

Karen Zelnick:

The first year of a startup's life is crucial, and life or death decisions seem to be made on a daily basis, whether it's fundraising, hiring, or simply getting people to care, you have a lot to juggle. And today we're talking with the founder who can speak to it all. Join us in today's conversation with Chris Hicken, founder and CEO of 'nuffsaid, and investor Gavin Christensen, as we bring you both sides of A Perfect Pitch. What is Perfect Pitch? It's a podcast from Kickstart that reveals the minds of both investors and entrepreneurs throughout a startup's journey. So whether that's uncovering what everyone's really thinking during a startup pitch, or learning how entrepreneurs like you have managed their first major roadblock, Perfect Pitch offers an honest, quick and tactical guide to help you on your startup journey. I'm your host Karen Zelnick. And I'm excited to introduce you to today's guests. Chris, before starting 'nuffsaid you hiked the... I don't even know how to pronounce this correctly... The Camino de Santiago, which is a 500 mile trail in Spain, right?

Chris Hicken:

Yeah. It's 550 miles. And you start in a little town called Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in France, and you hike along Northern Spain all the way to the coast.

Karen Zelnick:

That sounds amazing. I think we should put some photos from that in our show notes. So if you have any that you're willing to share, send them our way. Cause I would love to see them. And you and your wife seem like you're such adventurous cause you're avid scuba divers.

Chris Hicken:

I did propose to my wife underwater. So that tells you how big we are into scuba diving.

Karen Zelnick:

That's amazing. What's next on your adventure bucket list?

Chris Hicken:

I guess, no surprise, but we are looking to do a trip to Raja Ampat, which is a very famous dive site in Indonesia. It's known for having really beautiful national geographic style, soft coral, bright colors, and lots of really beautiful fish. So we're looking to do that, or the one that my wife is less excited about, but I really want to do, is a scuba trip down to the west coast of Mexico where you can dive with the humpback whales. Ooh.

Karen Zelnick:

Oh nice. That'll be amazing. That's so great. And Gavin, our favorite question with you is what are you currently reading?

Gavin Christensen:

There's a book called the sovereign individual, which is kind of, probably almost a must read for people investing in the venture space and startups. In some ways, this is kind of a manifesto for many folks in that community of what the future state looks like, and actually was predictive in a lot of ways. A really interesting read. Certainly didn't agree with everything, but a really provocative concept. And Karen, so you always ask us something about ourselves. I would love to hear something about you this time.

Karen Zelnick:

I know this is embarrassing, but it's like I can't wink. No one ever believes me. That's always like a two truths and a lie that I include. I can't wink. And it's a good thing we're not on video because the next question is always, let me see, let me just, let me see you try it. And I cannot do it. I just can't. I've been practicing and trying, but I also love to go on adventures. I think one of my favorites was hiking the Inca trail. I did a three-day trek of the Inca trail and hiked down into Machu Picchu. And I loved that trip. It was absolutely amazing.

Chris Hicken:

I've heard that's an amazing trip.

Karen Zelnick:

I think everybody should do it. I absolutely loved it. And Chris, I'm so excited for this episode, because in past conversations we've been interviewing founders who have sort of more developed startups. They're more in the growth phase, but a lot of our listeners have requested that we talk to founders with a younger company and 'nuffsaid, which was founded in 2019, so we thought you'd be the perfect entrepreneur to speak to. So can you give us a snapshot of what 'nuffsaid is?

Chris Hicken:

The one-liner is that 'nuffsaid is an AI powered brain that focuses you on the work that matters. That's a very ambitious statement. The way that 'nuffsaid accomplishes, this is by centralizing all of your work apps into a single workspace, then using AI to prioritize the stuff that matters for your jobs and 'nuffsaid understands who you are at work. And then it tees up the next task or project that will move the needle for your job. And so for 'nuffsaid our initial target audience is customer success. So you'll see us publishing a lot of hot content for that department. And so that's where we're present in the market today.

