

Learning How to "Talk American" - An insider's guide to defining value and navigating hierarchy

Daan Reijnders started Instant Magazine out of self-need and now offers digital publication solutions to clients all over the globe. A true testament to a scalable product suited for the modern content consumer, Instant Magazine earned Reijnders 50 new teammates in just four years and the expansion has only just begun. We met with the CEO and co-founder in his Amsterdam headquarters to hear more about his entrepreneurial callings and how growth led him to encounter the American worker and business culture.

[Hulsmeyer] Tell us about you. Had you always imagined you'd initiate and run your own company?

I've always been an entrepreneur. While in school, a teacher of mine asked if I could build websites and I said "yes I could," even though I was bluffing a bit. I knew about web design, but I hadn't done anything commercial. This led me to start my own web design company. Later, when I was 23, I was hired by an agency to build their digital department because they didn't have any digital expertise in-house. I started what would eventually become their primary service line and grew it to ten people. In total, I've been "employed" for fewer than two and a half years; I've spent the rest of my life as an entrepreneur.

About Instant Magazine --- where did the idea come from?

In 2008, I started building digital publications —; initially with a page flip tool and later on in Flash. But when the iPad arrived in 2010, Flash wasn't supported by Apple products and I needed a way to publish these issues on all devices. I couldn't find a proper tool, so together with my co-founder Joost, we decided to build our own platform. Within my agency at the time, we started on this project while I was still at my agency, and of course it got out of hand. So I decided to leave, sell my shares, and start from scratch with this platform called Instant Magazine from scratch. Now, four years later, our SaaS platform serves over 1200 clients in 40 countries, and we have 50 talented employees across our offices in Amsterdam, London, and New York. We, and aim to double in size over the next two years.

I've read your goal is to "reach 10% of the world's population with Instant Magazine by 2030." How do you inspire your team to buy into this mission and focus all short-term efforts to reach this mark?

This is our new "big, hairy, audacious goal" (BHAG) b-hack. Our first was to "become the MailChimp of digital instant publishing," but that didn't really inspire anyone except Joost and I. I believe feel our platform allows is letting brand owners to tell their stories more effectively and provides offers a much more enjoyable content joyful consuming experience. From that perspective, I think our goal the mission is more directed towards the for the end users. RThe readers deserve has a better experience consuming content, so this ambitious goal is really for them that's why we stated the 10 percent of the population. But it's good to translate these kinds of goals into what we want to do this quarter, in three years, and in five years. Everything comes back to the ethos of the platform and the ability to create something beautiful quickly without any boundaries.

Could you have imagined this from day one?

Not at all! I did imagine our platform would be global, but I wouldn't have expected to hire so many people. I was kind of naïve when we first started,. Tthinking we would just need about eight people and then I could can lie down in my hammock continually and keep hitting the refresh button on refreshing my bank account statement. But Tthat wasn't the case, of course's of course not the case. Once you start growing, everything it all happens so fast. Because we have global competition, and global clients, we always have to stay on our toes.quick., especially because we have competition globally, we have clients globally, But and thanks to technology, we have no boundaries when it comes toto serve them.

How did you secure funding initially? Did you seek for investment when you expanded?

We were bootstrapping in the beginning and, so Joost and I funded everything ourselves from the start. We were not actively seeking, but we received a 1.25 million Euro investment from a Dutch venture capitalist VC to facilitate growth in the UK and the US, and we are still using that money to grow. Now, we are deciding whether we should find a US or European investor to make a push towards New York because starting in a new country is quite intense.

How did launching in the US come about for Instant Magazine?

In 2014, we were selected as one of ten Dutch start-ups for the IT Bootcamp in the US, initiated by the Dutch Consulate in New York. This was my first experience with the US business landscape. We ran around the city meeting with other startups, scale-ups, and large corporations. This initiated the connections we made played a big role when later utilized when we began expanding to the US.

Why NYC?

It's the media capital of the world. Brands like Nike and Google all have their marketing departments in NYC. The time difference is ideal. We had some great connections in NYC from our time at the IT Bootcamp. There's also a lot of Dutch companies already in NYC, and the facilities like Dutch lawyers and service providers are great.

How important was it for you to be in NYC while setting up shop?

It felt really important. Initially, I was flying back and forth every four weeks. Each flight home, every time I was on the plane home, I was thinking, I should have been there longer. So, at one point, my wife and I moved to NYC for nine weeks. I didn't do everything I wanted to do, but we did learn a lot. One of our biggest insights was that there is indeed a market for our product, which was great. Another big learning was that it was the essential necessity to have someone over there to be the bridge between the Netherlands and the US. With modern technology, we have all the stuff you need to keep in touch like there is no distance, but you still miss a lot if you don't sit next to support, for example, and hear the types of questions coming in, or spend time at the coffee machine and have that coffee talk with chatting with the developers.

Do you have a go-to lunch spot in New York?

If you're in the mood for feeling something unhealthy, go for Shake Shack in Madison Square Park.

Did you have to adapt your sales pitch for the US?

Selling to a US company is a different ball game. Your potential clients don't have the time to hear you explain a better understanding of your platform. You need to be able to define value much quicker. They want to see what it will bring them, and in general, that's a good thing to focus on. In the Netherlands, we tend to focus too much on how it looks instead of the solution it's providing. Americans want to see case studies. "Can you show the amount of additional dollars brought in by adopting your platform?"

How did you have to translate your business for the US? How did you learn to "talk American"?

We have an incredible Sales Director in the US who is also proficient in marketing and communications strategies. We have a native English speaker in our Dutch office. He's our Content Marketer so he understands the language. We also have a US Content Marketer who localizes outbound campaigns and sales collateral to an even greater extent. The localization goes a long way.

What do you look for in people you hire, specifically in the US?

It's pretty hard to understand someone from the US. I had a few initial conversations through video chats from the Netherlands and then selected a few candidates to meet face-to-face while I was there in the US. The energy felt totally different when I met people in person. It was often a lot of bullshit, and I really had trouble getting through it. Every resume in the US highlights reaching their targets that were nailed and notes big sales achievements —, and it always seems too good to be true. One tip I received that helped me of my biggest tips to navigate these conversations was from a recruiting firm. They told me to ask about their previous targets, how far off/ over they were, their commission structure, and then for their pay stubs. If the evidence wasn't there, it wasn't on there or if they stumbled, it was probably BS. So, I'm constantly learning to look beyond their inflated truth.

What are some of the differences you've experienced working with Americans vs the Dutch?

One of the hardest things in our US sales cycle is to reach people. If I want to talk to the CMO in the Netherlands, it wouldn't be a big hassle. In the US, companies tend to be a bit bigger and there's a lot more hierarchy bit more job title bullshit. You will never hear back, and if you do, you don't have the meeting until you're in the meeting. People so often postpone, don't attend, or bail out. In the US, they get 90 sales calls every day. In the Netherlands, they are happy you called.

This hierarchy is an reflects internal issue as well. It's a lot about structure and growth and we're not used to that. We still don't have a good hierarchy or reporting structure because I've never gotten the question in the Netherlands about who is the direct report is. This is something that's stalling our growth in the US because the lines are not clear. You have to motivate people, tell them what to do, and then monitor if they do it the right way.

American sales people also tend to over promise results, so the sales cycle is harder to estimate. It's not a bad thing to be optimistic, but it is good to be able to analyze yourself and look at your own performance. But I do think Americans are better at selling than Europeans. Americans spend a lot of their life having to sell themselves, so in the US, having a structured sales approach is important. They need to know this is the structure, these are my marketing materials, this is my ICP, this is my pitch, this is how I follow up, this is how I close, and this is my commission structure. They like to have everything very detailed because it's what they are used to.

Was launching in the US everything you expected? Was it harder than expected?

It takes longer than I expected. Not necessarily with finding talent, getting an office, or starting from a legal perspective; as long as you have the right people doing it for you, it takes time but it's not too complicated. The part piece that takes time is really learning what works best and how to translate the EU/ Dutch approach to that of the US. It's pretty complex to get traction, but you can remove a lot of variables if you understand what your objectives are.

I'm sure you often feel the differences in operation status in the Netherlands and the US --- how do you manage that?

It's one of my jobs — to be that pull and liaison between the two operations. For example, in the US, they have some great ideas on marketing and they ask for a lot of collateral and sales support. We initially didn't listen or respond fast quick enough to make those changes because we thought they had everything they would need. I've learned to make sure to and delegate those resources and be the ear for from our US office.

What's been the most rewarding thus far?

Seeing our tool being used by so many different clients with a huge number amount of use cases is pretty incredible. And the dedicated team that we have attracted globally.

What's a piece of advice you would give to someone starting up and looking to enter the US market?

Thoroughly prepare your sales kit. Solidify direct instructions. Secure a CRM and a sales-tool-stack. Decide on a clear reporting tool and have your KPIs in place. Hire multiple sales people simultaneously. Think about and be prepared for the hierarchy. It's vital to define the director and the reporting structure.

Who's someone you would like to have a 30-minute meeting with?

Jason Fried — co-founder of 37signals/ Basecamp. He inspired me with his book *Rework*. He has some great ideas on how he thinks companies should grow. But the CMO of MailChimp would be good, too. The way they scaled up and became a global leader in email marketing with a totally self-reliant tool is quite incredible.

This conversation has been edited and reduced for clarity.