

What your business can learn from the #NerdNation

 By [Gary Willmott](#)

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They wear black hoodies, live in California, write code and give quirky and inspiring TED Talks. Some build annoyingly addictive social media networks and have movies made about them. Some build rockets, while others build games that have us falling over our feet following silly virtual characters into parks. This is the [Nerd Nation](#) as Marc Andreessen terms it, the so-called 'geeks' who are not only getting the girls but also building the platforms and networks that make our virtual worlds go around.



Admittedly, not every nerd is creating a new world order. Some exist on a strange diet of instant noodles and late-night coding. But given the outsized influence and success of many of today's geeks, the rest of the business community can surely pick up a few valuable rules from them on how to make products and services fly...

#Rule 1 – Solve your own problems first

Some of the best and most widely used products and services were the result of a nerd trying to solve one small and rather specialised problem. [Mark Zuckerberg](#)'s initial intent for Facebook was to virtually connect fellow students on the Harvard University campus, where he was studying psychology. As we know, the network quickly grew from a campus phenomenon to a nation-wide craze – and eventually into the mammoth global network that it is today.



[Kevin Systrom](#), an awkward management science and engineering student at Stanford, was tinkering around with ways to enhance photos and share them on the internet. His obsession with this ‘problem’ led to the creation of Instagram, a platform that was sold to Facebook for a whopping \$1 billion. These geeks didn’t start out with world domination on the brain – they started out with a determination to solve one immediate problem that was relevant to their daily reality.

This approach worked in our business when we solved a key HR problem. We had battled for years with archaic SaaS software that was clearly not able to meet our growing HR needs. So we decided to build our own solution. We built a fast, fun and easy way for companies to run regular peer reviews. The app, [Hi5](#), is now being used by the likes of Dimension Data, Makerbot, WiGroup, PEP, Cape Union Mart and The Really Great Brand Company.

#Rule 2 – Build it for your tribe

All too often, businesses set out with the intent to market themselves to everyone – and to achieve a critical mass right off the bat. Valuable resources are poured into sales and marketing, often with little to no impact. The nerds never make this mistake. They build things for their immediate community of friends and colleagues – their tribe – and let the product or service speak for itself. Venture capitalist and co-founder of the Y Combinator seed capital firm, Paul Graham, urges entrepreneurs to [‘do things that don’t scale’](#)...

“A lot of would-be founders believe that startups either take off or don’t,” he writes. “...Actually, startups take off because the founders make them take off.”

It definitely helps that geeks are very curious and are generally the first adopters. They will also happily share their views and experiences when they stumble on something really great (or really crap). So when you’re building or launching a new product, first appeal to the tribe – they will spread the word for you (and save you from encountering those steep marketing

bills!).

As Y Combinator's Graham notes, don't underestimate the power of compound growth!

#Rule 3 – Always be ready to pivot

Arguably, one of the most valuable lessons to be gleaned from the Nerd Nation is the ability to stay lean, agile and highly responsive to your market. Unlike corporate juggernauts such as Kodak (and any record label you can think of), the geek-led companies have all responded quickly and intelligently to a market that is highly unpredictable. In order to remain responsive, they stay relatively lean and small (avoiding high overheads and legions of staff) and continually adjust their strategies and goals. For bigger companies, it helps to almost adopt an 'incubator' mentality and be ready to pivot when innovation and creativity strike.

Local health company Tony Ferguson, for example, recognised the need to pivot their core business from products supply to service delivery. They achieved this by [partnering with our own agency-incubated start-up](#) called [UpForIt](#). The service is fast revolutionising weight loss and health in South Africa by providing users with access to 24/7 personal health coaching via instant chat on their mobile phones. This pivot will not only attract new clients and users to the business, but it will bring in a new source of revenue and create opportunities in an environment characterised by constant disruption.

ABOUT GARY WILLMOTT

The managing partner of Urbian, Gary Willmott helped co-found the digital product studio with his partner Anton Moulder, to forge a firm where digital is used to better business, deliver new markets, and unlock new revenue streams.

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