

GoSquared Interview with Matt Ellis

(Unless otherwise stated, responses by James Gill on behalf of the team)

Let's start with a little bit of history about GoSquared - when was it conceived, what were the initial aims of starting the company, a little information about the founders etc.

GoSquared creates web apps for business and site owners. We have just launched LiveStats, a web app that allows you to monitor your Site's traffic in real-time. We're soon going to be launching Get Seen + Sell Ads, 2 web apps that enable mere mortals to get seen and sell ads online. We also run Liquidicity, the blog on design and technology where we give away design resources and discuss our industry.

GoSquared started while we were at school, back in February of 2006. I had run a small design blog as a school project before starting GoSquared which taught me some of the most basic skills I needed to get a presence on the web - like how I needed a web host, and a domain name, and that you uploaded files via this transfer thing called FTP. I've picked up a few more skills along the way too.

By 2006, I started getting interested in business and its evolution on the web. When I saw the Million Dollar Homepage I thought 2 things: I want to vomit that site looks so horrendous, and, more importantly, if *this* can make an impact on the web, I'm sure some of my friends and I can. So I started work on a site that enabled people to buy a Square of ad space for a week at a time at a reasonable price. The main difference was that our site didn't make people feel physically ill when they looked at it.

In the meantime, Geoff had dabbled in basic website coding (HTML, CSS, and a tiny bit of PHP). Together with help from a PHP developer we knew, we produced the first truly interactive version of GoSquared.

Geoff and I approached JT, another schoolfriend who we knew to be a mathematics genius; we also assumed his interest in web innovation and computer programming. After expressing an interest in joining the team, JT became the third member of the company.

When we started GoSquared, I had little or no experience in HTML or CSS, Geoff was new to server side programming and databases, and although JT was always a genius, he had only experienced programming with BASIC. Since we started working on GoSquared, we've been learning constantly. We've taught ourselves almost everything we're good at today - school wasn't that helpful for teaching us how to build an ad network.

It didn't take long for us to realise that no one wanted to know about poor old GoSquared v1. So to get more traffic to the site we started the Liquidicity blog. As soon as we started giving away some of our design resources, like vector icons and buttons, the traffic began to flood in. To this day, over half of the traffic to GoSquared comes through the Liquidicity blog. I don't think I can state how important it is to grow a community around whatever you build - Liquidicity was essential for us to gain a voice and to reach out to our first users.

For better or worse, we started getting more involved with GoSquared than with our schoolwork. Earlier this year we completed our studies to work on GoSquared full time as we had always wanted. It's been getting better ever since.

Did you ever believe the company would become as popular as it is now?

While we'd always dreamed of gaining a very wide audience and user-base, we never really considered the actual possibility if we actually *did* do something that really caught people's imaginations. We've had to do some major rethinking over the last month or so to ensure our infrastructure can cope with the extra load it's under. LiveStats is a very performance hungry app, and ensuring we can provide real-time traffic stats for everyone who adds their Site means we have to keep optimising and growing.

We continue to dream of being bigger than we are. I think everyone in the industry aspires to be bigger or more powerful or just better than they already are - it's what drives things forward. To have the time and resources to build things now rather than next year would be nice.

With regards to LiveStats, we just love to see our hard work paying off, and that people enjoy using it. We spent ages in development knowing only a handful of people (usually ourselves) would be signed in to their GoSquared Accounts at once. Now it feels really rewarding seeing other people, often completely new to the site, signing in to monitor their traffic.

To what extent has Social Media e.g. Twitter had an impact on the company?

Social media, especially Twitter has had a major impact on the way we promote GoSquared and how we deal with support requests. We started using Twitter with just the one @gosquared account in February 2008 and since then we've gradually built a fairly solid following.

It's gone from being a place where we would promote a few blog posts to being essential to the success of GoSquared. Without Twitter we wouldn't have met some of the people we did at conferences such as Future of Web Apps (FOWA), or been able to get in touch with Smashing Magazine who are responsible for kickstarting most of the incredible publicity we've been enjoying these last few weeks.

On the customer support side of things - I can't say enough about how vital Twitter has been. Not only in terms of users being able to speak directly to the team, but also ensuring that when other members of the team are out we can delegate requests and bugs to each other easily and quickly. It's also meant that even if the GoSquared site has been struggling under load, or LiveStats has been down for maintenance, our followers could always know what was going on by checking our tweets.

Anytime anyone so much as mentions GoSquared, we like to keep on top of what's being said. We've been able to help quite a few people out just by keeping an eye on a few select hashtags. I can only conclude that any vaguely internet related company not using Twitter must be losing out on new customers and likely doesn't care much about their existing ones.

Where do you see GoSquared being in 5 years?

It's hard to say. We're very excited with the products and services we have lined up for 2010 and from there we'll have to see how people react to them and develop around what our users like.

One thing I'd like to make clear, though - we're in this for the long run. We don't have intentions of selling out to a bigger guy - we absolutely love what we do and being in complete control of our own business. I hate it when you see small companies with teams of talented people being swallowed up by the likes of Google or Microsoft and never hearing from them ever again. I think it's setting a bad precedent for the next generation of entrepreneurs - it seems like everyone's too afraid to even attempt to become "the next Google / YouTube / Facebook". It's easier to sell up and move on. We don't want to do that.

If you could give an aspiring entrepreneur any tips, what would they be?

Persistence. We've been working at this for a while and for months, even years, the effort we were putting in didn't seem to pay off. It wasn't wasted time though - it was teaching us new lessons. We were learning the hard way, but the best way - by actually doing.

Not only did we develop our skills in design and programming from the ground up, but we learned what we had to do to achieve the products we dreamed of building.

We're all self taught - in the beginning GoSquared was a static HTML site built in Dreamweaver's (horrendous) design view. As we went from one man to a group, to a business, we had to up our game over and over again. We're still upping our game right now. But we didn't give up, and part of what drove us on was that the skills we were learning had a direct impact on the business and on how people saw and used the site.

Iterate. Iterate. Iterate. We may not have launched LiveStats as early as we should, but we make changes to it every day. Many of the changes are under the hood and never get noticed but they're vital to ensure we keep pushing the product forward.

As soon as you get users everything gets better. It really motivated us when people started coming back to us with ideas for improvements, compliments on what we'd done, and (somewhat less so) complaints about what we'd done wrong. Furthermore, listening to your users is vital. We had some pretty different ideas about where we wanted to go back in the early days, and if we had carried on doing what we wanted rather than what users wanted, who knows where we'd be.

JT: Listen to people's suggestions. Just because you think your idea's brilliant doesn't mean it is. Criticism often helps just as much as compliments.

Don't be put off if you can't make a profit in the first months, even years. If you've got a good idea you're convinced will work, don't give up on it. Even if you have to pour yourself into it, it will pay off eventually.

Geoff: Be passionate. If spending time on your work starts becoming a chore for you, then maybe you're not cut out for what you're trying to do. You have to be prepared to work endless hours, days, weeks and even years before your product actually generates some interest, particularly before it starts earning money. Spending all day and all night working on it is not unreasonable if you love what you do.

James: Thanks for the interview, and if you would like to know more about GoSquared, check out the site at <http://www.gosquared.com/>

You can keep up to date with what we're up to on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/gosquared> and on our blog at <http://www.gosquared.com/liquidicity/>

We leave you in the words of Vidal Sassoon: "The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary."