

Ethan:

Hey, everyone, and welcome to Startup Savants. A podcast dedicated to helping aspiring entrepreneurs and startup enthusiasts by bringing you news, insights, and stories about the startups and founders that are making waves right now. I'm your host, Ethan.

Annaka:

And I'm your other host, Annaka.

Ethan:

And today, our guests are Gideon and Lynn Marks from DogLog, a mobile app that helps pet owners track and optimize their pet's health. Lynn Marks is a former product manager turned entrepreneur with a range of skills from social media management, technical development, and more. Her father, Gideon Marks, a serial entrepreneur and a startup mentor. Lynn, can you tell us a little bit about DogLog and the history behind it and its mission?

Lynn Marks:

Sure. So, DogLog was created by my family, a few years ago, really to help us solve our own pain point when trying to take [the] best care possible of our dog, Joy. I was living with my dad at the time, and with our different work schedules, being in and out of the house at different times, we just kept on having to ask each other very basic questions every single day, like "Did you walk the dog already? Did you feed them?" Of course, the dog always pretends that they haven't been fed even though they have been.

Annaka:

It's a common trick.

Lynn Marks:

Definitely. So, after a couple of months of this, we realized, "Well, we have the right people if we do want to create some kind of technical solution for this." Myself being a product manager, my brother, at the time, was a CS student, and my dad, like you just said, was in corporate development and also mentors startups. So, we realized, "Well, let's just create a solution that can help us with our own issue." And that's how DogLog was created. So, really, the basic idea we were trying to solve is helping dog owners better coordinate and track their pet's daily activities and health. And from there, we have really expanded to cover a lot of other pain points and use cases that other pet owners might want.

We live in San Francisco, and fun fact, there are more dogs here than children. So, we had a very large customer base that we could ask different questions for, what kind of pains they're having, or how are they working with other people, let's say, in their house to best track their pets. And really, from just that basic trying to solve that coordination issue, we're now really trying to be a platform where all important information about your pet can be found in one place. And we also want to be able to take all of that data and then help the pet owners understand if there are any concerning or changing trends about their pet's behavior.

Annaka:

That's very cool. I feel like... Does this exist already for kids too?

Ethan:

Gosh, if not ...

Annaka:

I have two dogs, so I understand all the pain points, but I'm like, "Man, I feel like some parents might want this as well."

Ethan:

Right. Have you walked your kids yet today?

Lynn Marks:

We have had people ask if they can use this for their baby and also for their husband, but that's a different issue.

Annaka:

Oh God, I love...

Ethan:

Just clone it and stick a new name on it, and you've got three businesses right there.

Annaka:

Yeah. I mean, I'm pretty sure... I'm a twin, and I'm pretty sure my parents had like a running notebook of each child and when they ate, so that's not too far off. And this is a family enterprise, which I'm always fascinated talking to families that work together. And it's like A plus, I love it. But what gives you, your family, your company, and your platform, what gives you a leg up in the pet-tech industry? Let me specify even more. Is there background, aside from being pet owners, that really gives you an advantage here?

Lynn Marks:

Yeah. So, I mean, first of all, the team that's working on this, like I said, all of us are from the tech space, but all of us are coming from different parts of the organization. So, together, we can cover a lot of the different skills that are needed to develop and launch a platform that users end up liking and getting value out of.

I think one thing that also, you mentioned, working as a family, I think when you are working with family and you have that level of comfort, you know that no matter if you get into an argument about how some functionality should be added or how things should be prioritized, you know that the business in itself isn't going to fall apart because we are stuck with each other after all.

And then living, I believe, in Silicon Valley and really being in an ecosystem where everyone has a startup pretty much and really having that culture has been extremely useful as well. And we've been able to meet a lot of other entrepreneurs and a lot of other entrepreneurs in the pet space specifically that has been really helpful for our growth.

Gideon Marks:

Yeah. I wanted to add something to what Lynn was talking about our backgrounds and things like this. So, interestingly, when you look at a lot of the companies that emerged in recent years, the initiation, the idea, came from users who were not satisfied actually, with what the world was providing as the legacy solutions. And being dog owners who experience the lack of communication and how do you keep track of your dog's activities, this was something that we understood, we got the pain point. The fact that my son was studying computer science and Lynn is a product manager, and I'm a tech person, helped us to say, "Hey, let's solve it." Because the perfect match is having a product manager and a computer science person, a developer. And this made it relatively easy for us to do. Another thing as a dad, I would say that seeing your two children work on the same project was kind of interesting.