Karen Zelnick:

Well and you have a customer success podcast, don't you?

Chris Hicken:

Yeah. And our podcasts are a little bit of a different format. We keep our podcasts very short focused on a single topic that you can digest. The COVID reality is we don't have time for 60 minute podcasts anymore. So that's what we present to customer success leaders.

Karen Zelnick:

So those who listen on doublespeak, get through it in like four minutes.

Chris Hicken:

That's right.

Karen Zelnick:

That's so fun. And this isn't your first rodeo in the startup realm. You previously worked at a go-to market strategy for another company. Is that how you came up to the idea?

Chris Hicken:

Yeah, so I was president at UserTesting for eight years and I joined there as employee number five. And by the time that we left, we were almost 400 people, 65 million plus in sales and the pairing there was really interesting. So the founders, Dave and Darrell brilliant product and engineering leaders, my focus was more on the go-to market side. So I built sales, marketing and customer success, professional services, Darrell, and I kind of split finance at different times of the growth of the company. So the idea for 'nuffsaid, well, I should take a step back. Every couple of days, I get some wacky business idea that I write down. So I've got my journal of hundreds of business ideas. One of the ones that was most interesting for me was this problem that I encountered at UserTesting, where by the time I left, people were working crazy hours, 12, 13 hours a day, everyone was busy, but I felt like we were getting less important stuff done than we ever had. And we were making less progress as a company. So one of the things that I did to diagnose what was going on was I shadowed people for two or three hours a day. And this is everyone from individual contributors all the way to C-level executives. And it was always the same problem. People were overwhelmed with information. Data was in lots of different places. So I thought, okay, maybe there's a software way to solve this problem. And that's where the kind of initial concept of 'nuffsaid came from.

Karen Zelnick:

I can't imagine anyone listening, who can't identify with feeling like they're overwhelmed, they're getting less important stuff done, but busy constantly. So Gavin, what were your first thoughts on 'nuffsaid?

Gavin Christensen:

I know there's something Chris talks a lot to entrepreneurs about. We talked about it as, okay, what are we looking for in an early stage startup? And a lot of it was identifying a deep pain point. In this case, prioritization in software tools that actually help us focus and do more things that matter instead of a lot of things, because it makes some really interesting points about productivity apps versus prioritization and a brain for really trying to focus on important things. That pain point really resonated with us and in the background. And we love investing in entrepreneurs that have an unfair advantage in attacking certain markets. And so the deep domain expertise and have lived with this problem for years and years is always a great factors of production. So that's really what struck us not to mention the fact that you've decided to start the company in Utah, which was really exciting, really great data point for Utah. And so that's how it came together.

Karen Zelnick:

And to that point, Chris, you didn't originally start in the Bay Area and you decided to move to Utah. We're actually seeing that with a lot of founders moving away from the coast. So I'd love for you to tell us about what motivated you to move.

Chris Hicken:

I just had to jump in on Gavin's last thing, before I answer that question. We actually met Kickstart pretty late in the process. In fact, we had talked to three other funds within Utah before talking to Gavin, but as soon as we met Gavin, we said, okay, this is the guy that we want to work with as a company. And so it was actually the quality of the Kickstart team that attracted us to Kickstart. And we basically shifted all of our focus to figure out some way to get Gavin on board. And so anyway I'm very thankful for the partnership and I'm just extremely happy with Kickstart as a fund and as a team.

Chris Hicken:

So Karen, on your question about entrepreneurs moving to Utah, I lived in Silicon Valley for 10+ years and I think it's worth just kind of setting the tone of what really stinks about living in California.

Chris Hicken:

So item number one is the stupid traffic. My wife and I have the saying "Salt Lake City far." "Salt Lake City far" is anything that's more than a 15 minute drive. If it's 17 minutes, I'm thinking, I don't know if I even want to go because it's so far of a drive. In California, pretty much any time between 7:00 AM in the morning to 8:00 PM in the evening, you're not going to be able to get anywhere within 90 minutes. Just the traffic is terrible. So you feel like you're wasting your life in a car getting from A to B. So a lot of people, they're tired of the lost life that comes from living in the Bay Area.

