

STANDING OUT IN A CROWD



Crowdfunding websites extend the financial reach of artists and entrepreneurs

Gone are the days of the starving artist.

The ubiquity of the Internet allows creative people — authors, musicians, artists, and film makers — as well as entrepreneurs, small-business owners and inventors to reach into the wallets of friends, family, and even total strangers in new ways through crowdfunding, a web-based vehicle for fundraising.

Crowdfunding, simply put, is a way to raise money for a projected business venture through small donations by hundreds or even thousands of individual contributors over the Internet. And those small chunks of change add up to billions.

According to a 2013 Forbes article, the crowdfunding industry generated \$2.7 billion in 2012 through more than a million funding campaigns around the world. The industry was expected to hit \$5.1 billion by 2013.

Sites like Kickstarter, Indiegogo, and others provide a platform for artists and entrepreneurs to tap the generosity of the global Internet village to fund projects a varied as films, books, websites, painting, and crafts, to commercial ventures seeking start-up money to fund technology solutions, manufactur-

ing processes, you name it.

Since its founding in 2009, Kickstarter has generated \$1.2 billion in funding from nearly 2 million backers for more than 19,000 projects. In 2013 alone, the site generated \$480 million from 3 million individuals in 214 countries around the world.

Considered the second-largest funding site, Indiegogo.com, founded in 2008, has funded fewer projects than Kickstarter. The company doesn't publish overall funding totals, but estimates place the figure at about a sixth of Kickstarter's.

But Indiegogo remains a popular source because its funding model, unlike Kickstarter, allows project creators to keep funding even if they fall short of their overall goal. (More on the all-or-nothing versus keep-it-all models later.)

And then there are dozens of other crowdfunding sites with names like Crowdfunder, RocketHub, and Crowdrise, all with slightly different methods and goals, but opening the door to millions of projects that might otherwise languish in obscurity for lack of funding. Some sites focus on artistic endeavors, others on causes and charity, still others on commercial ventures. For instance, a site like Quirky allows inventors, makers, and tinkerers to find cash to turn their gadgets to life.

A search on the two most popular crowdfunding sites, Kickstarter and Indiegogo, reveals hundreds of projects by Virginians ranging from films, e-books, websites, to small businesses, like the Old

Photo by Doug Stroud

Dylan Nicholls raised money on Kickstarter to help fund his film 'The Shedrick Thompson Case: The Last Lynching in Virginia.' Since its founding in 2009, Kickstarter has generated \$1.2 billion in funding.

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Locally, two young Fauquier film makers and a Front Royal painter turned to crowdfunding to raise the cash they needed to complete their projects.

Two films and 31 ballparks

Fauquier college students Brendan Rijke, 21, and Dylan Nicholls, 18, recently turned to Kickstarter to raise funds for film projects. Both young men are college students, Rijke a senior at the University of Virginia and Nicholls a rising sophomore at James Madison University.

Rijke's film "Fifth Street" was shot on location in Warrenton and tells the tale of Adele, who always wanted to become a famous writer. "Fifth Street" illustrates a young woman's journey toward self-discovery. The short film examines the ways we make meaning from past experiences," according to Rijke.

The film project began in November 2013 when his friend Shane Dutta contacted him about making a short narrative film in the spring. "He knew that I had a background in cinematography and he in music and writing, so we decided to partner with Niki Afsar, another UVA student, to collaborate on drafting the film's screenplay," Rijke said.

They spent three months writing the script and another five months on production, including casting and location scouting, before finally shooting the short in Warrenton last May. "We collaborated with Levi Magyar, a local Fauquier filmmaker, for post-production, which lasted a total of two months," he said.

He and his partners needed to raise money to pay for film equipment rental, post-production tasks, prepar-