There were some challenging moments from time to time. Like I'll never forget how my son said to Lynn and to me, and tells us, because he's the developer, he's the most crucial person, most important person. And I remember I got upset because as a dad, you want your children to be team players, especially in a family or wherever. And I had to explain to him that we're a family, we're a team of good people, our goal is to help dog owners. And I felt like I was doing some kind of a mentorship like I do with a lot of startups. And this was kind of a fun story that we had amongst ourselves. I wonder what would happen in a company which is not owned by a dad and a few children, and how would the CEO or the founder act to someone who came and said, "I'm the most important person?" But overall, it was a good lesson for him. And later, he realized he was one of the team, and everything began to move forward in a nice pace, ect.

Ethan:

Well, that's good. I'm glad that that was able to be solved because I feel like it doesn't just happen in family companies like that. I mean, ego management is extremely important. And whether it's from a founder, a CEO, or an advisor, I think having the ability to keep your people going and doing what they need to do, without trying to take over the whole thing, is incredibly important, especially at a very early and founder phase. So, I'm super glad that you were able to knock that out.

Gideon Marks:

Well, I did experience many conversations like this as I mentor at Google for startups, Plug and Play, many other organizations. So, it was not a big surprise because I do see a lot of startups, and so I was kind of prepared to give, hopefully, a decent educational answer and guideline, but it can happen in every company, whether it's DogLog or any other startup from any other geography, ect.

Ethan:

So, one last quick question on family. Would you recommend that someone go to their parent, their sibling, their aunt, uncle, and say, "Let's start a business," or would you rather it be people that are unrelated?

Gideon Marks:

I don't think that there is a precise rule. I think that when I began my high tech career, I worked in what became Israel's biggest data communications group, and two brother[s], actually, founded this group. And there is another company in Silicon Valley called House, very successful company which is led by a husband and a wife, or a wife and a husband. So, I think it's got to do a lot with the maturity of the people. And having Lynn as my daughter actually helps us a lot because we enjoy working together and sharing this values, maturing differently than you would do it with people you do not know, but for a good startup, basically, it's either family, or usually, investors will look for people that have worked together, have known each other, have seen dealing with crisis, et cetera. So, we kind of took the shortcut. We're from the same family, and as you can see, we still smile when we talk.

Ethan:

And those don't look like forced smiles. Y'all are great so far. All right. Let's talk a little bit about business. Lynn, when you launched the DogLog app, what was the initial marketing strategy that you used to gain early users? And I'll preface this a little bit. We heard something about dog parks. And if that's a story, then we want to hear that.

Lynn Marks:

Yeah. So, when we first launched DogLog, we actually just launched it for iOS devices. That is the phone that all of us use, so we were kind of predisposed towards that. And after we launched that, like I mentioned in the past, we did go to the dog park every day, as is prerequisite with having a dog. And my dad, as you might imagine, is a very, very talkative person, and he was and still is... he always would talk to people, pass along the story, we would put flyers all around San Francisco, because, like I said, it is a city with a lot of dogs in it. And really using that initial launch to not only understand what functionality we should add next but also what's the best way to actually phrase the value that we are providing by how well we were able to convey the value when talking to these different just random people at the dog park.

Now, after that, my brother was on Reddit, and he posted, it was either like a dog subreddit or like an entrepreneurial one, and he posted about this app that we made as a family. And that helped us get a lot more eyes to the app, and that's also what made us realize that it's really important for us to add an Android version of DogLog in the near term, because, a lot of people, they have a family, let's say, where there's a family member with an iOS and with Android, and you would need to have the app for both platforms if both members wanted to get value from it.

So, posting on social media, but not from a marketing standpoint, more just from sharing our experiences, was also really helpful for getting additional eyes for DogLog. Honestly, from there, we haven't done too much marketing even to this day. We've done a little bit of marketing on the app stores, but other than that, most of the growth for DogLog has been organic, just by people

needing an app that can do something like this and searching for the keywords that makes DogLog pop up in Google or the app stores.

Annaka:

I love sort of like you're just giving the people what they want. Love it.