Chris Hicken:

The second thing is the crazy high cost of living. I just looked up about two weeks ago. The cheapest house in Mountain View is an 800 square foot house. That's being sold for \$1.65 million. And it's probably a tear down too, if I'm being honest, it's not a great property.

Chris Hicken:

And then the last thing, this was the thing I found most frustrating was the crazy competition for talent. You have got Facebook, Google, Microsoft, Amazon, everyone is competing for the same talent. And we had people constantly being sniped away. And it wasn't even necessarily that they were getting paid more money. It was that they get the air conditioned wifi bus from Mountain View to San Francisco and the unlimited buffet meals and the laundry service that comes into the office every day. So a lot of times it's the little perks that got people to switch. So those are some of the pain points that we feel as entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley. And so the move to Utah basically removes all of those things.

Chris Hicken:

The traffic is not a problem, at least relative to California, not a problem at all, super reasonable cost of living. And there's a growing tech presence here, but I'm not worried about someone on my team getting sniped away by Google next week because they offered some new silly perk. I have an additional experience point, which is that my previous company, UserTesting played in the same category as Qualtrics. And we would interact with Ryan Smith once or twice a year. And we were always jealous about how he was able to build this huge sales and marketing engine here and support and people that stayed with him for 10 years. And it was a really good relationship. And we just were jealous of the culture he was able to build because of the staff kind of stuck with him for so many years. And so there was a little bit of Qualtrics envy because we got to see how he built his company. They built their company here in Utah.

Karen Zelnick:

Gavin, I'd love your thoughts on the inflow of entrepreneurs from Silicon Valley to Silicon Slopes.

Gavin Christensen:

There's a lot of volume of people moving here for a host of reasons. Now, increasingly it's quality of life and to start a company here, Omni being another example for us recently, where they literally moved in next to us. We just of introduced ourselves and not funding them. And it's exciting to see.

Karen Zelnick:

And I really think it's going to be interesting to see how the shift of people from the coast. Cause right now we're kind of seeing it where they're working remotely, but they're living in Utah or other areas. And I think what we might find is that they move and work remotely, but I think they're going to stay and work locally as they get involved in the ecosystem and the culture of these areas. So I think it's going to be such a positive impact for areas like Utah and Colorado and the Mountain West. So it's exciting. So apart from our worldwide pandemic, that's a crazy first year to have obviously, but Gavin, let's go to you first. Like what do you think the biggest risk in the first year of a new startup's life is? What should entrepreneurs be aware of?

Gavin Christensen:

The most existential risk for every startup is just that nobody cares. You know, most companies just die because nobody cares. No customer cares. Nobody cares. I can relate to that as the founder of Kickstart, because for a lot of years, nobody cared and I wasn't worried about competition. I wasn't worried about hiring. I just need someone to care about what I'm doing. So it's easy to be first and to have a monopoly on something when nobody cares and then you have to take advantage of that time.

Chris Hicken:

You know, when you're thinking about starting a company in Utah, or especially for people that are outside of Utah, thinking of coming to Utah, a couple of things that I think most people are concerned about, especially if you're coming from Silicon Valley: everyone is in tech. If you go to lunch in downtown Mountain View or San Francisco, and you introduce yourself to someone, they're going to be in tech. So lots of access to people with experience in your industry, in your category. That's number one. So people are worried that they're not going to be able to get access to talent in Utah. For founders who are embracing this new kind of remote work paradigm, now suddenly you can attract talent from anywhere in the country, or the world. So it's not a problem, if you have a company that's headquartered in Utah, you can have a small little office here that does whatever you want, sales, marketing, whatever, but you can also hire executives or other harder to find talent. You can hire them in other parts of the country.

