

A portrait of Niklas Jansen, a man with dark, wavy hair and a beard, wearing a light blue button-down shirt. The background is a textured, light grey wall. The entire image is framed by a thick orange border.

**HOW NIKLAS
JANSEN AND
BLINKIST
CREATED A
SERVICE THAT
PROVIDES A
PRICELESS
ASSET—TIME.**

**SUCCESS
STORY**

EDUCATION ON THE GO

A man with a beard and a microphone, sitting and speaking. He is wearing a dark sweater and has his hands clasped in front of him. The background is dark with some blue light.

Raise your hand if you've experienced the all-too-common dilemma of wanting to read new books but instead falling slave to long hours and mindless digital content consumption. (I'm raising mine right now.)

Self-education takes time, and time is often the one asset we don't have nearly enough of.

Well, Niklas Jansen found a way to give his customers more time. "My friends and I didn't have time to read books, and we were working full time. We also noticed more people consuming content on their mobile phones," he says. "We wondered, 'Is there a smarter way to combine these two things?'"

This was the very question that Niklas Jansen and three of his friends addressed as they formulated the idea for Blinkist, a mobile app subscription that provides 15-minute insights from the bestselling books we all wish we had the time to read.

Today, Jansen and his team of 130 are bringing ideas from the best nonfiction books to some of the busiest people on the planet. Blinkist is paving a new path for modern content consumption and self-education, and they're doing it in a remarkable way.

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Launch Day

Jansen has been an entrepreneur since he was in college. He did consulting for a couple of years, but once the idea for Blinkist hit him, he moved to Berlin and dove right in. That was seven years ago.

As Jansen and his three co-founders developed the company, they each managed different parts of the business: content, product, operations, and marketing. (Jansen owned the product side.) The team tried to stay lean from day one, a decision they're happy about today because, as they scaled Blinkist, they didn't become distracted by a large team.

"We had to figure out so much every day," Jansen says. Keeping the team small allowed Jansen and his co-founders to hustle every day, soaking in new knowledge by trying new things, reading voraciously, and talking to others. This process was especially important for Jansen, as he had no experience with product management prior to Blinkist.

Despite initial obstacles, it only took a couple of months to build the first version of the Blinkist product. To keep the development process simple, Jansen and his co-founders decided they only needed three things to get started: a mobile application, 50 nonfiction books to populate the app, and a marketing plan. "After five months, we were ready to launch," Jansen says. "We

were incredibly productive in that time."



As the Blinkist team did their competitive research, they found that there was only one similar product on the market, but since it served a different audience and used a different business model, they weren't worried. "We designed our content for mobile from day one in order to be different," Jansen says.

Blinkist closed their launch day with five customers, "after our parents, of course," Jansen says, laughing. To promote the launch of their product, the Blinkist team published a variety of articles in startup magazines and relevant websites. Jansen had high expectations for launch day.

"I thought everything was going to explode," he says.

The number of initial Blinkist customers was fewer than Jansen expected, but he still enjoyed watching people discover and purchase the product. "It felt good to watch it grow."

And grow it did. Blinkist is now a worldwide product with major markets in the US, Canada, Australia, Great Britain, and Germany.

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Growing Sustainably

The leap from five customers to more than five global markets wasn't an easy one. It took years of trial and error, but Jansen and his team eventually scaled Blinkist to a successful, profitable level.

With unique approaches to fundraising, marketing, and team management, Jansen has lots of valuable insights to share with aspiring founders.

As they built the company, Jansen and his team raised about \$35 million from investors in the US, Germany, and other parts of Europe. They raised their first \$300,000 as early stage, pre-seed money. If he could, Jansen isn't sure that he'd do that part again.

"We felt a pressure to use it without having figured out a lot of things," he says. He

also suggests other founders be careful about taking on too much money too early. "Investors have expectations, and building a company takes time. Mistakes can be more costly if you have too much money in the bank."

Of course, money can be helpful, but with too much, it can be tempting to spread your business too thin, too early. "If you can do one thing really, really well, that can be your superpower," Jansen says.

Working from a small budget can also help you focus.

Jansen boils Blinkist's marketing strategy down to one word: Sustainability. "It's important that whatever you do in marketing to grow your company is repeatable," he says.

For example, Jansen wouldn't consider PR a sustainable growth channel. It might work a few times, but after one or two days, PR stops being effective. "Marketing needs to be able to be repeated and sustainable," he explains. "You don't want to burn money for customers."

As for Facebook and other social advertising, Jansen and his team know precisely how to target their customers and how much they're going to spend on acquisition. Through different campaigns focusing on different creative elements, his team was able to conduct A/B testing and determine what the best parameters were.

They now apply those parameters to replicate successful campaigns.

"It involves lots of mechanics and details, but once you find something that works, you can scale it," Jansen says. "That's why we call it a 'marketing machine.' We automate as much as possible."

Recently, Blinkist has started investing in TV advertising—a completely new channel for the company. "It's very different from the others, but it's exciting because now we're part of mass marketing and mainstream media," he says.

Additionally, Jansen and his team rely heavily on word-of-mouth marketing and customer stories to grow the Blinkist brand. "It's a very shareable product," he says. "People share stories about

how they use Blinkist and how it improved their lives." The team also polls customers and uses the feedback they receive to further improve the mobile app.

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ith such a robust strategy, one must wonder how the Blinkist team manages so many marketing channels. Contrary to what you might think, the team doesn't outsource any of its marketing strategy or creative work.

Blinkist keeps everything in house, which is helpful for making lots of updates and changes to a campaign or strategy. "We want full control of the whole customer experience and what customers see from Blinkist," Jansen says.

What started with the Blinkist co-founders testing various ads has turned into a team of six to seven tech marketing experts. Today, they manage their marketing by channel: Two managers for paid social (such as Facebook and Instagram), one for paid content (such as Outbrain), one for AdWords and Google, one for podcast and influencers, and one for TV.

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he team also retains a creative team in house, including videographers, designers, and copywriters. These folks work with the Blinkist channel managers, who develop audiences and strategies. These managers, in turn, go to the creatives for the right vision or creative assets.

A single, in-house creative team can be tough to share across an organization, but Jansen believes Blinkist has established a good model for dividing resources. "Some designers work directly with marketing. Video and copy are shared

with other teams, but they do prioritize marketing needs."

At Blinkist, this model works because the marketing sees faster duration cycles than the product teams do. Marketing has daily cycles of content production, whereas product managers deal with longer cycles of design-build-test-repeat.

The entire Blinkist team still resides in Berlin. "We haven't expanded offices yet," Jansen says. "So far, we've established a global business, but we work entirely out of Berlin."

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What's Next

While Jansen doesn't plan on expanding the Blinkist team outside the Berlin office, he is excited for the international growth of the Blinkist product. The team is currently pushing into brand new markets and eventually wants to expand to be a truly global brand.

They're also making changes to how they select and source the content available on the Blinkist app, by selecting local curation from different markets. "We want to find what's popular in each market and be very local when selecting and curating content," Jansen says.

He's also aspiring to build out more original content under the Blinkist brand. Right now, the product is mainly focused on third-party books and authors, but there's a potential to create a learning space and provide new content formats.

At the moment, Blinkist is a curation tool, but Jansen can see the product creating original content, not unlike what Netflix has done. "We know what users like and their behaviors and favorite topics," he said. "We can use that data to make original content that our customers love."

Above all, Jansen encourages other founders to stay on top of what's happening. "Learn as much as you can," he says, "whether through books or podcasts or Blinkist!"

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