

Mashable

Mashable: Startups

6 Successful SXSW Startup Launch Stories

Sarah Kessler

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As part of this year's SXSWi, Mashable presents the [Mashable SXSWi House](#), featuring private events, open houses, meet-and-greet opportunities and two nights of parties. Learn more [here](#) and register for public events on [Eventbrite](#).

Startups vie for a chance to be part of the SXSW Accelerator competition for the opportunity it brings — 41% of the companies that have participated in the first two competitions received funding after the event. Only 40 companies are selected, but that doesn't mean your startup can't make a splash in Austin. Just being at SXSWi and exposing a solid product to the conference's 14,000 attendees and a 1,500-person-strong media swarm can ignite a business.

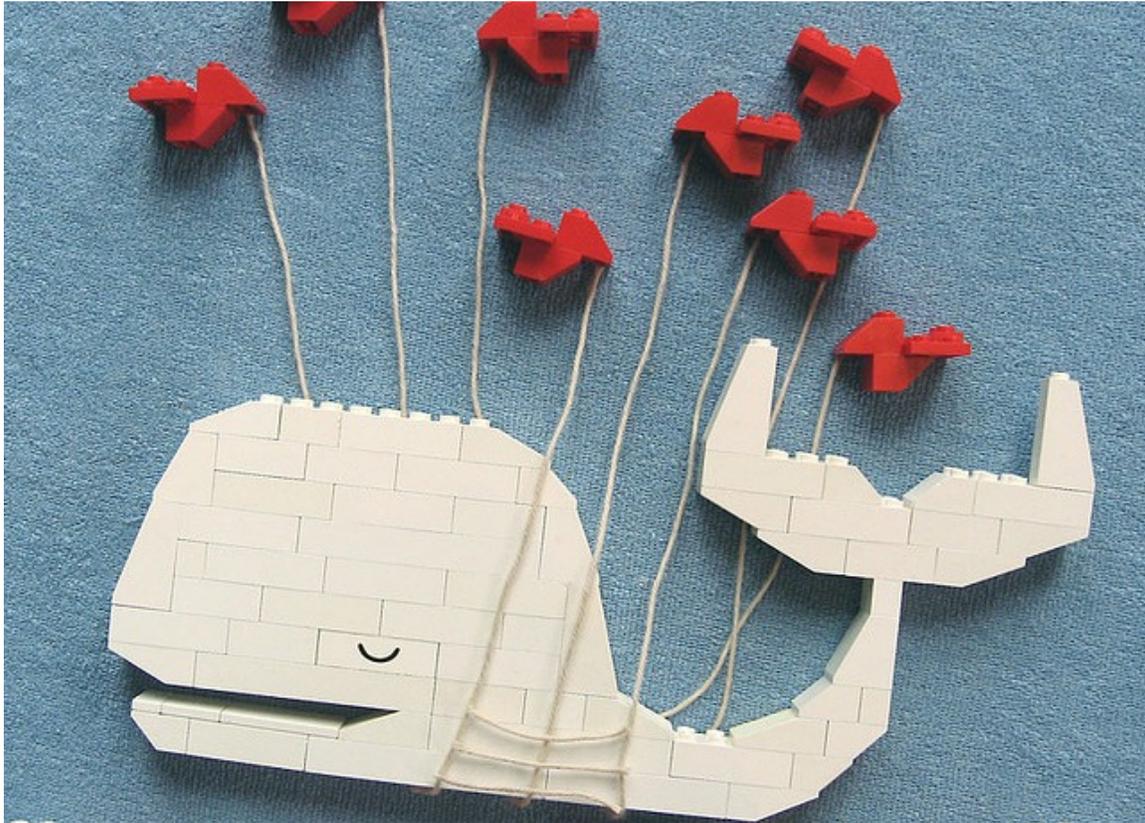


But it can't be engineered with snazzy swag and marketing dollars — you have to have great credibility and a great product.

“As a marketer, I'm happy to call out other marketers who think that SXSW launch success can be engineered or bought — it has to instead be earned with so much elbow grease and good will,” explains [Josh Jones-Dilworth](#), who has worked on SXSW's PR and serves on the [SXSW Accelerator](#) advisory board. “If anything, SXSW-goers are marketing-averse, super-savvy and able to triage credibility (or lack thereof) with a sniff.”

Without further ado, here are five companies (and an author) that have effectively leveraged the multi-industry conference into a launchpad for their success.

