the final messaging position that really stuck or caught to get traction?



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Gabriel: It shifted over time. Starting out [inaudible], we were not [inaudible], to be honest and I was the driving force [inaudible] people wanting to try out. I [inaudible] be cool and hipper and it's kind of like the initial kind of [inaudible] but it is like the urban early Google, it's like people saying [inaudible]. It's like harping back to the days [inaudible] cleaner and simpler and they felt it was fresh. That was [inaudible] messaging. In the last few years, I mean, the biggest [inaudible] has been [inaudible] and that really came along [inaudible] as strong when it certainly came out [inaudible] when Google search has the privacy policies and now it's the [inaudible] in particular has come out as [inaudible] from Google. So, that's in the book in the last couple of years.

Matt: Awesome. That's helpful just as a good example for people to compare their hook too with their own startup. We only have about five more minutes left. So, I was wondering if you might be able to talk to us a little bit more about startups that have used these strategies and some of the things in the book that have worked well for them.

Gabriel: Yeah. So, we have dozens of founders. Basically, the overall process is all the same like the ones we found being successful, we're doing experimentation across channels and find the one that works and then focusing on it and [inaudible] as of yet are when people will try a lot of different things and they have a good product, [inaudible] all those things you'll [inaudible]. So, I say you try some tradeshow and Facebook ads and you do SEO and they're all somewhat successful [inaudible] but tradeshow are really the most effective thing. What people often do is they [inaudible] and that's really when [inaudible] because the one that's really is already [inaudible] better because [inaudible] but to really [inaudible] is that the companies that are really successful [inaudible] and the only way they can do that is creatively asking is there [inaudible] resources to test [inaudible]. So, a good example of this is Mint.com and [inaudible]. They had an initial traction goal and they had a very quantitative goal [inaudible] 100,000 in finance in the first six months. So, they made it [inaudible] different channel ideas and they just [inaudible] and tested them in small ways. I mean, they had PR and blogs and SEO [inaudible] channels and they found that [inaudible] blogs initially was the best [inaudible]. So, what he did was drop everything else because they were all unsuccessful and then really test [inaudible] targeted blogs to find out if they [inaudible], in the end finding out that [inaudible] strategies that really worked for them. One was [inaudible] strategy which they [inaudible] which is like you get early access and extra access like [inaudible] other people and [inaudible] and two, they paid personal bloggers to put ads up on their site that didn't have any advertising [inaudible]. So, they had reached out and they got [inaudible] and click-through rates because these blogs didn't have any ads or ... And if you look at either strategies they innovated to make it the most efficient and if they work perfectly well like first 40,000 users there [inaudible] but I don't think that they could have done it that well if they were trying always [inaudible]. I think it only worked because they said "We identify that private blogs can get us [inaudible] focus on it and figure out how to really [inaudible]."

Matt: Okay, that's a helpful example and certainly a lot of entrepreneurs would like to have the kind of growth and scale and traction that Mind had.

Gabriel: Yes. They also sold their company for 170 million dollars after 18 months.



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Matt: Not too bad. Not too bad. Well, Gabriel, you're there in Philadelphia. I'd love to kind of close off just by hearing a little bit about the startup community there. What's that like there and why you choose to keep your company there?

Gabriel: Yeah. So, you're part of [inaudible] and I think just [inaudible]. I moved here in 2006 and I think this is a case for a lot of startup communities off the top three or whatever but lifestyle is a big reason why I moved here and it's [inaudible], it's affordable. Philly in particular has a couple other attributes that I think are attractive for businesses. So, we're a day's drive between New York and DC and Philly particular has lots of healthcare and other Fortune 500 companies. So, essentially if you're selling a [inaudible] company, within a day's drive of Philly you can have almost everything. Secondly, it's like a lot of cities but it is out of the mold, like I said, of like New York or San Francisco. If you're building a [inaudible] like us, you're just embedded [inaudible] normalcy, if you will, and it's much easier [inaudible] because [inaudible]. It's what I like about it. And then also [inaudible] is a very small community. Philadelphia is a really big city. So, there's tons of universities here and things like that but the startup community [inaudible] is very small, you can get in a lot of [inaudible] investors to access [inaudible].

Matt: That's really cool. It sounds very similar to kind of here in Indianapolis as well just in the ability to get anyone on the phone, the willingness to help and when I was in Philly, you could definitely feel that with some of the startup leaders and some of the entrepreneurs in the community. So, I really appreciate you taking the time to get on here and share some of your experiences growing DuckDuckGo in Philadelphia and beyond. Obviously, you're doing 3 billion searches a year and doing all the things in your book 'Traction' to help you get to 6 million next year.

Gabriel: That's what we hope.

Matt: Yeah, maybe beyond.

Gabriel: My pleasure.

Matt: Thanks so much, Gabriel.

Gabriel: Cool.

Matt: Dude, that was great.

Gabriel: Thank you.

Matt: I want to make sure that we got to finish there on time with 3:15 but we'll edit all this down and then promote it on all the different channels. So, we'll really see the interview in its entirety on VergeHQ.com but then what I'll do is I'll do a write-up on Forbes and Huffington Post and I'll reference back to the original full interview but kind of a different angle on each particular post. That way we kind of get a press blitz for the book and then obviously we will promote it all out to the email list.

Gabriel: I really appreciate it. [Inaudible].



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Matt: Absolutely, man. Well, my 3:30 calls with someone who's interested in bringing Verge to Philly. So, maybe there's a chance.

Gabriel: [Inaudible]. Who is it?

Matt: It is with this girl that I actually met on the tour and I may have to look up her name because I literally just got back yesterday. So, since I saw you last, last night was the first time I slept in my bed but her name is not on my calendar. Why is her name not my calendar?

Gabriel: Fair enough. If you [inaudible], let me know.

Matt: I will. Once I get on the call, obviously I haven't done my call prep yet but once I get on the call, I'll let you know how the call went and maybe if you know or you could provide some insight on whether she's the right person or not.

Gabriel: Alright, will do.

Matt: Awesome, man.

Gabriel: Thank.

Matt: Appreciate it. See ya.