Chris Hicken:

The second thing is there is just in general, there's just a smaller talent pool. It's a much smaller city relative to other kind of major metropolitan areas. I actually have found that you can find absolutely incredible people in Utah that just need coaching on how to work within a SAS environment. So I actually think the opportunity to find good people is extremely high. The third thing is that there aren't many later stage funds in Utah, yet, funds that are deploying hundreds of millions of dollars. And so there's this concern from founders that they're not going to be able to get access to capital as the company scales. The early stage funds have had wins, so those funds are growing. So every year they're able to raise larger and larger funds. So I think if you invest in Utah, the funds here will grow with you.

Chris Hicken:

And actually I think there's actually a fourth thing that no one talks about, but I think it's important to address, which has a lot of people in California, especially are worried about feeling like an outcast in Utah because of the LDS community. I'm not LDS myself, but I just have to say the folks here are the warmest, most welcoming, great to work with people, I've had nothing but awesome experiences. I don't at all feel like an outsider here in Utah. I feel like I'm among my peoples here. The thing that bonds

people in Utah, I've found, it's more about love of nature, love of adventure, love of activities, not the religion that you practice.

Karen Zelnick:

Yeah. And nothing makes me happier than when I hear people say that they found their people. So to hear you say that you've found that in Utah, that's amazing.

Gavin Christensen:

I think that's what people realize is like, okay, so it's a group of people that really value family and they value the outdoors. And then the state sport of Utah is entrepreneurship. That's the great game for Utah. And so it's fun to see that broadening out, drawing people in.

Chris Hicken:

I want to just a plus one that to Gavin, that the whole city, all of its infrastructure is built around family. So if you've got kids, what a great place to have kids here, because there's infinite things for you to do with family, tons of support systems in place. Also, you said, that the biggest risk of a startup of course, is that no one cares and that's true. And I think that for a founder, the most important things you can do to mitigate that risk is to be constantly in contact with your customers, whether that's interviews, user tests, demos... I talk to five to 10 customers a week and that's been true for the last two years. It's just really important to stay close to the customer, so you really understand who they are at work. What are their pain points? What are their alternatives if they don't buy your product?

Karen Zelnick:

Continuing on that theme of getting people to care. Chris, you did a great job of getting people to care, and you had other offers from other investors. How did you do it? And how would you recommend other entrepreneurs do that?

Chris Hicken:

Well, the biggest mistake that I see every founder make is focusing on the product because the reality is... can we, can we swear on the podcast?

Karen Zelnick:

I mean no one has tried before! So you know, you can do it, and then we'll edit it out.

Chris Hicken:

All right. And the reality is, investors, especially in the early stage, don't give a shit about your product. What they really care about is what problem is being solved, how big is that problem, and how much are people willing to spend to solve the problem? So, the job of the entrepreneur early on is to tell the story of the problem and get investors excited about the problem, the product that you build, who cares? The reality is all of us have to pivot our product at least three or four times as we're building. So what we pitch on day one is not what we're going to end up going to market with anyway. But what really matters is, who our customer is and what their problem is, and how big that opportunity is for the company. And I see this almost on every pitch, people start by showing screenshots of their product and I'm asleep by the time we get to slide five.

Karen Zelnick:

You sound like you're asleep already. So I get it. Yeah. You're like, I'm asleep. As you were saying, slide after slide of their product. Chris, I want to segue a little bit because I'm interested in this. I heard on another podcast that you always thought you were going to be an artist. And so I want to hear a little bit about that, and I want to hear how that background has influenced your approach as an entrepreneur.