1. [Twitter](#)

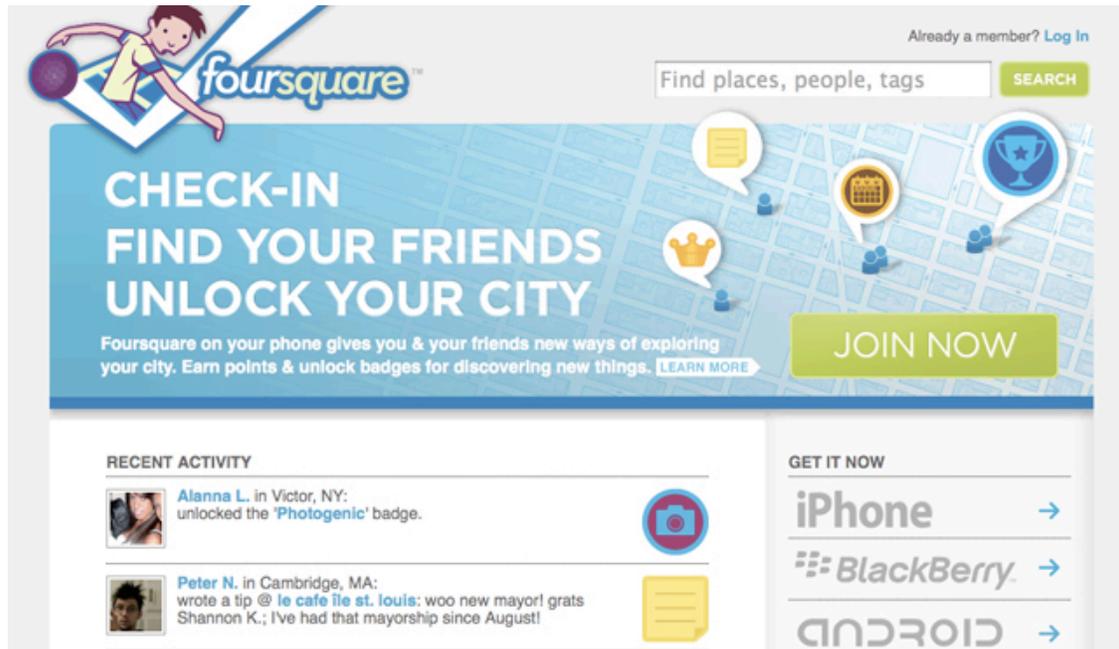


Although Twitter is the company most-often cited in lists of successful SXSW launches, it actually launched nine months prior to its debut at SXSW 2007. “Contrary to common belief, we didn’t actually launch Twitter at SXSW — SXSW just chose to blow it up,” wrote Twitter co-founder Evan Williams in a [Quora response](#) to the question, “What is the process involved in launching a startup at SXSW?”

The conference did, however, help the micro-blogging platform gain momentum.

According to Williams, Twitter paid \$11,000 to put a visualization of the service on flat-panel screens in the hallways (“We knew hallways were where the action was,” he says), and created an event-specific feature that allowed attendees to text a message in order to sign up automatically and follow a handful of “ambassadors” at SXSW.

2. Foursquare



Foursquare is another of the most well-known SXSW launches — but unlike Twitter, the location-based service actually *did* launch at the event. “We started building Foursquare in late 2008, but we really kicked things into gear in early 2009 so we’d have something ready to launch at SXSW — it gave us a deadline to shoot for,” says co-founder Naveen Selvadurai. “We weren’t sure if people were going to embrace us or laugh us out of the room for features like badges and mayorships, but everyone in Austin really seemed to get it.”

The startup raised its first round of funding six months after its SXSW launch.

3. [PhoneBooth Free](#)



Phonebooth sent a team of 11 and shipped five phone booths to SXSW 2010 for the launch of its free small business calling service, [Phonebooth Free](#). “The booth itself drove hundreds of people to sign up for Phonebooth Free on the spot, and they told their friends about the product, too,” says Phonebooth Senior Vice President and General Manager Jim Mulcahy. “The launch at SXSW got us several thousand users within the first two days and a ton of visibility with press and influencers. By the end of March, we were still seeing the effects of the SXSW launch on new-user acquisition.”

4. [GameSalad](#)



Free game creation tool GameSalad participated in the [SXSW Accelerator](#) in 2009. At the time, it had just five employees and was searching for funding to expand.

The Accelerator, which is sponsored by [Microsoft Bizspark](#), is a two-day competition in which selected startups pitch to a panel of VC and angel investor judges for a grand prize of a “most innovative” title. But it’s more than that.