Gideon Marks:

We did a few more things, actually. So, as Lynn said, I like to talk with people and I love taking assignments. So, before moving to San Francisco, we lived in a small town in Southern Valley called Los Altos. I approached the local newspaper, I think their name is Los Altos Town Crier, and I was able to convince them that two Los Altos High School graduated, developed an app for dog owners. And guess what? They wrote a beautiful article, they interviewed Lynn and Ron, and this helped us to get some additional exposure. Then I decided to approach a TV in California. And one TV station in Sacramento actually interviewed the three of us, and we appeared on TV. And apparently, this TV station had affiliation with other stations. So, we noticed on these days that we were shown on various stations, a big spike in number of downloads, but these were the real two kind of media initiatives, TV and written media, that we also did.

Ethan:

Can I take a moment for a second and say that the Los Altos Town Crier... I mean, can we just talk about how awesome names of newspapers are? I lived in a tiny little town, and their newspaper was called The Unterrified Democrat. Where did that come from? It's fantastic. All right. I'm out.

Annaka:

It doesn't seem like it should be real. So, just in speaking with the two of you for a couple of minutes, something that I'm noticing popping out is a lot of conversation with users, not so much in like a face-to-face, but like, "Hey, as pet owners, as dog owners, what are your pain points?" You build that into the app, and then it's like, "All right, let's get some feedback on that." What else do you need? What else would be helpful to you? And as kind of a data nerd and user experience nerd, that conversation is super interesting to me and super important. So, is that just an under aligning strategy within the build of this app and the features in it?

Lynn Marks:

Definitely. I mean, coming from a product management background, we're really supposed to serve as the customer's voice. So, when starting to work on DogLog, we've used this as one of our main pillars, where originally, we were trying to solve this issue just for ourselves, but when we realized that we could do so much good for the pet community and help other pet owners, we really tried to understand their own voice as well as we could. And at this point, I believe like 90% of the new features that we add in DogLog are user-requested.

And we just try to have a really friendly communication style whenever we are talking with customers, whether that's responding to their positive or negative review on the app stores, or anytime they have emails, we always try to solve any issues as best as we can and also really push across that we want to hear what else we can do to make their lives as pet owners easier. So, that's definitely one of the things that I believe has made DogLog become more successful and allows for a lot of that organic growth, because, we are building the things that people are asking for, which is then letting other pet owners in the same situation try to solve that same issue by looking up for some solution, and then that's how they find DogLog.

Gideon Marks:

One of the features we added on the app itself, if you download DogLog and you go to the setting button and you push there, you'll see that we enable you to contact us directly from the app itself, whether you have a good comment, but we also want to get bad comments so we can improve. And it was from day one, the decision to have the ability to communicate with the users.

Annaka:

I think everyone is familiar with trying to contact a company, and you're like, "Hold on, you don't even have a contact page. You do not want to be found." So, very much appreciated that in the app. And I downloaded the app. I had to. I have two dogs. So, if you see a note, it's from me.

Lynn Marks:

Yeah. Please reach out if you have any feature requests for us. And it really does make the development process more rewarding when you see someone who initially give you, let's say, like a one or two-star review, you message them very quickly, and then later, they come back and change their review to five stars and they comment about how quick the developers were able to reach out to them and solve their issue. So, that definitely helps make dealing with difficult requests, but also just continuing to work on this app a lot more rewarding.

Gideon Marks:

Even what you mentioned that you have two dogs, so we had one dog, and it never actually occurred to Lynn and to me that some people have more than one dog because we come from this world of one dog. So, we were approached by some people saying, "We have two and three dogs." So, as a result, we added the ability in each pack, that you can manage on DogLog, to run for free up to three dogs. Because until then, it was a one-dog pack. So, someone like you who has more than one dog actually told us, "Guys, you need to add other dogs' abilities."

Annaka:

Yeah. And I like that it's three and up, or is it four and up that would then be in like premium?

Gideon Marks:

Four.

Annaka:

Yeah. I feel like up to three, that's when I would be able to handle it. Four and up, I'd be like, "All right, this is too much."

Ethan:

Not if you have the app.

Annaka:

Not if I have the app. It's very true.

Ethan:

All right. Let's go back to business and let's talk a little bit about your business model. Now, obviously, you've got the free and the premium packages. The premium package, I think was \$3.99 a month or something like that. Is that the only monetization strategy that you all are running right now?

