

A stylized sunburst or starburst graphic in shades of yellow and gold, with rays emanating from the top left corner, serving as the background for the text.

APPSUMO
Presents

Killer Launch

with

Jesse Maddox
TripLingo.com

* Transcript

Paul: Hi, everyone. I'm Paul Hontz from the Startup Foundry. In this AppSumo action video we're going to teach you how to have a killer launch. Jesse Maddox is here. And, Jesse, thanks for being here. What is it that you do?

Jesse: I'm a CEO of TripLingo. We're a team of six weapons-grade guys that build language learning apps and help travelers instantly learn a foreign language on their trips. So essentially, the idea came about when I spent two years in Asia trying to learn languages over there. It presented some real problems. I tried out a lot of other things, and wasn't very satisfied at all. That's all I'll say on that matter at the moment. That got us started on the path for TripLingo, and we launched our company on February 2 of this year. We launched our first product on May 5th.

Paul: Okay. Now, what's really interesting about your story is that you guys came out swinging. You

won some competitions, got some great press, and you were even a featured app in the App Store on iOS. In this AppSumo action video we want to take everything that you know and break it down into actionable steps here. So, we're just going to use you for your brain on this.

Jesse: Got it.

Paul: So, why is having an awesome launch strategy important? What about this enabled you to have such a successful run in the Apps Store?

Jesse: Well, one of the biggest things is creating momentum within your company, both internally and externally, because if you don't have momentum, things start to die on you and you lose that fire that you have that will drive you forward. So I think the launch was a big part of that. And also, it drove us toward a lot of the other milestones that we had com-

ing up after that. It made it easier for us to get press, and then the press enabled us to find partners. And everything that comes before it drives the thing that is after it. A launch is also a very critical point, because up until that point your mom loves your app. They think it's cool. But then you launch it, and all of a sudden people that you have no control over, that don't care about you are giving you feedback. And that can either help boost you along, or it can be a road block, and damaging to the team's morale. The launch is definitely a critical part of a startup. It's not the only thing, but it is definitely one of the big things, early on especially, that helps set the course of trajectory for what happens afterward.

Paul: Now Jesse, a lot of companies are working toward their launch. They're just head down, working on their product, getting closer and closer to launch. But they haven't really thought too much

about it. Can you help us build a map of what we should even try to hit with our launch, like what our objectives should be and how we're going to get there?

Jesse: Well, the number one objective is going to be having users that are going to find you at launch. And so, the way that you're going to get those users is through a couple of ways. One is through press. The other is through other marketing initiatives. For instance, we use LaunchRock ahead of our launch to basically get people to sign up before we even had anything ready, saying that they were interested. And what that meant was that by the time we launched we had 2,000 customers that were ready to be our customers that day.

Paul: Okay. Let me quickly interject here. How did you actually use LaunchRock to get 2,000 people, because LaunchRock is a pretty simple page? But unless you're actively promoting it just kind of sits

there?

Jesse: Yeah, that was interesting. The first thing that we did was to try to figure out a hook. How are we going to get people to give away their email address? People treat that as their private property, and are very reluctant to give it away. The idea we came up with was to have a contest. We decided to give away a round trip ticket to one person that signed up ahead of time. But even more than that, we wanted to find a way to incentivize people to share it--to not just you to sign up, but we want you to get your friends to sign up, as well.

So the rules of the contest were, if you sign up, you are entered in the contest. Every person that you get to sign up is another entry for you to do it. That was one way we wanted to incentivize people. That said, another aspect to getting people, say they do share it with 15 friends and they come to your page, they need to want to

sign up for it. So, part of it is having good copy that's short and simple. You don't have anything to launch yet, but you do need to describe what you do. And part of that is not sounding spammy. A nice story that I have is my brother posted a link to our LaunchRock page, and he said, "I promise this is not spam. It's my brother's company he's launching."

When my own brother has to say that it's not spam, we realized that something was up. And we had to go back and actually tweak it. But that was one of the things that we had to do. The other, once you've got the page set up, once you've tested it and you know what people like and don't like the first natural point to reach out is to your friends, and to encourage them to help you out. What I did was I sent an email out to my 100 closest friends and said, "Hey, this is what I've been working on for the past six months. We've made this progress so far." Basically, treat them

like you would want your friends to treat you--not asking them to be your robot, but saying, "Hey, friends, this is what I'm doing," and then giving them actionable steps to follow. It's not just saying, hey, it's be great if you'd share this with your friends, but say, here are the three ways you could help me right now.

One, email this to people that you think would actually like it. Two, post a link on Facebook, and three, if you're on Twitter, give us a mention there. So, having those actionable steps gave my friends, "Okay, Jess, you're my friend. I like you. I'm excited about what you're doing. Oh and here's how I can help you." You know, one, two, three. So, that drove a lot initially. And then, they share it, and that's when you sort of hope that the viral effect kicks in. But even if it doesn't become viral, you know, your viral coefficient isn't greater than one, still I mean, even the diminishing effect of it will still get you to a couple

thousand people. And that helps in your story to investors, and it helps in actual user acquisition. And it helps team morale, keeping the minimum going once you get started.

Paul: Okay. So, what's next after that, like we'll say we started to get some users signed up? What else do we need to map out here?

Jesse: Well, the obvious thing is to build your product. You promised them that you're going to launch this thing, and having firm dates and motivating your team and making sure that you achieve what you say you're going to get to them is a big thing. Another thing that helps is obviously doing some general marketing. You're a startup. You don't have much money. You can't go hire a big PR firm. You can't buy a ton of Google Ad Words, so you've got to really take the marketing side seriously and do it on a little budget. And the key there is finding influencers, finding

blog writers, finding newspaper reporters that are into the space you're into, that might like what you're doing.

Then, craft a message to them that they'll actually read. And these guys get 100, 500 emails a day. How are you going to stick out? But the returns can be big, not just in terms of getting press and actually getting people to notice you, but also when you start to work with partners, when you start to talk to investors, having press, especially if they're major outlets, helps confirm that this press thinks you're noteworthy. Okay, you're obviously doing something interesting. We'll at least look into it further.

Paul: Okay. So how would you connect with those influencers? Like you said, startups typically don't have a huge budget. Would that take the form of guest posts, or how would you get connected with them?

Jesse: Guest posts are definitely good. All of this is time consuming. So, that the problem if you're just a lone developer, or just two developers. The marketing alone can take up five people's time. So, it is time consuming. But I'd say the main thing is to just do research and know your area. If this is an area you're passionate about, if you're into ed tech, like we are, you should know who the ed tech reporters are. You should know the publications that might be into it. And ideally, you started forming relationships with reporters ahead of time.

But even if you haven't you don't just do a mail merge and blast out to 1,000 reporters on a list you bought. It's worth it to take the time, to spend ten, twenty minutes per person you want to talk to, and really craft a message that's going to appeal to the things they're interested in. There is no magic bullet, here. It really requires a lot

of hard work and time. You've got to be a salesman, I mean. You're selling them on your idea, just like you're selling investors and your co-founders, and everyone else. You need to be inventive.

Another thing I think is important is to be human. These aren't robots that are getting your email. Be humorous, make jokes, write in lower caps, if you want to--whatever you have to do. Write poetry. I don't know. But don't send them PR spammy crap that's just going to get deleted. Like I said, there's no magic bullet. I think the key is to tell them a story that they can relate to, and that pique their interest.

Paul: Yeah, when I'm writing stories on the Startup Foundry, the ones that are personalized and I can tell that people actually took time to customize their content, those just rise above everything else. Because like you said, I'll get 100 emails a day, and I can't cover everything.

Jesse: Yeah. Do you read the body of them all? Do you just delete some, because they're spammy?

Paul: Whenever I can tell it's just PR hooking the subject, 9 times out of 10 I don't read it. So, the subject line for me is insanely important. And then in the body, like you said, it has to be customized. I know it's a lot of work, but that will just separate you from 90% of other people that are trying to get noticed. And doing things the normal way will ensure that you get normal results, which in this case would be not being covered. So, I think that was really good advice that you gave. Let's talk about more milestones. You said that's really important in order to keep momentum going. The plan could almost be milestone one. Would you agree with that?

