The Business Spotlight - TwineIT

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SPEAKERS

John Hawker, Jon Hawker, Halie Morris

H **Halie Morris** 00:35

Hello, and welcome to our Business Spotlight feature today. I have Jon Hawker with twineIT. And I'm gonna let him lead off by just introducing himself, telling us a bit more about what he does, and about twineIT itself. So if you don't mind, Jon,

J **Jon Hawker** 00:50

Yeah, absolutely. My name is Jon Hawker. I'm one of the founders of twineIT. We aggregate multimedia. I mean, doesn't sound real sexy, but when it comes down to it, what we're doing on a day-to-day basis is we're creating a technology platform that allows us to take photos take animated gifs, boomerangs and, and even looking at video now and aggregating that. The way that looks in the real world is it started off as a photobooth and so the photobooth business was kind of the early concept and one of the things that we pursued for a number of years. Then what we realized is that we were collecting a lot of information that was important to businesses, for marketing purposes. So somewhere along the way, a couple years back, we started exploring a little more deeply into putting the technology into restaurants and bars, maybe even retail environments and a couple other places, which allowed us to collect some information on the customers that are coming through the door, and allow us to communicate with those people on the behalf of our clients. So they can let them know what's going on, make announcements about specials, sales, that type of thing. So it really became a brand

engagement and marketing platform. And it's pretty multifaceted, actually, at that point, because not only are we collecting some information, and people are taking some photos, but they're sharing those photos with branding for the locations. And so you know, it's it's become a pretty good opportunity. It's been an interesting transition here with COVID. And, you know, maybe we can get into that, you know, when you're ready to have that part of the conversation.

H Halie Morris 02:39
I'm curious, when did what year did you start this [company] again?

J Jon Hawker 02:41
So we started in 2012, my co founder actually had a concept of aggregating photos using the cloud. And when we first started telling people, you know, what we were doing and talked about the cloud, no one really knew what that was, I mean, 2012 is really the front end of that type of concept. And it all started on the mobile like on your iPhone, in particular at that time. And then as the iPad specifically came out with a camera on the front side, it really changed the game for us and allowed us to look at that kind of entertainment event based engagement, because we were able to set up a separate device that allowed us to, you know, take the photo, when we pass it to the cloud, into a gallery on people's phones. So just took that fun aspect of people being able to collect photos from an event, whether that was shot on their phone or shot through the little photobooth experience, and put it into a consolidated gallery, you know, with no regard to if you were Android or iOS, or whatever it happened to be.

H Halie Morris 03:49
I was probably interested in launching it back then. Because people were like, What are you talking about?

J Jon Hawker 03:54
It was interesting. I mean, even like I said, even just saying the word the cloud, confuse people and social networking was sort of still in his earlier phases. And so you know, just getting our hands around getting people to leverage their phones in a different way. You know, so it was it was kind of a, I guess, a paradigm shifter for a lot of people as we were talking to them about what we were doing, just trying to get them to understand the concept of, you know, how we got the photos from here to there, and what the technology was that we needed develop behind that in order to get it launched.

Halie Morris 04:30

So I'm curious what were the main platforms that were used when you started?

Jon Hawker 04:35

I mean, you were dealing with like your Facebook and your Twitter, you know, MySpace was sort of an it's, it's kind of winding ish down whatever it happened to be. You know, 2012 was sort of the front end, you know, the iPhone. was really the launch of social media. Like people were doing it for, you know, years, a couple of years ahead of that, you know, it all be based around your laptop On your computer, then when you when you put that into people's hands, that ability to instantly upload and talk about what they were doing what they were up to. That's really when social media in general skyrocketed when when everything was able to be done, you know, in real time.

Halie Morris 05:19

I'm curious too, because coming from Toledo, we tend to be known more for the manufacturing and things like that. So what was it like launching a company that's so tied around this idea of the cloud and social media in an area like this, that maybe is not always one of the for forerunners?