Lynn Marks:

It's not. So, for a very long time, DogLog was just free, completely free. And the first monetization strategy that we had was to add some affiliate marketing partners to our app. So, I believe, at this point, we have three or four affiliate marketing partners that our users can buy and get a discount through the app. And all of these partners are ones that we actually trust and believe that their products are going to bring value to our users. With the user experience being so important for us, we wanted to make sure that only products that we actually stand behind are going to be the ones that our users can see, and we don't want to spam anyone. So, that was really the first strategy, but what we realized is, you can push people towards that funnel, but once they go to that external partner, it's kind of out of your control and out of your hands for if they're actually going to finish the conversion.

So, it's been kind of up and down with that particular monetization strategy, just because it is so out of our control and it is really hard to predict, are we going to get more sales this month or less? Because we can make our own advertising for those partners better, but we can't improve the pages that they go to afterwards. So, that was our initial one, but it's not the one that we're, going forward, going to be leaning on as much anymore. In 2021, is when we launched our first premium version. And you're right, we have the monthly subscription and then you can also buy it for annual, and you get a discount. And that's where we're really focusing on generating the majority of our revenue, going forward.

Ethan:

Gotcha. Yeah. We're pretty familiar with affiliate around here. And I thought it was interesting that that was also something that you were pushing on the app. And so, was it just the unpredictability that has got you leaning more towards premium service model as opposed to affiliate or was there another underlying reason?

Lynn Marks:

I think the other... Well, I was going to say there is another reason, but I do think it actually connects with predictability because the way that we build our premium is that it's a subscription, which is the model that many apps and services use now. So, that allows us to generate reoccurring and predictable revenue. So, I think the fact that we can completely control the product and improve whatever we need to help people go through that conversion flow, is really what helped us decide that this is the main monetization strategy that's going to work for us moving forward. Now we might have other tighter integrations with other partners in the future, like sharing data back and forth, or if it's like a TeleVet, something like that. But at this point, we believe that the premium model is the best way for us to go.

Annaka:

Yeah. I would love a TeleVet. That'd be amazing. It's like trying to take two dogs anywhere, is like, "No, no thank you." They haven't had a pop cup in a year.

Lynn Marks:

You can find it through DogLog.

Ethan:

There you go.

Annaka:

Yes. So, the subscription model, the premium model is really popular with apps. How do you then entice your users? You have a great free version. I've already been poking around in there. How do you then say, "Hey, here's what you get with premium"? How do you get them to sign up to that?

Lynn Marks:

Yeah. So, like we said, the user experience is really important for us. So, we did want DogLog to be fully functional and be able to provide value to users in its free form. It's once we started adding features that we think aren't necessarily things that are basic, or if they're features that, let's say, are more expensive for us to develop, those are the ones that then we realized, "Okay, well, let's start adding them to the premium ones." And it's really anything that maybe it's more like an advanced use case. So, like, if you want to export your data because you want to do additional analysis on it or if you want to show the data to your vet.

It's things like that, where we thought, "Well, you can still use the app with its basic form, but if you really want to take it above and beyond, that's the functionality that we've decided to add." And at this point, we are continuing to add new functionality, both for the premium version and for the free because we think it is important to continue to improve both versions. But as we are trying to build up our premium version more and more, we are focusing a little more on adding advanced functionality to that while still adding some new capabilities to the free version.

Annaka:

That's such a good answer. When the premium version just becomes this like Goliath, and then the free version, you're like, "I can do nothing on here." There's a very popular music streaming service that does that, where the premium is like the crème de la crème and the free is unusable, that turns users away. So, thank you. It's excellent.

Gideon Marks:

But let me add something here. I remember that Lynn and I, the very philosophical discussion between us, especially after our dog that triggered us to come with DogLog, Joy passed away. And this was kind of a sad moment for our family, very said. She was kind of the anchor of the family. We all loved her. We decided to have DogLog as her legacy. And it meant to us that, at that time, that even though we didn't have now, a dog, we will continue to develop DogLog for the benefit of dog owners and the wellbeing of dogs. And at that time, it was about us giving back to other people. It wasn't about making money, it was pure, let's do a good thing.

This premium model, for us, is a way to close a little bit of the gap between the needs to continue developing and what can we make out of DogLog. Because at the end of the day, when you fully bootstrap something like this, it does cost you a lot of money, and you have to find a balance. And so, the way I see it in the future, is that we will continue adding more and more features to the free version, but there will be, hopefully, AI predictions added to DogLog. And for these relatively expensive features to develop, I hope that we'll be able to charge some of the users.

Annaka:

Oh yeah, absolutely. And there's a lot of features that... Any talk of AI is always going to get me interested. So, I'll be keeping an eye on you for sure. And continuing to talk about money... Everyone loves talking about money. How was DogLog initially funded? Gideon, this might be more your ballpark, I'm not sure. Who wants to take this one?