Jesse: Yeah, absolutely.

Paul: Okay. So, what would mile-

stone two be?

Jesse: Well, milestone two is really your product, getting a prototype that you can test on people that you can show to investors that you could start to iterate on to improve. So, we actually built the prototype of our app in two weeks, in time for Startup Riot. And looking back at that prototype, I think it was Reid Hoffman who said, "If you're not a bear [spell it] what you launch with, then you spent too much time on it." We sort of debuted publicly two weeks afterwards--our prototype. But that was huge, one, in terms of doing our own internal testing, and starting to get feedback. And also, just keeping the momentum going, not just on the marketing side of the equation, but also in terms of the product side. Time is money, and startups have very little of both. So it's important to have these achievable milestones that, especially on the product side, keep you going, essentially to let you know you're

making progress.

Paul: And in our pre-interview you said that you stick to these milestones almost religiously. Like, if there's a timeframe, you have to hit it. Why is this important?

Jesse: One is feature creep. If you don't stick to milestones religiously, then you allow yourself to, "Oh, you know, we'll take some more time, and oh, we need to get that feature in." Then all of a sudden you're six months or two months or four weeks behind schedule, and it adds up. The way it worked out for us is that the two weeks before Startup Riot, I mean, just . . . uber cliché startup stuff, or you were sleeping four hours a night and, you know, driving ourselves to bits. It's not sustainable in the long run, but especially early on, these short milestones were really important to us, the same thing with our launch date. We set a launch date of May 5th, Cinco de Mayo, and we sent out all these physical

invitations to people in the Atlanta community saying, “Hey, on May 5th we’re having a big party. We’re going to launch our product. You should come.” And whether or not we had a product ready, we’re going to have 300 people at our party on May 5th.

So, having that deadline, up until seven days before then when we had to submit it to the Apple App Store, I mean, again was another crazy, crazy crunch. But we got a lot done in that time that we wouldn’t have gotten done had we not had that milestone. And it also forced us to really focus on what was important, especially when you talk about things like minimum viable product, where you really need to focus your efforts. Having those milestones forces you to deal with that issue, rather than say, “Oh, we’ve got three months, and we can add stuff then.” It doesn’t necessarily need to be there. So again, it just kept our internal momentum up, and hitting

those milestones was also big for us--internally for morale, and just generally proving that we could do what we said we were going to do. Having those milestones helped in a lot of ways.

Paul: One of the ways that you really took off when you launched was you connected with customers really early. You used the contest, like you mentioned earlier. Why did you use something like that, and was it successful? Why was it successful?

Jesse: That’s a good question, and there are a couple points, here. One is that, even before we launched we’d won these two competitions, and we were getting some press. So, we needed to have a page, you know. We couldn’t just have a fore page at our website address. So, we needed something up there. The second one is, we’re going to drive people to this, and let people know that we’re launching. It doesn’t do us any good if

they just come to our page and then leave. If we can get their email address, that action gives us a point to connect with them in the future. Actually, LaunchRock launched the same weekend that we launched at another Startup weekend event. We emailed them that Sunday night. I said, "Hey, I heard about you guys on Twitter. We really need a landing page. Can we please be one of your first customers?: So, that's why I think we were customer number eight.

But what LaunchRock gave us, you know again, was a way to have someone come and check us out, and then to be able to communicate with them in the future. The issue we were thinking about was how could we maximize the percentage of people that come to our site, and let us talk with them in the future? And there are a few ways you can do that, right? There's having [fit] page with a good picture. But also, we thought that if we did the contest and gave

them an incentive beyond just letting them know about our future launch, that we'd be able to increase the referral rate. So, that's why we decided on a contest.