Jon Hawker 05:37

Yeah, that's a loaded question. You know, the to boot, let me say to boot, we are also not like, when you think about technology startups, you're thinking about, like, the 20 year old kid who's cranking away in their basement for 23 hours a day drinking Red Bull. And, you know, that kind of situation. So we were middle aged family men, that were trying to launch a technology company in a traditionally blue collar manufacturing base town. Now, there were a few forward thinking people in the area. And we actually got hooked up earlier on with the University of Toledo and kind of went through their incubator or a version of their incubator that was going back then. And we've continued to be engaged with them. And they, they did some investing in us. And then we were also able to bring on some other people who believed in the project. Again, not what you traditionally think about as an investor in technology, because while we were in an area that doesn't have like Sequoia, and some of these other like, large VC firms, so we're really doing the grinding, grinding out a family and friends type of raise for some equity, so we can boot this thing off, and then anchored by the university leaves early on investment, and a little bit of guidance on them from them.

Halie Morris 07:03

and obviously, it worked, because you're here today, you know,

Jon Hawker 07:06

it's not without its ups and downs. You know, startups are challenge, and most of them last, I think, two years, we're now in year eight. And, you know, in an awkward year eight at the very best. But, you know, we've continued to innovate, we've continued to try to push the boundaries and find new ways to use our existing platform. We've pivoted, you know, like I said, we started out kind of really focused on that, you know, photobooth activation in events. And then we, you know, really started exploring what it looked like to be more of a marketing tool with the restaurants and bars. And, you know, now we're looking at some other opportunities to, you know, if you think about us just kind of really step back and go 50,000 feet as we're an aggregating technology, we collect information on on people, we collect analytics about what's going on how those people are engaging with a brand. You know, there are actually quite a bit a different, you know, different opportunities that we have, we just have to reposition our marketing, we have to reposition our kind of our story as to like, we're not just taking photos and having fun, but we can use it for something different.

Halie Morris 08:19

Now, that kind of leads into the idea of like you said, 2020 is a funky spot for any business, but how what are you looking at as far as projects and focus right now?

Jon Hawker 08:30

So events and restaurants pretty much blew us up, like, everything kind of came to a screeching halt in March. And we press the pause button for a little while on the actual traditional events and traditional type of work that we were doing. Restaurants closed their doors for a while, events completely ceased. I will say that we're slightly seeing a little bit of like, you know, we've got these all around the country, the photo booth version of it's all around the country with different people who go out and do an events and not every state handled the shutdowns, the same, they all slow down. But, you know, we we were able to take some advantage of the government assistance to try to, you know, wait it out. So we did that we worked really hard to reduce our overhead costs, ask for a lot of leniency from the people that we work with, whether that be Verizon or the banks or whatever. Other people that have extended us some, some leniency just to reduce our overhead costs, and give us a little bit more runway to get through this process and, you