Gideon Marks:

Maybe I'll begin, but it'll be interesting to hear Lynn's perspective here. So, I funded, until now, I would say, 98% of DogLog. We got a few thousands of dollars on a GoFundMe project we had, but I've been funding DogLog until now. And again, the notion behind it is I'd rather give my children, those who contribute to society, with, as I like to say, warm hands. I want to share with my children, the assets that we gained and made as a family and work on something together. And this is kind of the rationale behind it. I would say that we were getting close to \$100,000 that we spent on DogLog, mostly on development. Some other services such as automatic emails to users and surveys we conduct or payments we do for storage and things like this, still, most of the money is on development. And until this very moment, it was actually from the family's money.

Annaka:

Lynn, anything to add?

Lynn Marks:

No, I feel very lucky that I get to have my dad fund my pet project. And I mean, it's definitely something that drives the direction that we're taking, where we want to be able to make DogLog sustainable. We're not necessarily looking for this to generate all the money in the world, but if we can make people's subscriptions or affiliate marketing, whatever revenue we get, if it can just support all the basic infrastructure that we need and the future development that we can make, then I think really, that's all we can ask for at this point. I do feel very blessed that I get to work with my dad on this and he's funding it.

Gideon Marks:

I urge a lot of other parents to support and promote initiatives their children have. Parents should encourage their children to do something positive and good. I have three daughters, including Lynn, and a son. And the whole notion of female founder is also essential. And I think I'm extremely blessed to work with Lynn. I wish my other daughters would also be involved. And again, I'll repeat what I said, I encourage parents to work and encourage their kids, children, to achieve their goals and make their dreams come true.

Annaka:

Your family endeavors like running a business together, and my family can barely survive card game nights. So, y'all are a special —

Lynn Marks:

Oh, trust me, game nights for us have a lot of emotions as well. At least when we're talking about dogs, we can pet our dog and calm down a little bit.

Ethan:

Exactly.

Annaka:

Yeah. It's like, all right, running a business and then a game of monopoly are two different things.

Gideon Marks:

Do you know another interesting fact about us?

Ethan:

Tell us.

Gideon Marks:

I mentioned to you I have four children, and I have four grand dogs. I don't have, yet, grandchildren, but I do have grand dogs.

Ethan:

Ah, what's the difference anyway?

Gideon Marks:
It's a good question.

Annaka:

Oh man. So, when we're talking about DogLog, what does scale look like? I mean, it sounds, and if I'm putting words in your mouth — please stop me, that you're looking for it to sustain itself, but we're not looking to take over the world, but are there any kind of scale goals or things that you'd really love to see included down the road?

Gideon Marks:

Maybe I'll begin, and Lynn will take it. So, don't make a mistake with our smiles. We like to win, and we're winners and things like this. When we started DogLog, it was just for our family. And today, we're looking at 100,000 downloads. We're not too far away from there. A lot of times, Lynn and I will talk about it and say, "Wow, what has happened?" But our goal is actually to become a dominant platform that will help pet parents better communicate, be able to store data about their dogs or other pets, will have the ability to predict about their health, et cetera.

So, yes, we are aiming at millions of users eventually. Of course, in order to achieve the millions of users, we will have to change a little bit about the way we fund it. And we do hope that some investors, eventually, will be interested to invest in such a platform because the future is very bright for DogLog. Think about all the data we have there which we protect and we don't share it with anyone. Think about all this data we have about dogs, different types of dogs, where they live. There's a lot of things one can do with this information. So, we will hopefully be able to get to the millions of users and also get funded, et cetera.

Ethan:
Lynn, do you have anything to tack on to that?

Lynn Marks:
No, I think he answered it very well.

Ethan:
All right. Excellent. All right. So, let's go a little bit more personal and hear more about the founders as opposed to the business. So, Lynn, you've got a lot of entrepreneurship in your family, obviously, there's entrepreneurship in your all's history. What's something that surprised you? I mean you've got all this knowledge. What's something that really hit you out of nowhere when you started your own company?

