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Gary Vaynerchuk: What I've Learned

Technology leader, CEO, 38

By Cal Fussman



Getty Images

noisy social world.

If I could instill anything into anybody I love and care about it would be self-awareness.

The foremost technological storyteller of our time, Gary Vaynerchuk, couldn't speak English when he came to America from Belarus.

He was three years old. A series of moves took him from Queens to New Jersey, but he always felt at home wherever he went because he loved to meet strangers — which is one reason why he's so attracted to and comfortable around new technologies.

His passion for selling and studying how people think started with baseball cards as a teenager. At age fourteen, he was selling \$2,000-\$3,000 worth of cards on his weekends. He used similar storytelling strategies to create Wine Library and take his family's liquor business from \$3 million to \$60 million in sales.

Now, he runs and storytells at VaynerMedia, which works with Fortune 500 companies to develop digital and social media strategies. A best-selling author, Vaynerchuk recently released Jab, Jab, Jab, Right Hook. How to tell your story in a

I was a D and F student. Which is a *real* shocking thing for an immigrant. Education is the way out, and my parents' Russian friends pushed education very heavily. It's hard for people to wrap their head around somebody getting Ds and Fs and then having the success that I've had. But a lot of my success is predicated on self-awareness.

My mind was elsewhere. From 12 or 13, I just wanted to sell stuff. When you're selling two or three thousand dollars worth of baseball cards a weekend at the age of 14, you start prorating. That's \$100,000 to \$150,000 a year. Back in the 1991 or 1992, those were big numbers. You start to wonder. *Imagine if I could sell from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. every day. That's a half a million, easy.* When you're thinking like that, you start veering off. I just didn't have interest in Saturn or run-on sentences or what was inside a frog.

I made a lot of money because I bought rookie cards of people that weren't good yet. I basically sold people on the notion that they were going to be good. Kenny Lofton should have been rookie of the year. Screw you, Pat Listash.

My first day in my dad's liquor store when I was 14 seemed stupid. What is all this stuff? I fell in love with it when I was 16. It wasn't the first taste. It was the storytelling. This is like sports cards! People know the stars. Ken Griffey Jr. is like Opus One. Michael Jordan is Chateau Lafite. The reason I built Wine Library was I was able to story-tell about wines that weren't big yet. Wines that I felt were going to be big. A new vintage comes out every year — just like a new set of baseball cards. Collecting. That was the frame.

After a year and a half of doing my wine show on the Internet, I was a guest on Conan O'Brien's show. I became the first famous wine guy who was contemporary. That was like reaching the end zone. After that moment, I started becoming more passionate about technology.

I've always had a lot of passion for how people think about buying. That's what I care about: Absorbing people's thoughts or actions — not their words. Because if I'd gone by words, seven years ago people said they'd never go on Facebook or Twitter. But I knew they would — because I was watching their actions.

We, as human beings, love to draw lines in the sand when it comes to innovation. *I'm not going to wear Google glasses — that's like a robot.*

But go back in time and think about older people who said:

“I’m not getting a color TV. I grew up with this black and white, and there’s nothing wrong with it.”

Evolution is always going to happen. Technology is always going to happen. Innovation is always going to happen. We as human beings are headstrong. So we communicate our first fears, but then we act on them.

I spend a lot of time making my success by creating opportunities through the notion of knowing what people are going to do when they say they’re not.

Technology. Same thing. I talk about things that aren’t big yet. I introduce people to Snapchat and Vine. But, the one common thread through everything I’ve told you is I never bullshitted. I only talk about apps that I believe are actually going to be big.

Because you miss enough that if you bullshit even a little it shifts your percentage too far toward being wrong — and then you’re out. My life is predicated on being right. I was right about Frank Thomas. I was right about Kenny Lofton. I was right about Bryant Family cabernet. I was right about Twitter and Tumblr. Without that success, you’re not sitting across from me right now. Without that success, I’m a snake-oil salesman.

Success is reinforcement.

It’s been funny to watch entrepreneurship become such a sexy word — especially tech entrepreneurship. It’s been Hollywoodized. Mark Zuckerberg’s story becomes a movie — The Social Network. Now it sounds exciting to do something on the computer to tons of 13 to 15 year olds who are in the middle or the upper middle and want to become billionaires.

Going into technology doesn’t feel like you have to go outside and take a thousand free throws like Larry Bird did. Or take six hours of piano lessons and go to auditions every day. It feels easy. It feels scalable. Which is great — but I caution people to be very self-aware.

Always bet on your strengths.

We don’t bet on our strengths enough in America. We’re taught to work on our weaknesses. Lose weight. Get smarter. Go to grad school. There’s big business in America to story-tell to people to be good at what they’re not good at.

I just found the things that I was good at and I went 150 percent into all of them. That’s all I do. Then I rinse and repeat over and over. The world changes.

That’s what makes it feel fresh when I rinse and repeat.

Anything that’s happened before is borderline irrelevant. I’m not religious about the way things are.

It’s all a blank slate. Anything can be done.

I'll use a sports analogy to tell you what I am. Took me a while to figure it out, but it really works for me. I'm a cornerback. I'm not a quarterback. I'm not a receiver. I'm a cornerback. I react.

Kodak didn't lose because digital cameras were invented. It lost because it didn't react to that reality and own it. Kodak needed a cornerback.

Google Glasses are going to be very interesting. Whether Google wins, or somebody else. The idea of smart glasses, smart watches, smart pants — your hat may be smart eventually. Your hat may tell you through your phone that it's about to start raining. I think about that. But I'm a counterpuncher. I'm not too worried about what's going to come in the future. Because the moment I see it, I'll know what to do.

I don't think of accomplishments day to day. I don't think in terms of accomplishments at all, actually. I think of it in terms of process. To me, working 17 hours that day was the accomplishment.

When you have the taste of immigrant lifestyle, you have the taste of zero. If you have the taste of coming from a communist country and coming to America, you have the taste of all this opportunity. There's no secret police going to put you in jail if you accomplish something. Or lead you away if you say the wrong thing. It seems amazing. Americans born into this country are unfortunate to lack the context of their opportunities.

I don't love the science of winemaking. I love the notion of what wine actually does. Wine is a gateway to spending time with the people you love.

Why is fashion such a big industry? It's a multi-billion — maybe a trillion — dollar industry because it's all about storytelling.

The word context is massively important to me. It's the framework — the way you tell stories. Framework matters.

Everybody is a storyteller. Everybody is in the media business. We just never looked at it that way — but I have since Day 1.

What I am is an entrepreneur. I think that one of the great misnomers right now in our society is the lack of understanding of how much of entrepreneurship is artistic. Everybody thinks of business people as very black and white. For me, it's very much a craft and an art.

Bring value. Two words. That's it. *Bring value.*

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