The next question is, what are we going to give away? Some sites give away early access, etc. One of the things that we focused on was we wanted people that were in our target demographic, which is travelers. So we tried to think of a contest in the realm of what we were doing, and that people would actually want. So, we could give away luggage, but that doesn't really appeal to me, but give away something that people had some choice in. So we decided on \$1,000 toward a round trip flight, which appeals both to travelers and really anybody. But it also reinforced our message, which was that we were about travel and language learning. That's how we decided on it, and we got a lot of great feedback on it and we saw a pretty good retention rate.

Paul: So, how could a company that's not in the travel space, like, how could we apply these same principles to our own companies?

Jesse: Sure. I think that the key is to think about who your target demographic is. Is your target demographic hunters? Is it car enthusiasts? Is it people that want to have a teddy bear picture on their Facebook profile? Trying to get into the mind of who your consumers are and figuring out something that they want. Even within your target demographic you can break them into niches, trying to find something that's broadly applicable to your target demographic. And this isn't just in terms of thinking about the contest, but also in terms of your product. You need to get inside the heads of who your users are and having a firm grasp of that will inspire you to find an awesome contest.

Paul: Okay. What other strategies

did you find that were helpful in connecting with users early on in the process?

Jesse: One thing was finding key influencers in our target market, some of the top education blogs. We reached out to them early and said, "Hey, this is what we're doing." And they are naturally inclined to like it. That's what they do. They love technology and education. So, as long as you're coming to them with something interesting those are sort of the early adopters you can find. We talked earlier about reaching out to your friends as the first group of people that just like investors, the first investors are your friends and family. They're not investing in your idea. They're investing in you. And it's the same with your friends. That's another really good group to reach out to early.

But other than that, again I think you have to find the influencers in your target demographic and get

them on your side, whether it's taking the form of doing guest posts or just forming a general relationship. For some there are certain industry forums and things like that. You can't just pop in one day and say, "Hey, we got this." If you haven't been a participant, if you haven't demonstrated you're connected to that community and not just to yourself then you're not going to go very far.

The whole thing underlying both of those is really a passion for whatever it is you're building. You were a member of that forum, not because you wanted to sell your product, but because you really care about that area, or you're doing your product because you really care about it. And that is easily decipherable by influencers in your industry. But again, I'll go back to there is no magic bullet for this. Finding early adopters and influencers takes not just hard work but thoughtful and smart work. And there are very few overnight suc-

cesses that I've seen. Even the ones that you think were overnight successes, they would tell you differently.

Paul: So, the takeaway is to try to be involved in the community and actually give back with that as well.

Jesse: Absolutely. And be passionate about what you're doing. That will help you in every major facet of starting up--also in marketing.

Paul: Now, one of the ways that you guys had a lot of success when you launched was you entered competitions. You won a weekend hacking competition, and you won Startup Riot. And that just propelled you, like crazy. So, what was it that you did at those competitions that made you so successful?

Jesse: I'd say the biggest thing was that we really wanted to win. And we thought we could win, we believed it, and did everything we could to make it happen.

Paul: But doesn't everyone really want to win?

Jesse: Yeah, when you talk about Startup Riot, there are 50 companies. So, the percentage chance of any particular one winning is 2%. We believed not 100% that we were going to win, but one, that belief was key to helping us get the things done we needed to get done to make a strong showing. The most obvious thing in terms of practical aspects of it is you need a killer presentation. And it draws me mad when I go to some of these startup competitions because you can be up there, talking about your business. You've got Startup Riot's case three minutes. We did one yesterday that was six minutes. You need to show how passionate you are about it. You need to get up there, and if you're an investor, an audience member and the person that you're watching doesn't seem like they're passionate about it, how the hell are

they going to make you passionate about it?

So, one, getting up there and just being yourself and letting your passion for what you're doing shine through, both in terms of the way you talk about it, and also the preparation that you've done ahead of time. Another thing that is surprising in a lot of these is that you really have to practice a lot, especially if you have three minutes. Try to do a full presentation on your company in three minutes--time yourself. You won't be able to do it under less than seven minutes. And the first couple of times that I practiced it was at seven minutes. Then I got it down to five. Then I got it down to four. Then that last 30 seconds was just impossibly hard to shave off.