know, utilizing some of the government funds and now we've seen a little bit of that turn back on. But we're so the short story on that is it was really pretty scary for a little bit from the standpoint that we didn't have A lot of light at the end of the tunnel, and still just kind of getting some peaks that we are bringing a few of our restaurants back online, even if it's at some sort of limited capacity. But now what we're doing is we're, again, okay, we aggregate information. So what is another way that we can aggregate information is through feedback. And so we can use that for either video feedback, photo feedback, we can, we can take this information, aggregate it and deliver it back to someone that may need to receive feedback. And that's very important for them. Whether that's making like, you know, quick service recovery type things, okay, we got a piece of feedback, we need to reach back out to this person and handle that situation, they, we can do it through that particular way, or even long term process improvement, where you receive the same type of feedback a few times, then you can start looking at, okay, what's going on. And we can make some process improvements, test that and see if we can shift that quickly, quickly, quickly, in order to, you know, get out in front of that not have that piece of feedback come in again, as the same way for the same thing, like a department is handling something in a way that's not working? Well, it's not necessarily about something that's being done right or wrong is what's working, what's not working. And really feedback is a gift in that respect, that you learn what's not working. And then you can make some changes, and we can test it real quickly. So we've been having some conversations with the healthcare industry in particular, around this, you know, they have not slowed down. So we've taken a look at some opportunities to leverage our technology of aggregating information, collecting analytics being, you know, really contributed to the big data kind of scenario. Because we can collect a lot of information very quickly, in real time, create a creative process by which we digest that information for them through computer learning AI and that type of thing, and spit it back out to them in a way that they can like, take some action. So it's in it's sort of ideation, still, we're still exploring it with a couple different partners, to, to see what we can do. But I think our hypothesis that we could leverage our technology to create value for healthcare retail, some of these different even restaurants and bars, some of these different types of organizations, has transitioned into something that looks more like a creating a more robust platform, that we can not only do the video stuff, but we can take information from other systems, put them all together, and, you know, create a consolidated aggregation point of data. And then, you know, send that data out the back end with, you know, some, I guess, some actionable things that you can look at test, and then, you know, reset and try to get credit, improve your, whatever your measure is.

H   Halie Morris   12:59
    That's that side of things that businesses are going to have naturally a more difficult time

doing. They're not in business to do that.

J **Jon Hawker** 13:06
they aren't, and you know, at the end of the day, a lot of technologies, you can get 10 different technologies, but then the data that they collect end up being siloed. And so one of the one of the like, main objectives that we have is not only taking our data, bringing it into our system, and getting it out in a meaningful way, but also taking data from other systems, and either replacing it or just bring it in so that they could all be in a single data set, which we can then spit out the backside with in a meaningful way. So yeah, then they're not in the business of most companies are not in the business. They're in the business of making french fries or healing people. And so, you know, we're trying to really develop a modular platform that can, you know, support them in helping them make informed decisions quickly.

H **Halie Morris** 13:59
That's really cool. So how you're starting working towards this, right?

J **Jon Hawker** 14:06
I mean, we're almost approaching this as a startup. Like, we've got this, we've got the infrastructure, we've got an architecture, but what we're developing is a very different than our traditional, I guess, business platform that we've been working on for the past eight years or so. So it's definitely something where we're, we're kind of looking at it with fresh eyes. And we'll see where that leads us where we're getting close to the point where we feel like that we've developed an internal external business cases so we can start talking to other people. We've talked to some of my existing clients, for example, we've worked with McDonald's from McDonald's franchisee and so we're talking with them a little bit about Okay, what are your systems look like in the restaurant world, how they siloed you think of McDonald's it's like this like, finally run finely tuned, machine. But it turns out a lot of their systems specifically around feedback are not all tied together. So, you know, maybe we found ourselves a little, little niche that we can get in there and create a few different opportunities and value for people that are looking to increase their amount and the quality of the feedback that they're receiving.

H **Halie Morris** 15:25
And franchises are kind of interesting in that they may be tied to the bigger unit, but it's going to be run on the local lower, there's that owner,

J Jon Hawker 15:33

for sure. And some have more tightly run ships in other like Dallas tend to be very tightly run. With very, you know, you don't have a lot of leeway in there. We work with another franchise here in Toledo, called hamburger Mary's, they are recent to the area, they're kind of a family friendly drag burger joint. So they're looking over at the docks, and it's a really fun place. Well, we've had a location in there in that location since their grand opening. And another franchisee called us the other day we installed in their grand openings Actually, today, so exciting, exciting to have, you know, get the referral from the existing franchisee into a new franchise, and they've got a number of locations around the country. So this may be some opportunities there for us to get it through that franchise creates a value there just for the entertainment part. And but talking with McDonald's, again, kind of circling back, like, you know, there's some opportunity with them within that franchise world, they have a little bit of control and corporate knows about us. So it makes it a little nervous, because but they you know, some of the, I guess, corporate decision makers have taken pictures in our fotostation. And instead, it was a really great local store marketing type thing that they could do to connect with their customers. So we've gotten the soft blessing from even even McDonald's.

