



TECH STAR



Ryan Koonce: Using Technology to Market Business Success

[By Akbar Ali]

As founder and CEO of LuckySearch.com, a new Internet search engine which offers users the chance to win prizes every time they use the site, Ryan Koonce is doing what he does best: bridging technology and social marketing, a phenomenon which has exploded in recent years with uber-popular sites like Friendster and MySpace. But while those sites are decidedly network-oriented, Koonce has designed LuckySearch to be both utilitarian and fun for users, who can win a variety of special prizes, including gift cards, electronics, cash prizes, and even a new car. With the launch of LuckySearch, Koonce is cementing his reputation as one of the industry's most innovative figures, using his expertise in social marketing to launch business success in a market dominated by technological media connections.

A native of Farmington Hills, Michigan, Koonce attended Michigan State University, where he initially planned to pursue a career in finance. By the time he was about to leave school, however, the digital revolution was in full-swing, forcing him to reconfigure the direction of his career.

"In school I studied finance, and I thought that I was going into international trade. I was involved in AIESEC, which was a large international student organization. However, at the end of my senior year they installed the first web browsers on campus and I was captivated. I ended up taking a position at Andersen Consulting (now Accenture) and after about a year set out on my own to start my first web company. I haven't had a 'real' job since."

After his initial stint in the industry, Koonce continued to develop his skills and interests in technology, though he found that entrepreneurial skills were equally necessary if he wanted to succeed in the early wave of tech companies. What he discovered was that he had the final say in where he would go as a professional.

"I've basically evolved with the web, and as an entrepreneur, my career path as been defined by both interests and opportunity. I did my first venture-backed Internet start-up when I was 23, in the height of the first "tech bubble." It was an educational experience, and as the business models and technology

of the web [have] grown, I've just grown with [them]. Since most of us are innovating as we go, there really isn't a career path per se, beyond what you define for yourself."

Over the years, Koonce has worked on

the marketing of a number of companies, founding Popular Media, Inc., which is a viral marketing firm teaching businesses how to utilize technology to attract business and maximize their name recognition. This has led to opportunities to work with companies like Entertainment Publications, ShoeBuy.Com, Dish Network, and Borders.

And what is it that drives his innovative spirit in launching successful start-ups?

"As an entrepreneur I think I derive the greatest satisfaction from building a team, providing them with a meaningful project, and seeing it to fruition. I've launched many web properties that have been [touched] by millions of people, and that is very satisfying.

"I know now that everything takes longer than you want, costs more than you want, and doesn't always happen the way that you want. Experience is definitely a counterbalance to being naive."

Koonce also places a high premium on seeking out the expertise of those who have come before and established their own brand of success. The influence of several colleagues has helped him shape his own approach to understanding the relationship between business and marketing.

"Seeking out mentors and advisors at any stage in a career is critical to success. When I arrived in California, I was fortunate

Q. What do you do for fun?

A. My work is fun. I also like scuba diving and hanging out with my family.

Q. What CD is in your CD player right now?

A. I'm not much of a music aficionado. Probably U2.

Q. What is the last magazine you read?

A. *Forbes*.

Q. What is your favorite TV show?

A. I default to Discovery Channel and football.

Q. Who is your role model?

A. I don't have a role model per se. I think you should try and learn something from everyone you meet, however small.

Q. What makes you laugh?

A. Nothing specific, but my wife always knows how to pull it off.



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to meet Pat Ferrell and Reid Hoffman. Pat was the founder of GamePro Magazine, and Reid was a blossoming tech visionary (now the founder and chairman of LinkedIn, among other things). We founded SocialNet together, and I learned a lot from them in that process (and since)."

For the up-and-coming generation of tech business leaders, experts, and gurus, Koonce has one simple piece of advice:

"My field is entrepreneur. No one defines my career but me. Being an entrepreneur means being willing to risk everything for the

passion of an idea. My advice is to start early, find good mentors, make mistakes, and press on. Don't let other people define what you can and can't do."

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