Lynn Marks:
I think one thing that surprised us early on really is how much more you can learn about your users or the personas that you're targeting, where you might think you really understand their characteristics and what they're looking for, and then you realize either, "No, that persona is not actually the right one," or it's like it is right, but it's a much larger group. So, definitely, that was

something that we learned early on. Like my dad said, a very basic thing is we didn't even think about the fact that people might have multiple pets that they need to be able to track. So, I think really, that's one thing that was surprising. I think another thing which, not necessarily surprising because I did know it was always difficult, but experiencing it personally was different, was just how difficult marketing can be.

Luckily, at my full-time job, I have marketing people who I get to rely on, so I can focus more on the product side, but at DogLog, I'm really the marketing person and either trying to do social media or contacting newspapers or TV stations so they can do a segment about you and any other types of marketing that you may have to do. It really is a difficult skill that it's not just as easy as like posting cute pictures of dogs on social media. Because I mean, even though everyone likes that, there are millions of cute pictures of dogs.

So, that's really one thing that made me realize how I really need to focus more on honing that skill better and also trying to rely or get help from other people who are more knowledgeable in that space. And really, not to get down on myself too much if there are some marketing projects that end up being really difficult because you always need to remember that there are people whose full-time job is just to do marketing. So, having to really experience working on the marketing versus its new media, old media, that was definitely something that shocked me, how much it would be challenging for myself to do.

Ethan:

Gotcha. Gideon, next question is for you. How do you separate the learnings that you know you need to pass on? I mean, you've got all this entrepreneurial knowledge, and you could sit your kids down for hours and just give them every bit of information that you've got. But, we all know that some lessons need to be learned and not told. So, do you have any specific way that you can separate out the things that you feel like you can pass on versus the things that they need to learn for themselves?

Gideon Marks:

I think that during the time Lynn and Ron grew up, back in Los Altos, I tried to share with them some of my experience in companies I worked for. So, they actually were exposed, relatively at a young age, to advanced and things that happened in the tech ecosystem. So, this was my way of exposing them to the real world. Even took them, a lot of times, to technology conferences hosted by investment banks. I remember I took Lynn once to a talk by Mike Moritz, the legendary Mike Moritz from Sequoia, and she talked with him.

So, I think that if you try to set an example along the years, while staying humble and sharing as much as you can and also showing them examples of other people that are actually doing things better than you yourself, I think this is probably the ingredients that you need to plant in your children. And then, it's upon them; do they have the entrepreneurial spirit or they do not? I don't think that you can impose on your children to become something. I think that Lynn, since I remember her, was extremely passionate about dogs. She and one of her sisters... I still have it.

[They] sent me, many, many years ago, I think she was less than 10, a presentation why the Marks family needs a dog.

Lynn Marks:

I should have known I was going to be a product manager back then.

Gideon Marks:

And I'm more than willing to share this with you because she's passionate. And entrepreneurs need to be passionate about it. Lynn has the passion for dogs since I remember her. And I've seen it never went down, never. Actually, just increased and increased all the time. And when we came up with an idea of DogLog, she was the perfect person to lead it. And then it was easy for me.

Lynn Marks:

I think from looking at it from the other way, there are times where I actually go and ask my dad for help on a specific thing, if it's like coming up with a business plan, like the first time we had to do that, and I didn't have as much experience, that's something where I would have directly asked him for his advice. But a lot of instances of just us working together is more where that organic mentoring came. And a lot of the times, I really came out of somewhere where I got frustrated with him, and I later apologized to him and said like, "Well, thank you for helping me see your view and why this is maybe a different or better way for us to approach this specific issue." And it's really learning that that not only helps me grow as an entrepreneur, but also just as a person.

Ethan:

Absolutely.

Annaka:

I love the developing your pitch skills before the age of 10. I mean that just cements your life trajectory there. And now, we all know anyone involved in new businesses, we know that it's not always puppies and walks in the park.

Ethan:

Oh man.

Annaka:

How do I know Ethan wrote this question?

Ethan:

Here it is.

Annaka:

But can you tell us about a time in your company when things maybe weren't going so great, when you're like, "This might not actually make it," what did that feel like, and how did you pick up and move forward?

Lynn Marks:

Yeah. I have two examples. And both of these examples are actually focused on when we pushed a new release, a new version of DogLog. I think maybe like two years ago, I remember we launched a version of DogLog and we, I guess, didn't test everything that we could have tested. And after launching it, we had a lot of customers complaining that the app was down, they couldn't log in or they couldn't use it. And as a non-technical founder, it can be extremely frustrating because you're not the one who's actually coding it, and you can't do all the testing that you want to do. You can only do it using the app itself.