H Halie Morris 17:00

That's hard one! they're huge!

J Jon Hawker 17:02

They are not easy to get yourself into your we got we're very fortunate to have met someone that is a very forward thinking franchisee and also sits on a number of the marketing and and customer engagement boards at corporate level. So she's been a fantastic guide for us. And, and a good partner in developing this for what I'll refer to as limited service restaurants, which is that walking restaurant. And I'll say as a side note, that was an interesting thing. We weren't sure how customers and limited service restaurants would behave, you know, bars seemed obvious college bars even more. People don't want to commemorate their experience in a very specific kind of way. But it turns out that that limited service restaurant has been great. And we get quite a few people to come in and engage with the photo station and opt into the marketing communication. Wow.

H Halie Morris 17:56

Right? Yeah, I can kind of I can kind of see that. And especially like McDonald's. But it's

really cool. Especially, I'm excited to see that opportunity kind of flowering for you. But also some of these new ones popping up. So you've seen, this has probably been one of the you're one of the businesses that I've obviously been hit extremely hard by these times. And so to see you kind of take it and start to turn it into a positive and overcome things that it's not just been, you know, oh, we're gonna go home, we're gonna take the business home, there's been a lot more complexity to it. So with that being said, of course, your business is based on technology, but what technology do you use to support that business?

J Jon Hawker 18:41

Sure. Well, software as a service, which is SAS, a lot of people probably know that we use a lot of that. So from a technology kind of like back office technology, we use a lot of SAS, like slack Trello and a lot of the different software platforms, QuickBooks Online, to allow us to, you know, really operate the back end front end, like hardware style. Obviously, we use something to take a picture and that's in our particular case, that's an iPad. And we've integrated our software iPad technology, which is called twin studio, which takes the photos into a LED ring light. And so is this beautiful led ring light that sort of catches your attention, we'll call it an attractor gets people's catches people lie they like Oh, what's that thing? Oh, I can see myself Oh, I can take a picture so we get them involved. We've actually through Bluetooth Bluetooth technology integrated. When you take a photo when you hit the snap, you know snap a do a snapshot button, it'll actually change the LED ring light from you know a rainbow colored or some like red and blue flames into white to give you the white hue that you want on your face when you're taking a photo and allows the iPad to adjust the To that lighting and take a better photo for your. So we've done some of that. And then really up, you know, you know, our software platform is dealing with Android and iOS devices. So Apple devices and you know, name and you know, any Samsung or whatever device that's running Android on it. So we have mobile apps for that. And we've even leveraged the cloud for printing. So in an occasion where you'd want to print a four by six photo at an event, we've created a cloud based print server that we attach to a real fancy printer, that you would use see it like the Walgreens or whatever they do the printing, we use a miniature version of that, and in the cloud, so if you take a picture, you say, print it, anywhere, it can be anywhere on the planet, as long as you're running that print server, and it will print. So if I hit print on the iPad, and the printer happens to be in Guam, it'll print within two or three seconds at that location, no matter where it is in the world, as long as they have internet connections. Oh, so pretty cool piece of technology, which allows us to do some pretty creative things with the printing, you know, in a retail establishment or even at a sporting event. We've used it at museums and that type of thing where you know, you take a picture, and then you can pick it up in the gift shop, for example, which encourages people to go in the gift shop, which encouraged

people to maybe pick up a jersey, or whatnot. So there's just some creative things we can do with that sort of cloud based printing, where we don't have to be in proximity to where the cameras actually located.

H **Halie Morris**   21:34
It'll help move people into the secondary area, like a gift shop, or sometimes just get them away from the one area. So they're not crowding it.

