

“Stealth mode” and other f’ing brilliant strategies

Stealth · Perfection · Don't ask · Relax · Code · Raise · Copy · Everyone



“Bad news – something that happened in Vegas has been spotted in Des Moines!”

credit: 1

Here are some of my super-secret winning strategies from 25 years of building startups.

STAY IN STEALTH MODE UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE

The last thing any startup needs is people finding out about it.

You can get attention later—that’s easy. You don’t need the distraction of all those customers clamoring outside your office, begging to give you money, while you’re still refactoring your NoSQL database schema.

It’s instant death if a competitor were to launch at the same time as you, so you’re right to keep all your ideas completely secret. Once you launch, *then* millions of people will know about you, including competitors, but by then you’ll be a full 4 months ahead of the whole world, making competition impossible, even if they are two Stanford kids with \$9,000,000 in funding and the wind of YC at their backs.

That means you can’t talk to potential customers² either, because the word might get out! Worse: some of those potential customers—the ones willing barely willing to part with \$20/mo—might rather save that money by quitting their day jobs and start a brand new company to rip you off. Their feedback isn’t worth the risk!

Oh and *absolutely* don’t talk to other entrepreneurs or advisors who can and surely will copy your idea. Just read the history of any startup or interviews of famous founders³ and you’ll find one thing in common—no one had mentors or found value vetting ideas and brainstorming with people who have trod this path before.

GET IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME

With those millions of customers anxiously awaiting your launch like the next book in *Games of Thrones*, you absolutely *must not* disappoint them with a shaky v1.0.⁴

Look around—other software companies wait until there’s no bugs before they release. That’s why they have no usability problems nor lack important features. With all those fully-completed products, it’s a mystery why “feedback gathering” tools or bug trackers even exist. I guess some people just enjoy project management. There’s no accounting for taste!

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. That makes prevention, like, 16x more valuable than cure. So take your time before you release, even if that means years. Perfection is worth the wait.

DON’T ASK ANYONE IF THEY’D PAY FOR YOUR PRODUCT

Of course they’ll pay; the math is simple:

They’ll save 45 minutes a day by using your product. Even if they value their time at only \$20/hr, and work only 20 days per month, that’s a savings of \$300/mo. Your tool is \$20/mo, so this *is a money-printing machine for customers!*

Customers can’t afford not to buy it. Maybe they should buy it twice.

That’s how buying decisions are made—cold, rational, and based on micro-economics 101—so why waste your time and theirs, just to verify the obvious?

DON’T WORK TOO HARD

Building a startup is hard enough—don’t make it worse by working too much.⁵

All the great startup founders are known for 30-hour work-weeks. It’s one thing to be passionate—that’s great of course—but that doesn’t mean you should be waking up at 2am in a cold sweat. You need your sleep!

Steve Jobs didn’t work constantly, Bill Gates had lots of hobbies, Mark Zuckerberg wasn’t tethered to his laptop, and Tim Ferris really did become a best-seller by writing and then promoting his book while working just 4 hours each week.

Startups don’t require obsession—that’s an unhealthy rumor perpetrated by all 2,000 startup founders ever interviewed on Mixergy.⁶ They’re all lying—they actually lead healthy, balanced lives. They don’t want you to know their secret, because this keeps potential competition at bay.

Don’t fall for it. A startup is a job just like any other—you can leave work at work and make sure to use up all your vacation days!



WRITE THE CODE FIRST

Writing software is tricky. You’ve been doing it for 8 years, so this is the part of the business you know best—and you know the difficulties that await you!

The easy part of this startup will be getting attention and making sales. Getting people to a website is easy—it’s not like there’s 1,317,681,984

other websites clamoring for attention. Getting them to buy once they hit the website is even easier—why did they come to the website if they didn’t want to buy? Getting consistent attention from the media is easy too—why *wouldn’t* popular influencers want to talk about you all the time? Getting reseller deals is simple⁷—why wouldn’t they want to make more money, in the grand tradition of the win-win?⁸

No need to work on that end of the business, because a great product sells itself. The world isn’t littered with failed startups⁹ with decent products but only four customers.

Rather, you need to focus on coding¹⁰—the one part of the business you understand and have the most confidence in. Double-down on what you know!

Don’t face your fears now. If you shut your eyes and learn a few extra keyboard shortcuts in Visual Studio, everything else will work itself out by the time you get there.

RAISE MONEY BEFORE YOU HAVE CUSTOMERS

Every successful startup raised a big pre-pre-pre-seed round before they had customers or revenue. They had to—how else can anything get done?

Who cares if you already gave away control? You need ten engineers right now to build dark mode.

It’s easy to raise money anyway—just take your a Figma mockup and \$48B TAM justification to a few pitch competitions and three cocktail events on Sandhill Road. They won’t ask questions about those meddlesome customers or revenue.



COPY THE COMPETITION

Why reinvent the wheel when successful competitors have already figured everything out? The smart move is to just copy their feature list. Or just 70% of it—whichever 70% seems easier. Customers probably don’t care about the rest of those silly things, especially if you’re 20% cheaper.

Speaking of pricing, copy their pricing. Because the competition is always smart and researched with optimal pricing, and is targeting the same segments in the same way with the same brand, so you can copy their pricing instead of talking to customers and figuring it out for yourself.

Speaking of talking to customers, don’t waste time talking to customers! The competitors obviously did all that research already. Their product decisions must be right—that’s why they have market share!

And forget about differentiation. Just match their features but 20% better and 20% cheaper. Customers will flock to you immediately since you’re basically the same but slightly improved. Whatever “better” means.

SELL TO EVERYONE

There’s no reason why everyone on Earth wouldn’t like your product—it’s so great! Of course it is—otherwise you wouldn’t have bothered to build it.

Besides, if you target one segment of the market,¹¹ all you’re doing is alienating other people who would have bought it. If you don’t say “everyone” on the home page, you’ll lose sales.

Sure, other products make different trade-offs in features, usability, integrations, design, and price, but nothing is as right-headed as yours! That’s why you made it all by yourself, without a team, without talking to anybody, so you wouldn’t be distracted. No reason to wonder why people buy from all those competitors. You know the answer: they bought from competitors because they had no choice. Now that they can choose you, they definitely will.

Now that you have all my secrets, go out there and kill it!

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