And seeing all of these users complaining, I mean, on one side, it made us realize like, "Wow, these people really get value out of DogLog because they went out of their way to let us know that it's no longer working." But on the other hand, it's just extremely challenging when people are saying things, maybe not in the nicest way, about how we're not doing enough testing or we're not developing as well as we could. And a similar thing with that is when we released the first premium version last year. And we definitely got some backlash for some of our users. They can call you sometimes like a greedy app developer, and it can be really frustrating.

And also, you have to work a lot to not take things personally because they don't know my full story. They oftentimes think that we're part of like a big development group, when in reality, it's just a small family funding everything. And that's really why we need to have this premium version. So, really, those two instances where we really tried to improve the app and then we had backlash come at us, those two instances really come top of mind for those challenging moments that made me really think, "Are we taking the right path?"

Gideon Marks:

I can give you another example. So, when we launched DogLog, it was on iOS because we come from Apple's world, living in California. And my son, who wasn't an expert on Android development, without consulting with us too much, just signed an agreement with developers not in the US, in some other country, and they developed an Android version that was not good. And I won't use words, but I was all furious, I remember. And imagine you're launching something on Android and it doesn't work. So, this was a moment of a lot of aggravation for us because we were just trying to migrate from iOS into the other part of the world. This was a very challenging time for Lynn, myself, and of course, my son. Luckily, we knew some people and in the Ukraine, and we've been working with them to offset this challenge since then, and we're seeing good results. This was for me, one of the most difficult moments because I knew that all the money we spent on the Android development is gone. We now have to do everything from scratch.

Annaka:

Yeah. And I think iOS to Android, most people think like, "Oh, well, the app looks the same on my Apple versus your Samsung." Oh no. No, the code, it is not the same.

Lynn Marks:

Not even just the code, but also trying to make a good user experience, you also have to do it differently because like gestures that are native for iOS users might not be native for Android, and that is something that I have learned over the time developing. Because I am more used to Apple, I usually go with those, and then I have a lot of Android users saying, "Oh, I don't know how to do this specific functionality," that for me, seems really intuitive. And then I've realized that the Android ecosystem actually does that functionality differently.

Annaka:

Yeah. I'm pretty sure if you handed me an Android these days, I'd be like, "I don't know how to use it. Somebody please help me." So, how do you approach those obstacles, and how do you keep going? How did you recover?

Lynn Marks:

I mean, first of all, working with my family has made it easier, where we feel comfortable talking about things from not only the business perspective but also our emotions and how different obstacles have negatively affected our psyche or our motivation or our self-esteem in regards to being a founder. So, I definitely think that being able to get support from your family or anyone else who's close to you, has been really helpful for that.

Annaka:

Yeah. Your kind of support system.

Gideon:

And we also try to manage DogLog like a real company. So, for instance, support is one thing, but Lynn and I talk daily as a father and daughter, but we also have, what I call, the DogLog discussions that are purely business. And since we do work with developers in the Ukraine, we have a weekly conversation with a project manager on their side, we try to talk and communicate with users on a weekly basis, so we, all the time, stay in touch with all the players in our ecosystem: users, developers, founders, et cetera.

Ethan:

All right. So, we're going to ask you just a couple of more kind of like wrap-up questions, advice for aspiring entrepreneurs, anything you'd like to share, how people can get in touch with you, that sort of thing. Is there anything thing that we haven't hit that you absolutely want to make sure that you hit?

Gideon Marks:

Yes. I think I would like to make a few comments. When I look... And again, sometimes Lynn and I may see data differently. Actually, we should see data a little bit differently. So, when you look at our user base, there are some interesting facts here. So, most of our users come from North America, meaning US and Canada. I think it's about 80% of our users. The rest come from England, Australia, South Africa, and mostly English-speaking countries. And most of our users are either millennials or Gen Z, which is clear. They're more receptive, I would say, to digital transformation, but also, they look at their dogs like real family members, they're attached to them like their own children. Another interesting fact is that two-thirds of our users are women, versus only one-third is a man.

Annaka:

That's interesting.

Gideon Marks:

Yeah. This was kind of interesting, I think, for both Lynn and myself. And maybe some of the women that have dogs really look at the dog as a real family member, and this helps them better understand what's happening with the dog, showing their love to the dog. So, again, looking at data about your user base is extremely new for me about dogs. Another thing that Lynn and I noticed is that the pets' industry, and I don't want to generalize things, is very conservative and there is a place for digital transformation in the pets' industry.