Chris Hicken:

When I was applying to colleges, half of colleges, I applied for an art major and half I applied for a computer science major. And I ended up choosing computer science probably more because I didn't think I could actually build a real career with an art background, but I've, over the years, continued to nurture the artistic side of my natural skill set. And the way that it shows up at work is that, I'm able to very quickly create sketches or concepts of an idea, and then iterate on them very, very quickly with feedback so that within a week or two, I have a really, really nice product that I can deliver. And so some examples of this was when I was building the first version of 'nuffsaid, I scrapped probably 16 versions of the product before I arrived at the one that we actually are bringing to market now. And I did that within probably three or four weeks.

Chris Hicken:

So I guess the creative side of me, I'm able to crank out concepts very quickly and then always bring in feedback from the outside to iterate. And so that's how it shows up at work. You know, I still play the piano and I still will draw from time to time. But these days it feels like time is the hardest thing to find.

Gavin Christensen:

So I know a lot of artists and have a lot of love for artists, but I will say you being a, especially a visual artist and you're a COO of my background, right? You're a get it done guy who's very organized, to-do list. Those don't go together very often in my experience. Maybe speak to that. It's very interesting to me that those are two of your skills.

Chris Hicken:

Yeah. Well, if you look at the type of art that I do, it probably is closer to COO art than like designer art

Karen Zelnick:

We're putting that in the show notes, send us some pictures!

Chris Hicken:

Yeah. I mean, the stuff that I do tends to be very realistic, it's precise. It kind of fits the mold of someone that you think is kind of more disciplined and structured.

Gavin Christensen:

That's cool. I mean, I love it. So many entrepreneurs that even have a very broad skillset where they could do a lot of things. I love the story of how you're applying that kind of rapid prototyping, visual art to the cycle of entrepreneurship. That's really cool.

Chris Hicken:

Well, I came from UserTesting, so, you know, I helped build the industry around testing and getting feedback. So I got to live what I preached.

Karen Zelnick:

I could talk about this all day. Honestly, I've been so excited to ask you about this, but I do want to be conscious of your time. So I'm going to get to our final question that we ask everyone, and I'm excited for your answer, but Chris, what's an effective practice that you've implemented in your work or personal life that has had a great impact on your success?

Chris Hicken:

I think we can have a little bit of fun with this question. And I think I'll start with something maybe a little bit controversial, which is I'm personally really good at spotting the wave makers versus the wave riders. The wave makers, we all know these people. They're the people who are creative, super resilient, strong work ethic. And they create this wave from scratch. You're on a flat lake. And these are the people that come in with pure strength of personality and create that wave. And then you have the people that come after that. You need these people, but you need the people that come after it, the wave riders, and they ride that wave across the lake. The challenge as an entrepreneur is to spot the wave riders from the wave makers because the wave writers will often take a look at the wave and say, "Hey, I created that," when in fact you don't want person early in your company's development. You want the person who created the wave in the first place,

Chris Hicken:

The way that this plays out practically when you're hiring people is to place a lot more weight on someone's raw talent and potential versus their experience. We look at people's resume and we look at the logos on the resume to determine whether or not this person's any good. So if someone has a Microsoft and a Google logo, you might say, wow, this person was vetted by two big companies, they must be awesome. But the likelihood is actually that person was not actually creating waves at Microsoft. They were riding those waves. And so the important thing to do as an entrepreneur is to ask questions that uncover whether or not this person really is a wave maker. For example, you want to go deep on a topic and see how deep into the details someone can go to reveal whether or not they were the ones making the actual decisions.

Chris Hicken:

You want to ask them questions about how they make decisions. You want to ask them about track record. So asking for several examples of success and ask them to define what success looked like. When they say that they were very successful in something, what was the actual result? So was it that they beat it by 10% or 50% or a 100%. The wave makers, they can quote those numbers right off the top of their head because they built it from scratch. It was their babies. They feel real ownership for it. So I think that's one of the things that I think I'm really good at. And I emphasize with my team at 'nuffsaid, is we're looking to hire the wave makers. And we spent extra time in our screening process to find people that will help really move the company forward, especially in the early days where it matters the most.

