



Stanford eCorner

The Second Time's the Charm

Tom Conrad, *Pandora*

April 28, 2010

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2441/The-Second-Times-the-Charm>

After initially turning down the opportunity to work for Pandora (formerly called Savage Beast), Tom Conrad, CTO, shares an anecdote about how following his passion led to tremendous personal and professional success. Though he eventually accepted the job with reservations, six weeks later it became the exact position he had dreamed of. To his surprise, the objective for the company had changed, providing the environment he'd hoped for to drive the direction of this popular consumer music product.



Transcript

And so I started thinking about these ideas, these ideas of putting together some kind of a music destination on the Web that would make recommendations and connect people together. And in talking about this a little bit, I got introduced to this little company in Oakland called Savage Beast. The company had about eight full-time employees and they were looking for...well, the job description on the website when I met them said, "Engineering Manager." By the time that I arrived for the interview, they have decided to upgrade that to VP of Engineering because I think they were looking at my resume saying, "Well, if we're going to hire this guy, he probably, given his background, wants to be a vice-president of our little eight-person start-up." And as much as I appreciated the upgrade in the title, the reality was they needed an engineering manager. They needed somebody to hire a bunch of engineers and to manage its schedule and to hit the date and repeat over and over and over again. They had a pair of brilliant founders, including somebody who was a technologist and had a great technology vision. And I got the job offer from them...and turned them down. And I turned them down because it didn't feel like the right career opportunity for me. I didn't really want to be the engineering manager. I wanted to have a much larger kind of purview with respect to the product. And I didn't want to work for -- I wanted to work for a company that was doing something for consumers, and Savage Beast was making just recommendation infrastructure for other brands.

And so it was like a B2B solutions. They'd sell this recommendation engine to, like, Best Buy, and Best Buy would use it in kiosks in their stores. And so I thought, 'Well, gosh, it's not the right kind of product exactly. It's not the right kind of career move,' and so I turned them down. But a funny thing happened. Every day, I thought about this little company and this great group of people and this opportunity to use the start that they had. About a month passes and they call me up and they say, again, "You know, we talked to some other people and we think really you might be the right guy for the job." And I said, "That's funny. I can't sleep at night because I'm thinking about this so much." And I said, "Are you still kind of focused on this B2B thing?" and they said, "Yeah, we're still focused on this B2B thing." I said, "Are you still looking for kind of a glorified engineering manager?" and they said, "Yeah, we're still looking for a glorified engineering manager." And I said, "You still want me to take a 40% pay cut?" and they said, "Yeah, still want you to take your 40% pay cut." I said, "Sold!" And that was definitely a moment of just following my passions for solving this problem and trying to come together with this team to figure it out. And a kind of miraculous thing happened. I arrived at the company, and two weeks later, Joe Kennedy, who's our CEO, started, and the company raised a little bit of money.

And suddenly we had a new mandate to create a consumer service rather than this B2B thing. So I'm, like, "God! Halfway there. I'm halfway to the job that I really wanted. Now we get to build a consumer service." Another few weeks goes by and my phone rings and it's the founder/CTO/technologist product guy who had hired me and he said, "You know, I've got a new baby.

I've been at this for four years. I'm really kind of a B2B guy. I'm going to leave, and I think you should take over running the product organization." So in just six weeks, I went from accepting a job description I didn't really love and working out a product that wasn't a perfect fit, to suddenly I had exactly the job I wanted and exactly the product opportunity. And ultimately we spent about the next six months doing the work that led to Pandora.