The companies that we do affiliated marketing are relatively young, just like our company. It's very difficult to get into the legacy companies, the incumbents, and persuade them, "Hey, how about we work together? We'll give you ability to communicate with your users or new type of users." So, I think that there is a big potential in the pets' industry for digital transformation. And I urge other entrepreneurs who have the set of skills to improve pets' life, to come with new innovative platforms or apps or whatever. So, these are some additional insights that I've seen looking, analyzing the data that we accumulate all the time.

Annaka:

And user data, it's priceless when you're looking at trends and insights and "Okay, what do I want to build next?" Well, you might not throw like a WWE-style logo on your app if 75% of your users are women. It helps inform decisions. So, those insights are worth their weight in gold when you're looking at user experience.

Ethan:

Hey, don't make fun of WWE fans. I don't want to be attacked.

Annaka:

No, you're good. I'm a NASCAR fan. Let's go. We just got our summer plans all made right there. Maybe not that far. That sounds interesting. So, this question for both of you, whoever wants to go first is more than welcome, but what advice do you have for aspiring entrepreneurs? I don't know, Lynn, if you want to run with this first.

Lynn Marks:

I guess my biggest advice would be to work on something that you are passionate about and to really understand the problem and the point that you are trying to solve because being an entrepreneur is not easy. It's very difficult from the hours that you spend, from the new skills that you need to develop, or just from the emotional... making sure that you don't take things personally when people maybe give negative feedback about your product, and really knowing how to be resilient about that. So, with all those difficult obstacles that you need to overcome, if you're working on something that you truly believe in, it's going to make it a lot easier to keep on motivating yourself to push forward, while if you're working on something that you're more wishy-washy about or you don't really understand why this pain point needs to be solved, I think you're a lot more likely to just give up when hard times come. And definitely, as an entrepreneur, hard times will definitely come at one point or another.

Annaka:

It's a given.

Lynn Marks:

Probably many times.

Annaka:

All right. Gideon, any wisdom?

Gideon Marks:

Well, Lynn and I both agree about being passionate about what you do is the first thing in solving a problem with a good solution, of course. I would add also that the team component of a successful startup is probably the most crucial. If you don't have the perfect team that complement each other, that brings different set of skills, the odds of you being successful are relatively slimmer than what already are. So, be passionate, solve a real problem, and build the best team you can because you will run into a wall many times, and only a team can overcome all these hurdles, obstacles, et cetera.

Ethan:

I think that's really great advice. Well, Lynn, thank you. Gideon, thank you. Is there anything else that you'd like to share with our listeners before we end this conversation?

Lynn Marks:

Well, I guess if you are a dog owner, you should check out DogLog. Our main personas are people with puppies as they're doing their training, or people with ailing or aging dogs who maybe need more tracking of their illnesses or their medicines, or really if you're just in our situation, where you have multiple people taking care of a dog and you just can't keep track of what's already been done. I would urge you to go check out DogLog and see if it can help you have an easier time being a pet owner.

Annaka:

Yeah. And that's dog walkers and there's multiple caretakers, partners, whoever is involved, you can add them all in the app, right?

Lynn Marks:

Yeah. Definitely.

Ethan:

Add them to your pack. All right. And besides going into DogLog, clicking on settings, and reaching out to you via comment, is there any way that you'd like people to get in touch with you?

Gideon Marks:

Well, we also have a website which is doglogapp.com, and you can contact us there, you can also get some additional information. We also have a simple Facebook page where I believe you can send us some data, but the biggest support, I think, for DogLog is to see constant growth of users and hopefully, satisfied users who want to join our journey to make pet's life better.

Lynn Marks:

You can also email us at support@doglogapp.com.

Annaka:

Perfect. All right. Well, we will be putting all of these links in the show notes, so, any of you listening can reach out and get in touch. I do encourage you to check out the website because their team descriptions are A-plus. Love them. They have some really great team members on there that I think y'all will like. Just a little weird plug-in there, but that is a wrap for this episode of the Startup Savants podcast. We want to thank you for stopping by and listening in. Do you want to chime in — if you think we're doing a good job or you think we're terrible and we got nothing right? Let us know in the comments. We read every single one and do our best to learn from you. For tools, guides, videos, startup stories, and so much more, head over to TRUiC.com. That's truiic.com, T-R-U-I-C.com. See you, folks.

Ethan:

Bye-bye everybody.

Gideon Marks:

Goodbye.