



Stanford eCorner

Finding the Problem is the Hard Part

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Instagram Co-Founder Kevin Systrom believes building solutions for most problems is the easy part; the hard part is finding the right problem to solve. Here he opens up about how he and fellow Co-Founder Mike Krieger identified the problems they wanted to solve around sharing photos through mobile devices. He also reminds entrepreneurs to embrace simple solutions, as they can often delight users and customers.



Transcript

Finding the solution to the problem is the hardest part. I always thought like, you're faced with these problems that people have, you assume that you know exactly what you're going to tackle, and the hard part is finding that algorithm. The hard part is scaling that solution. It turns out... thank you, Mike... that the hard part is actually finding the problem to solve. Solutions actually come pretty easily for the majority of problems. Not for every problem, but for the majority of problems. And in our case, what we did is when we sat down and we were deciding to work on Instagram, what we did was we wrote down the top five problems people have with mobile photos because we wanted to build a product that solved problems. We didn't want to just build a cool app to look for a problem that people had.

We wanted to do it the other way around. So what we did was we listed out these five problems. And I remember the top three that we circled. Number 1 was that mobile photos don't look so great. We've all had that experience... you're seeing the sunset, you take a snapshot, and it looks washed out, you can barely see the sun, etcetera. And we were like, 'That's the major problem we want to solve.' Number 2 was that uploads on mobile phones take a really long time. So we were like, 'What could we do around that?' Well, maybe if we started the upload way before you're done even editing the photo's caption, and what if we sized down the photo just to fit perfectly on the screen but nothing else? And that's the small little problem and solution that it turns out really delights people because they press 'done' entering their caption, it's already been uploaded. The third problem was that we really wanted to allow you to share out to multiple services at once. We felt like, should you have to make the decision of taking a photo with a Facebook app, the Twitter app, so on and so on, or should you just take it in one place and distribute it to many places at once? Those top three problems allowed us to really hone in on what solution we wanted to build.

And that's really what Instagram became. I also wanted to say that once you have those top problems that you want to solve, you need to verify that they're actually the ones that people have. And really the way to do that is get your product in front of people very quickly and test that hypothesis. I think too many people wait a long time... and I'm going to talk about this a little later. Too many people wait a long time to see whether or not what they're working on is actually the problem people are having. And the last point is that, really, you should not be afraid to have simple solutions to simple problems. Like I said early on, I think too many people believe you have to solve things in a really complicated way. And at the end of the day, if you delight people even a little bit with a simple solution, it turns out it goes very far. That first day when we had something like 20,000 new users, I was like, 'Clearly there was a need for this that hadn't been done before,' and I'm so glad we tackled those simple problems.

There's something about... in the tech community, you always want to feel like you're working on the hardest problem in the world. It turns out that simple problem becomes very hard at scale. And that's what's really exciting. In a way, we often... in our

entrepreneurship classes we hear about the Big Hairy Audacious Goal, like, 'What's the huge chunk you're trying to bite off and tackle?' And one thing that really struck me was that that Big Hairy Audacious Goal could be bringing that simple solution to something delightful to the masses. Yeah. And that, in itself, is a huge challenge.