

Sandy Visions

by Jason Cohen on August 27, 2013



"They were all out of chests."

I sit on the sand.

The slight breeze brushes the most precarious of formations. One grain tumbles, nudging a few others, a recursive Fibonacci cascade dampening to zero as quickly as it began—an ant-sized, blink-lengthed avalanche. It's happening everywhere, three times a second, in the corners of perception, yet never where I happen to be currently fixated.

What appeared to be a static scene morphs infinitesimally, perpetually, unpredictably.

Each event improbable, yet collectively inevitable.

It's an identical feeling when a new customer signs up, never more so than with that first-ever customer. What confluence of improbable events led to this? Fed up with—what?—a person flaps despondently at Google, inside which ten million tumblers control the landscape of discovery and the fate of the transaction with an algorithm even its inventors could not manually recreate. The frustrated hunter, receiving no satisfaction from adverts,

however strategically located and A/B-tested, nor from About.com, no matter how artful the collage of other people's ideas, finds himself in a desperate flurry of tab-opening. Finding a website at position #7, a landing-page headline catching his attention for reasons he himself could not articulate, hovering over screenshots, eyebrows alternately raised at a clever feature and furrowed at the lack of a "hard requirement," not completely dissatisfied with the "professional, yet approachable" About Us page, he takes the plunge, still too steamed over the wrongs imposed by his current Service Provider to worry himself too much over pricing, wrestling a company credit card from the fist of a gatekeeper, and successfully punching through a 40-digit payment questionnaire which assumes he's guilty of fraud until proven innocent, and lo, a new customer is born.

Impossible, almost.

At WP Engine a series of events, different in detail but equal in incredulity, happens with the constancy of the sand-falls of the beach. It's just as magical today as it was the first time it happened.

Yes, *magical*. I tell my four-year-old daughter that magic is what you call something until you understand it (HT Arthur C. Clarke). Has any business owner ever forgot her first customer? Did any amount of preparation or effort prevent that moment from being unbelievable, inscrutable, magic?

That first taste hooks you for life. It's our drug. Tech founders often refuse to think of themselves as "sales people," but it's the first sale that's most exhilarating, not the first feature. Each new customer is another hit off that pipe, none as sweet as the first. Then single hits aren't enough and you need "biggest ever" to feel the rush, and we become slaves to the mantra of %MoM growth, then cajole more sophisticated metrics into ac-

ceptable ranges and trajectories, summoning ever greater and more abstract calculations to provide greater rushes that we collectively call “scale.”

We’re not wrong to obsess, so long as we obsess over customer happiness and employee happiness at least as much as self-serving financial ratios, trusting—as I do—that the formers are the most efficient and personally fulfilling path to the latter.

Even so, too often this right-minded obsession blocks us from an even greater calling.

To truly fulfill the promise of entrepreneurship and what we as founders can do for our customers, our communities, our employees, and yes our top and bottom lines, our visions must lift beyond the incremental metric and the hourly order rate. Those are necessary and just, but incomplete.

The biggest opportunity lies beyond. Where is the space for true innovation and exploration in a land of metrics optimization? How do you realize you can move vertically when your compass measures only two dimensions?

I watch three crabs fight over a scrap of seaweed. A beach-full of seaweed—for a crab, infinite—but this one demands a skirmish.

Tomorrow I’ll return to the office, fighting the other crabs for seaweed, the wider beach forgotten, oblivious to the vast ocean beyond the surf, the foreign lands beyond the ocean, begging to be discovered, explored, won.

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