

ALLOWING BRANDS TO CREATE AN EXPERIENCE

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*Yan Simard is the CEO of ZapTap, shown in this photo taken at the company offices in Fredericton. ZapTap was founded two years ago based on Simard's idea that information for retail items needs to be more readily available at the time that it's most needed.*PHOTO: JAMES WEST/THE DAILY GLEANER

As part of my recent Leaders to Watch in 2013 column, I included an impressive entrepreneurial leader - Yan Simard. What makes him impressive? For starters he has 20 global brands piloting his technology right now, and his product has the potential to literally change consumer behaviour in the retail sector. The company is ZapTap (zaptap.com), and Yan is the founder and CEO.

With a background in IT Management working for companies such as Bell Canada and Irving Oil, Yan is a visionary leader with a taste for disruptive innovations. Originally from Quebec, Yan now calls Fredericton home. ZapTap was founded two years ago based on Yan's idea that information for retail items needs to be more readily available at the time that it's most needed: when consumers are in-store or using the item. As a result, ZapTap became the solution and is quickly becoming the global leader of Augmented Consumer Experience.

I began my more in-depth interview (one of my longest) by asking Yan about the main focus of his business...

A: We allow brands to create an experience around the products that they are selling. We allow brands to tell the product story that they want to tell to consumers when they are in stores. Think of a really high-end product - probably more expensive than the competitive models. The worstcase scenario for them is that you only see a price next to it when there is a great product story to tell.

Q: How exactly do you help brands tell their product story?

A: Customers can access the story inside the stores using their smartphones. They scan the ZapTap tag that we place on the store shelf or on the product itself and they then get access to the product story. It may include technical specs, videos on how to use the item at home, or it might be an expert in the field talking about the different products. It can be a lot of things, and it's up to each brand to determine their product story and how to tell it.

Q: What role does social media play in building a story for a brand?

A: Part of the story is what people say about the product in social media. We allow brands to link with all the comments that are made about their product on Facebook. So while standing in the store, consumers can scan the tag and get access to all the comments that were made by people for that given product.

We make sure consumers have all the information they need to make a good purchasing decision inside the store. It's about making sure that the full value proposition is communicated.

Q: Tell me about the ZapTap platform.

A: The real value is in the platform itself, which is web-based. Brands can create products on the fly, update information any time, and it's all done in a user-friendly environment. Another component of the platform is the consumer metrics. We gather a lot of data about what's going on inside stores.

The last platform component is that ZapTap allows brands to use data and change the consumer experience accordingly. We call it customized incentives. As an example, the brand could send an invitation to a fashion show to all females age 25 to 35 who scanned a given product in a given store on a given date.

Q: When did the idea of ZapTap first come to you?

A: I first got the idea some eight years ago. At the time, I was a researcher working on augmented reality concepts. I thought, "Wouldn't that be cool if all knowledge related to an object could come along with the object as opposed to being stored somewhere else?" So that was the original spark. The problem though, eight years ago, was that there were no good devices at the time to provide that experience.

Q: Tell me about what you describe as your "wake-up call."

A: The wake-up call was three years ago. I woke up one morning in January 2010 and I thought, "We have smartphones now, and smartphones can be used to provide that experience that I thought of years ago." It was a Saturday morning, and I spent the whole day doing research on what was on the market in terms of technology and so on.

The idea of the ZapTap platform was born during that weekend. I put together all the main components. I figured out at a high level how technically to make it happen.

Q: Were you sharing your ideas with anyone at the time?

A: No, and that was a mistake. I should have shared with people much earlier. I say that to new entrepreneurs all the time. The value of an idea itself is zero, no matter how good it is. The value comes from how you execute on the idea. The risk of sharing, of talking to people about the idea, is pretty much nothing.

Q: If someone has an idea for a business, and they think it's good, what advice would you give them?

A: There's The Lean Startup methodology. If people want more guidance on that, I'd suggest they go online and Google "Lean Startup." You wake up with an idea and you think it has some merit, go talk to your spouse, your parents, your kids, friends, get their feedback. These people are typically very honest with you.

Q: What happens if people don't buy into your innovative idea? Should you abandon it?

A: What that means is that maybe your idea is good, but it's not articulated well. So go back to the drawing board. When you get the people that are close to you excited, that's probably the time when you should go and talk directly to a client.

Q: I'm guessing that your path since the inception of ZapTap hasn't been a clean, simple trajectory. Would that be correct?

A: There's a saying in Silicon Valley - "Overnight success is typically a two to three-year overnight success." That's exactly how it is. When you get to a point where it's mainstream, people think that this success happened quickly and easily, but usually there have been many ups and downs.

Q: What do you expect 2013 to look like for ZapTap?

A: We have a fully developed version of our platform right now and a commercial-grade version of our service as well as verbal commitments by over 20 global brands. In 2013 our plan is to execute really well on those wins. If we do that, we will become the de facto standard for the in-store experience.

Q: That is impressive. How much selling is involved in attracting these global brands?

A: If we have a chance to get a call with a global brand, we're almost 100 per cent in terms of getting the interest. We're definitely hitting a big market need.

Q: What about the number of ZapTap employees in 2013?

A: As of today we're seven employees. If all goes according to plan, we may end up with 40 more employees in 2013. Our plan is to be the world leader in our field, so we need people of that calibre.

Q: Do you anticipate hiring people primarily from New Brunswick?

A: Yes, as much as possible.

Q: What are the current challenges for ZapTap?

A: Because we have a disruptive solution, the challenge we have - especially when we talk about sales - is when we go to brands, they all get excited very quickly because they all want to do something. What's keeping our sales from happening faster right now is the fact that we have to educate our clients. Even though some are very sophisticated, they are learning how to create this kind of in-store experience.

Q: How are you meeting this challenge?

A: We're trying to make sure that we understand what the most common questions, or challenges, are and be much more proactive with the kind of support we can give. It's something that we're developing as we learn about our clients and each of their situations. It's a listening approach.

Q: I ask everyone this question. I ask them to finish the following sentence: A leader's job is to □

A: A leader's job is to solve the real problem. You need a problem and then you need to solve it in a novel way that is way better than anything else. If you do that and you can figure out that magic formula, money will follow, good-quality people will follow and business success will follow. A leader is not about reaching financial objectives. A leader is about making a difference.