“The night before the Accelerator presentation, all participants were invited to an event called Tech Cocktail, where Accelerator startups were given the opportunity to mix and mingle with the very same VCs and angel investors they would be pitching to 24 hours later,” says Jonathan Hunt, GameSalad’s director of communications. “Within one hour, GameSalad had secured its first investment check.”

Hunt attributes more than \$1 million in investments over the next five months directly to the Accelerator contest. Since then, the company has tripled in size, and more than 2% of the games currently available on the Apple App Store were built on its platform.

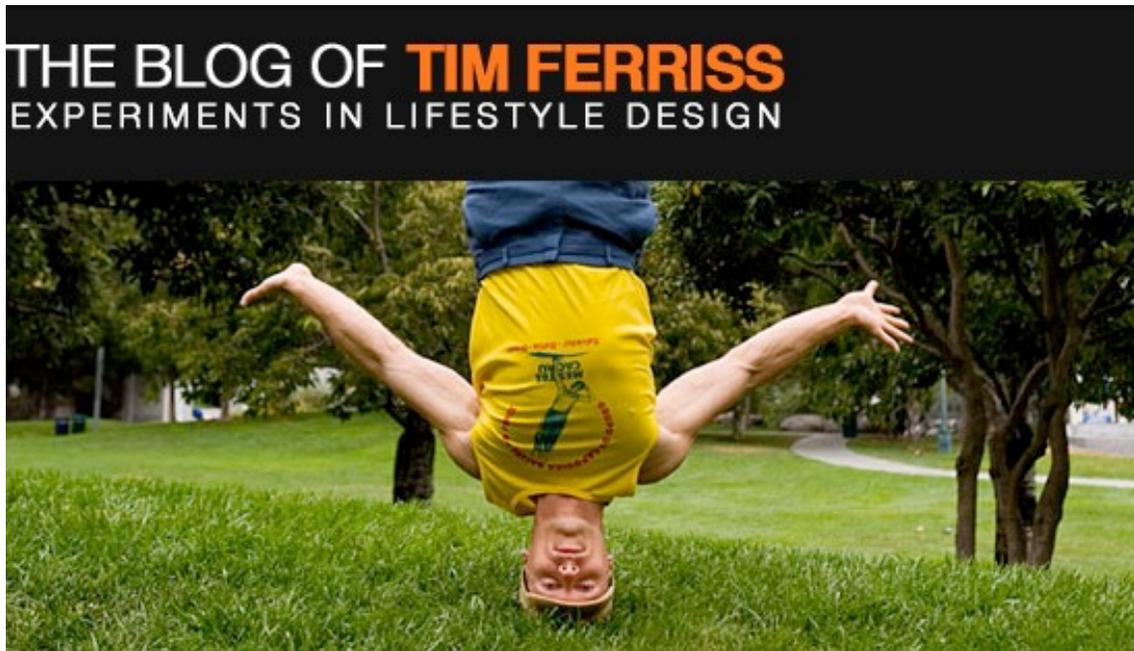
5. Foodspotting



Foodspotting was a finalist in the 2010 SXSW Accelerator. The company, which makes it easy for foodies to share photos of dishes, launched its iPhone app just before the event. It is taking the same approach this year with its Android app.

“We found that the most important thing for us was being present at SXSW and having people see our “I Camera Food” t-shirts — gaining that brand awareness and exposure is key,” says Fiona Tang, Foodspotting’s Community Lead.

6. [Tim Ferriss](#)



Author Tim Ferriss gave a presentation about his first book, *The Four-Hour Workweek* at SXSW 2007 in an overflow room that could seat a mere 100 people. But that talk, combined with some minor marketing efforts, was enough to launch his career.

“If I had not gone to SXSW, I almost definitively can say that I would not have been able to build the writing career that I did, nor the startup, investing and advising career that I did,” he says. “I really view that first SXSW as a pivotal inflection point for me.”

Ferriss says size doesn’t matter when it comes to audience. What matters is that you talk with the right people and make a strong impact on those people — which he did for his 100-person crowd.

“If you hit the right 100 people at SXSW with Twitter and so forth, you can effectively hit everyone there if you have a strong impression,” he says.

[Disclosure: Microsoft BizSpark is a Mashable sponsor.]

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If you're going to be at SXSWi, join *Mashable* at the [Mashable SXSWi House](#). Located at Buffalo Billiards, the Mashable SXSWi House is hosting a variety of public and private events such as VIP dinners, the [Geek Games](#), open networking opportunities and parties, including the third annual MashBash SXSWi party on Sunday, March 13, with music by DJ Chicken George.

Register for public events at the SXSWi Mashable House on [Eventbrite](#). The event is open to all SXSWi badge holders who are older than 21.



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