J **Jon Hawker**   21:43
Yeah, you know, pick up, you know, here's your free photo, go pick it up from the guest up, spend $50, on a jersey, whatever. So it's really supporting the entire, you know, kind of retail part of the operation for those types of places.

H **Halie Morris**   21:53
Probably helps right now to is those places that are starting to open up and do more that you can maintain social distancing? And, of course, of course, yeah,

J **Jon Hawker**   22:01
Yeah, we're, obviously very cognizant of that, and working very hard to try to let you know, let our type of technology, you know, work within the scope of that. And so, you know, it's all tricky, but we're working hard to try to create some features that allow us to do that.

H **Halie Morris**   22:17
That's good. That's good. All right. So we've talked a lot about what you do and your tech strategy. Why work with you, particularly versus going somewhere else and finding a similar product or similar service? What do you feel is your favorite part that is a learning to consumers about buying it?

J **Jon Hawker**   22:38
Well, locally, here we do it, we have a rental service, like if people wanted to rent us for a wedding, we've done tons of not for profit events, we've partnered up with, you know, the March of Dimes, we've partnered up with Boys and Girls Club. And many, many other you know, not for profit events who've been great throughout the years, and we create a really

great experience at those. So the not for profit world in the private event world is, you know, if you're just wanting to rent a photo booth that has it, we do have a couple even people that leverage it utilize our platform locally for their own business and events. So certainly welcome to work with them as well, they're, they're great, and they do a fantastic job. You know, in general, if you're looking, if we're looking at like the, you know, restaurant side of things, if you're looking to communicate with your customers, if you're looking to create a fun, engaging experience for your customers, if you're looking to capture imagery for your social media and other marketing platforms. I mean, this is the this is what we're really dialing in on, if you're looking to, you know, be able to send text messages through that communication. These are the types of things that we've been focusing a lot of our energy on, because, you know, we really bring a lot of value to those operations. Because, you know, if you think about pandemic, in particular COVID going on, those people that had lists, were able to communicate with their customers and let them know, we're still open. We're open and these hours were we've we've, you know, started doing curbside pickup, you know, so being able to communicate with your customers. And you're not just commuting. It's not like you're buying a list of people, like you'd like sometimes you buy lists when you're doing marketing, and you're like sending up blast these lists and you're hoping a few of the people respond like these are your customers. These are people that have come to your place experienced your place. If Twinings involved, we've provided them a fun engaging commemorative moment. Now you can just have a conversation with them, and you get them involved in that conversation. And you let them know, and you drive traffic back through your door. And that's really the key to what we're up to is driving traffic back through the door. So, you know, again, looking at kind of the two sides of the coin. Events are fun. And when events are going back on, you know, we, you know, we have these cloud based gallery So, you know, you can take the photos at the event and often you know, someone in another A country that you couldn't invite or couldn't make, it could be looking at the photo gallery and enjoying themselves. Looking at that restaurant side, that's, you know, I think where we bring the most value right now, which is just getting people in the door allowing us, you know, to work with you guys to communicate with them. And, you know, that's, that's ringing the register, and that's the most important thing.

H Halie Morris 25:21

All right, thank you for that. Anything else that you would like to touch on before we wrap up here?

J Jon Hawker 25:30

I really appreciate the opportunity to come sit down with you guys and chat about what

we're up to. You know, it's been a challenging time, but we're working our tails off to try to keep the dream alive. And you know, if anybody has any questions, they certainly, you know, hopefully, you'll just post them information about where to how to reach out to us but you can give us a call, you can shoot us an email, and we'd be happy to answer your questions and see if we could support you.

H Halie Morris 25:54
So we will add in all of John's contact information, everything that you need to know about sign it and our blog posts that we're going to create. And if you wish to follow up, I definitely recommend that as well as just kind of touch base learn more about their company through this. This has been a great conversation. So I want to thank you, john, for coming on. And I want to thank everybody for tuning in. Thank you.

J John Hawker 26:17
Absolutely my pressure. Thank you!