Karen Zelnick:

That's such an incredible insight. And Gavin, have you seen this practice benefit Chris and his company?

Gavin Christensen:



Well, for sure, I think one of the signs of great founder leaders is attracting other founders, right? Who could lead their own startup, who are willing to work with that person because they're given rein to be themselves. And we certainly see that on Chris's team. And I think that distinction is making yours really important.

Chris Hicken:

Yeah. And I think another thing which I think is valuable for founders to think about is, I got a piece of advice from Ken Weller who was the head of Best Buy sales and marketing team during their growth years. And he was also the CEO of the Good Guys, if anyone remembers that electronic stores. And he said, your biggest strength in your twenties becomes your biggest weakness in your thirties.

Karen Zelnick:

That just hit home.

Chris Hicken:

Yeah. And I find this to be true so many times, especially for entrepreneurs who are ambitious, who have been successful, what happens is in our twenties, we build this toolkit that we look back on as helping us be successful. And then we over rely on that toolkit when we get into our thirties and we don't take the time to invest in additional tools to help us be successful.

Chris Hicken:

My personal example of this is, one of the reasons why I was in my twenties was over abundance of confidence. So I have this inner voice inside me. That doesn't matter what the topic is. If someone says something in my soul, I know an answer that is right. And so early in my career, that enabled me to make decisions very, very quickly. And I got good at relying on my gut when I was making decisions. But of course, when you're a small company, that's a really valuable skillset. But as the company grows, if you make a decision that's wrong, it's very difficult and expensive to change and fix it. So I was making these very big decisions. Some of the times they were the wrong decisions and the cost to repair a bad decision was enormous. And so I hadn't developed a skillset of being able to stop for a second, gather more data, understand different points of view, and then go on to make the decision. For me, that was my learning from twenties to thirties.

Karen Zelnick:

Thank you for sharing that. I really appreciate it. That's amazing takeaway for listeners. Gavin, did you have anything to respond to that?

Gavin Christensen:

That's terrific insight. I would broaden that and say, probably one of the biggest insights from me over the last 20 years has been on the same thing, that our strengths and weaknesses come from the same source. One of the things that's allowed me to do this job pretty well as a VC and deal with all the daily drama of just a lot of companies going up and down and struggling and doing well, is I have this view of my life as this unfolding story. And I'm just kind of intrigued by it and have some distance in some ways from it. And it's allowed me to weather some hard things that have happened to me in my life. On the flip side, I needed a lot more compassion for others that didn't have that same distance. I needed to be more vulnerable with what I was experiencing with other people as well. But the main thing for me is

just the need for continual learning and humility. The only way the best leaders scale is by having enough humility to know when you're wrong.

Karen Zelnick:

This has been such an amazing discussion. I said this already, but I could talk to both of you all day. So thank you so much for your time. Thank you for being so open and sharing all that you've shared. And I loved so many things about that. Like nobody cares and Chris, your insights on how to make them care. And I think that's going to be really valuable for the listeners. So thank you, Chris and Gavin for being here today.

Chris Hicken:

Thanks for having me on the show and more importantly, thanks for everything that you and the team do for us as entrepreneurs in Utah, it's really helping the community get better. And so I'm just thankful for you and the team.

Karen Zelnick:

Thank you so much.

Gavin Christensen:

Yeah. Thanks Chris. Thanks Karen.

Karen Zelnick:

And of course thank you for listening as we dive deep into what it takes to create the Perfect Pitch. If you want to learn more about our investor, Gavin Christensen, from Kickstart or our founder, Chris Hicken, and his team at 'nuffsaid, we'll have a link to the company and longer bios in our show notes at [kickstartfund.com](http://kickstartfund.com). You can listen to more episodes of Perfect Pitch wherever you listen to your podcasts, and if you like what you're learning, leave us a review or rating. We'll be back next time with more insights from entrepreneurs and the investors who fund them. So be sure to subscribe so you don't miss a thing.