But by the time I got up there on stage, I'd done the presentation myself twenty times. I knew it cold.

I knew that it was going to last 2:59 minutes, and that's exactly how long it lasted. But, practicing meant that I didn't spend any time saying, um or ah, or uh and the words I was delivering had been optimized. I wasn't wasting time saying things that weren't important or that weren't as good as they could have been said. So, I think practice is huge.

Another thing that's important, and Steve Jobs, I'd say, is probably the guy that drew the most attention to this aspect of presenting, is really great design. We're lucky to have an amazing designer on our team who helped us craft these presentations and make them visually stunning-not in a "bash-you-on-the-head" type of way, but by creating simple visuals to support what you're saying. At the end of the day, you need everyone listening to what you are saying rather than reading the text on your slides. We're relentless. Every time we do a presentation, if there is any

piece of text we can replace with a graphic, we do it. We get awesome feedback on it. One, the presentation is super important.

Another thing is that if you are presenting one of fifty companies, you're going to be forgotten by the end of the day. You need to find ways to keep people refreshed and reminded of who you are and what you're doing. We created an info graphic of the American traveler. It was this very interesting, visually appealing, something you could get lost in for a little while info graphic that talked about our demographic, which is American travelers overseas. After we were done pitching, we basically walked around all day and handed out these info graphics to people. And what would happen was, they would sit there and hold it for a little while. As they were watching some boring pitch, they'd look at their hand and are engaging with us again outside of that. Working the crowd outside of your pitch is

really important.

The last thing I think is very important is to tell a story people can relate to and understand. So many times you hear pitches and it takes people two or three minutes to get to what they do and by then you're lost. It's really important to focus up front on engaging people with something they can get. If you're doing data security for enterprise data systems or something-something that nobody has a clue about, you need to find a way to relate it back to that person's life. For us it's been easier because we do travel, language learning, culture stuff, which more people have exposure to. But we see a lot of great companies that have done a great job of taking their very abstract concepts and making them relevant to the people in the audience. That's really important because if you're not relevant to them, they're going to forget about you.

Paul: Okay. We're going to these conferences. We're having really good results at the conference. What came from being at these conferences after the fact? How did this help you with your launch strategy?

Jesse: I'd say a couple things. One is that it gives us legitimacy when we talk to the press or when we talk to potential partners or investors. The second is that we actually got monetarily valuable services from it. We got some free tax services. We got some free PR stuff. We got [meetings] with VCS-things we wouldn't have had otherwise. These people signed up beforehand to offer us. We won and they had no choice but to give it to us. It saved us a good bit of money. Going forward, it gave us credibility. We could talk to partners and say, "Hey, notice us. We're worth looking at. It's not just our moms that say so."

It's also a good practice for refin-

ing your pitch. It's good exposure. Because of that, we got introduced and were known in the Atlanta start up community. If you trace the path back to how investors found out about us and the whole process, for every single one, it was totally different and totally unpredictable. It was setting yourself up to be lucky. This was just one aspect of that. You never know what the effects are going to be down the line.

Paul: What really pushed you guys over the edge is that you were featured in the IOS App Store, which is just a huge marketplace. I know it's not an exact science of how to get featured, but you did some really interesting things that helped you rise to the top and were ultimately selected. Can you share some of that?

Jesse: The first point is that it's the best marketing that money can't buy. It's something, also, that's unpredictable because it's such a

great resource, it's something that we get asked about a lot. The fact is that there are over 500,000 apps in the App Store. So, how do you get to be one of the few that are featured? And, the number one piece of advice I give to people is to pray. Pray to Allah, pray to God, pray to the Waz. You literally have no control. There's no one you can talk to. There's no one you can schmooze with.

Essentially what happens is when you get featured on the App Store you wake up in the morning, you check your downloads, and then you say, Holy Crap! What happened? And then you start trying to figure out why you had so many downloads, and eventually you figure it out--or one of your friends texts you and says, "Congratulations." The first thing is, you have no direct control over it. There's no one you can bribe, no Starbucks certificates you can send anyone. You just have to pray.

