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Developer's Diary Episode 2: 'Bluffs, Guesses and Threats'

Joe Kerr and his partners continue their great adventure of starting a wireless software company. We join the team as they dress up for a demo, sign up a developer, almost land a sponsor, and almost meet with a carrier...

by "Joe Kerr"

One of the great things (OK, so maybe it's the only great thing) about having no clients and few prospects is that you can always wear shorts and Birkenstocks to work and it makes no difference. Shave only when you feel like it. Wear the same shirt three days running. Maybe bathe when you start to get a little gamy. So while I am understandably thrilled to be heading to an actual Pitch Meeting with a seemingly interested sponsor, I'm feeling a bit put upon to have to wear socks and a collared shirt.

Nevertheless, I have to admit at this point that things are looking pretty good. We've already sold the marketing manager on the idea of branding a freestyle skiing app, and now all we have to do is convince his boss, the VP of marketing. And by now we've got the shtick pretty much down:

1. Gloss over credentials. (Note: When you've been in business less than a year, always gloss over credentials.)
2. Throw around big numbers. (Good throw-around numbers: 30 million subscribers and 400 million handsets. Not so good throw-around numbers: fewer than half a dozen full-time employees, and twelve dollars in the bank.)
3. Hand them a color handset with a cool-looking, working app on it.
4. If time is short, skip steps 1 and 2.

Because we're so close to closing this deal, today we stack the deck to our advantage. Fed up with showing our prospective sponsors some other publisher's app, we've built a demo to help him catch the vision. You know: Take an existing game engine, embed some artwork lifted from the Web, and just like that you've got insta-app. The prospect no longer has to merely imagine what it would be like to see his logo on a phone—he can see it for himself. In this case, we get one of our developer buddies to overhaul his street-luge app, and within a few days we're in the freestyle skiing business.

It works like magic. As if someone has put a match to a sparkler, we put that Z800 in the VP's hand and his synapses start to fire, with ideas flying around the room in all directions: "How much does this phone cost?" "What if I want to give a bunch of these away to my customers—can you get me a deal?" "Can I put this on my Web site?" "Do you think you could get Verizon to display some skis in their store?" "Man, I gotta get me one of these phones. This is *sweet!*"

Of course, we tell him we can essentially do whatever he wants (and what's nice is that, in some cases, that might even be true). Since we don't really *know* what's going to happen, we focus on what we believe: Downloads will be plentiful, we tell him, exposure widespread, adoption accelerating. At the same time, we don't bother to mention: a) that we have no documented assurance whatsoever that Verizon (or any other carrier, for that matter) will actually offer this app to its customers; or b) that we don't have a single contact at Verizon who can help us get there.

"How much is this game going to cost me?" You knew he was going to ask that. Craig makes up a number and delivers it with a magical mix of conviction and equivocation. As he does so, I look at Mick, knowing that his team is the one that is going to have to make it happen. In an instant, beads of sweat appear on his forehead. On the drive back to the office, we have to keep reminding him to breathe.

Within a few days we have bids back from several developers who want to build Freestyle for us, but to say that we end up comparing apples to oranges doesn't quite capture it—it's more like sorting through a fruit basket. One developer wants a big percentage of the download revenue; another wants none. One wants full-disclosure credit for doing the development; another is happy being a ghost-writing silent partner. And the prices are all over the map. Mick presents a full-blown ROI analysis, complete with four different scenarios and bar charts. I think he may have even used the word "algorithm."

Don't forget what Craig told the VP we could build this for, I remind him.

Oh that. We decide to go with the guys who built the demo, offering to increase their percentage of the take provided they can hit the target price. They say OK, and for the first time in two-and-a-half weeks, Mick exhales.

Meanwhile, Craig is working QUALCOMM to arrange a meeting with a carrier. Like I said before, when Craig gets fired up about something it's generally a good idea to try to horn in on the deal, but the folks at QUALCOMM haven't quite figured that out yet. When Craig lays out his Freestyle vision, complete with branded sponsorship by a major sporting goods manufacturer, Developer Relations' reaction is on the luke end of warm. Even so, although the initial conversation doesn't yield the carrier introduction we were shooting for, he does come away with an important piece of insight. "I think I messed up when I used the word 'advertising,'" he tells us. "They said the carriers would never go for ads on phones. Of course, no one ever said anything about running advertisements on phones. I guess we just had a failure to communicate."

Sounds like a Cool Hand Lukewarm reaction, I say. No one laughs.

Undaunted, Craig tries another tack. The tone of his e-mail is courteous, and the threat delivered with panache: "Sorry to hear you're not interested. I'll let you know how it goes with AT&T." Of course, we don't know a soul at AT&T, but no matter. QUALCOMM offers up a meeting with Verizon for the following week. "You get a half hour," they tell us. "You do have the license from the ski manufacturer, right?"

(I'm reminded of a time in junior high school when we pulled Mark Hyer aside and said to him, "Hey, Tammy Brimhall says she likes you." Separately, others were telling Tammy that Mark had said essentially the same thing about her. Although neither Mark nor Tammy had ever actually mentioned the slightest interest in the other, within a few weeks they were holding hands at the lunch tables.)

All in all, it's been a pretty successful week: We almost signed up a sponsor and we almost met with a carrier. (I guess we're almost in business.) Now if we could just get them to start holding hands. . . .

Click [here](#) for Episode 1

Joe Kerr is the pseudonym of a software engineer working for a real wireless software company that has just published several real products, including the one profiled in this series. He can be reached at kerr@devx.com.

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