The second piece of advice and it's obvious to the point, and I'm not trying to be condescending, but make an awesome app. The people that are reviewing the apps in the App Store, they're people. They want to see cool stuff, and if they like it they'll pass it on to whoever needs to be featured. And I've talked with a number of different developers who have been featured and they all say the same thing. One day you get waked up with a surprise. And it happens. I talked with another developer whose app was featured on TV ads. Well, he got an email from a "no reply" Apple.com saying, "You need to fill out these two legal forms, and send them back to us." Then, all of a sudden his grandmother calls him from Norway saying she saw his app on TV. So, Apple, they're a very closed system in terms of being transparent about that stuff, and there isn't much you can do.

Paul: Let's start talking about some of the things you did to help stand

out. It's easy to say, I'll build a great app. But specifically, what are the things that you did that helped you create a great app, and stand out?

Jesse: One thing that we did that has definitely helped us is that we literally use only one native control for IOS. So basically, every button in our app, every interaction we built ourselves. So, we don't look like any other similar app like us, because we customized it 99% of the way. And we didn't just customize it for the sake of customizing it, we customized it to suit our purpose, which is we have a goal that we're trying to achieve, and not only are we going to customize the interface, but even the graphics. So every button is unique. There's nothing that we used from the iPhone--standard buttons, etc. So, I think that helped us set us apart.

The other thing is graphical design. We didn't use anything boilerplate,

but also we just had really good design. We have an amazing design team. That's something that people instantly recognized, that makes it interesting to use. I think for any consumer-facing application design is so important, and if you don't immediately understand what I'm saying, I think you're going to have some problems, because it reflects on the quality of everything else. No matter how good your technology is, if it looks like crap, people think it's crap, and will move on.

Paul: So, would you say that apps are typically like the old saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover." Would you say apps are judged like that, just the first impression?

Jesse: I'd say apps are judged very harshly. So, if your app doesn't look good, then you've got a problem. If it doesn't function well, you've got a problem. We were talking earlier about how we have a free pirate version of our app that . . . it's a

great app. It's really funny, and it's free. And it has two and a half stars, whereas all of our other apps have four to five stars, and they cost \$10.

So I think part of that is reflecting on the harsh nature of the way that people judge apps, and also the increase in competition. There are firms that have dozens of developers. They're putting tons of money into apps, and if you're competing with them, you've got to compete with them on every level, which is design, content, marketing even. Yeah, it's certainly not an easy market. I don't know what it was like in 2007, where you could just put something that was mediocre out there and hit the lottery. But today, people's expectations are really high and you really got to do a good job.

Paul: Would you say that's true with web applications as well, I mean, obviously there's not the IOS App store there for that but when you were launching your product did

you really just have to polish the webpage as well, right?

Jesse: Yeah, we used to spend, our webpage is on its 15th iteration. One of the things I always say, the webpage is different than the app. With the webpage, we'll publish something before it is maybe completely ready because there's nothing to motivate you to fix it like being live and you having to look at it yourself every day.

With the app actually, and this kind of goes back to the minimum viable product idea, the key word there for me is viable, in the sense that we were not okay with releasing something that wasn't super polished because, especially in terms of getting press, in terms of getting traction. In the App Store you really get one chance once you launch. I'm sure there are plenty of people who've done it on their second launch. For us the first one is really important and we were will-

ing to let little things slip by, little bugs slip by. If we had done that, if we had let little things slip by then I'm positive it wouldn't have been featured. So I think releasing a polished app, even if it didn't have all the features we wanted, as long as it was polished visually and worked flawlessly, was really key. So I think you can take the minimum viable product idea too far and forget about the viable part. That also was key to getting featured. They're not going to feature something that has major problems that are easily findable.

Paul: Sure. Jesse thanks a ton for your time. We wish you the best with your app and thanks for giving us the insight on how to launch our own.

Jesse: I hope it helps.

Paul: All right. All the best.

Jesse: Thank you