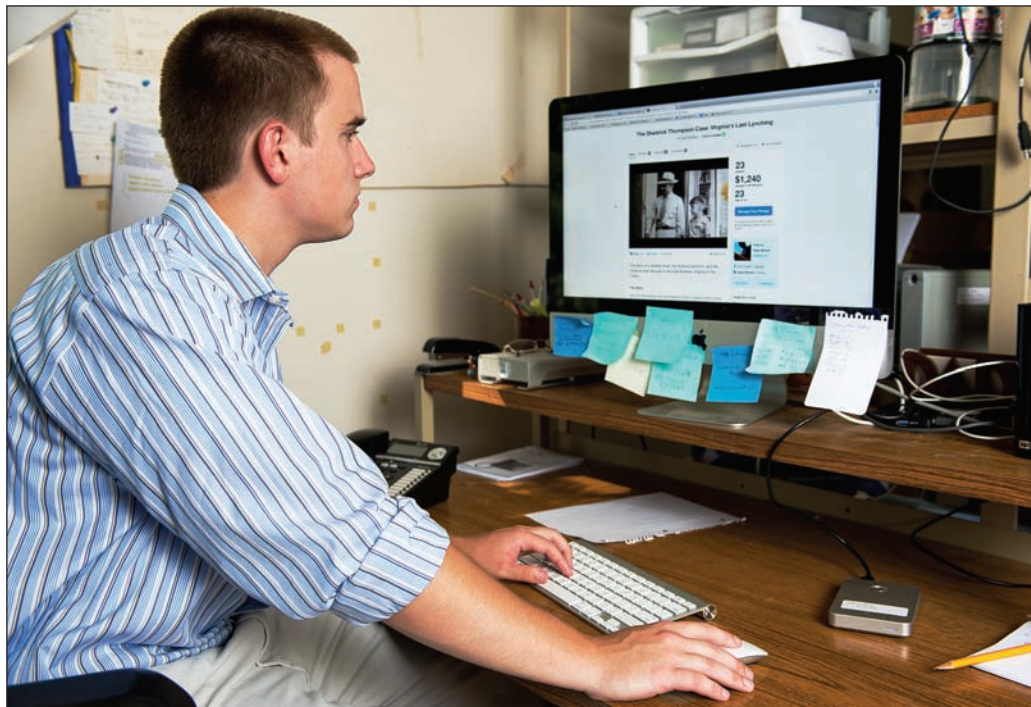


PHOTO BY DOUG STROUD

Dylan Nicholls' film, "The Shedrick Thompson Case: The Last Lynching in Virginia," chronicles a mysterious unsolved murder of a farmhand in northern Fauquier County in the 1930s. The film tells the tale of the brutal beating and rape of Henry and Mamie Baxley by their tenant Shedrick Thompson.

ing the film for exhibitions, and film festival submission fees. They considered Indiegogo, but liked the "all-or-nothing" aspect of Kickstarter, which they believed added more urgency to the fundraising effort.

Rijke launched the Kickstarter campaign last spring and went on to beat his goal of \$2,000 by 228 percent, generating \$4,550 by the April deadline. The surplus provided additional flexibility in equipment rental and the number of film festival submissions they could afford.

"The size and degree of support from the Fauquier community, friends, and family is something that we never expected and are wholeheartedly grateful for," Rijke said.

Only a week into his own Kickstarter campaign, Dylan Nicholls' project passed the

halfway mark with \$1,090 pledged by 22 supporters toward the \$2,000 goal. His film, "The Shedrick Thompson Case: The Last Lynching in Virginia," chronicles a mysterious unsolved murder of a farmhand in northern Fauquier County in the 1930s.

The film tells the tale of the brutal beating and rape of Henry and Mamie Baxley by their tenant Shedrick Thompson. After the attack, an outraged community formed a search party to find Thompson, but it was two months later that his body was found hanging from a wild apple tree. His death was ruled a suicide at the time.

Working with Delaplane film maker Tom Davenport, who in the 1990s interviewed the then-surviving witnesses of the event, Nicholls began piecing together the various

interviews along with new ones by other surviving witnesses and their descendents.

The film examines several unanswered questions about the attack and subsequent hanging. "Why would a black man commit such a crime in 1930s Virginia?" the Kickstarter synopsis asks. "Though in many instances the black and white communities interacted amicably, racial tensions were enough to make this a virtual act of suicide on Shedrick's part."

Also, the film seeks answer on who caught the man, and why his death was considered a suicide.

Nicholls also initially considered Indiegogo, but he had been hearing "a lot of buzz" about Kickstarter among his college friends at JMU. In addition, he heard news stories talking about

film projects netting millions for their producers.

“Some big film makers have stopped going to production companies and started to fund independently on Kickstarter,” Nicholls said. “It just felt like Kickstarter was getting a lot of publicity and seemed like the place to start.”

Painter Kelly Walker in Front Royal also determined that Kickstarter was the place to launch her unusual project “Painted Diamonds—30 Ball Parks in 30 Weeks.” Her campaign, which ended in May 2013, beat its fundraising goal of \$4,800 by 119 percent, raising \$5,712 from 82 supporters.

Her ambitious project involved creating a painting of every major league ballpark, 30 in total, between April and October 2013, the 30 weeks before the World Series. She needed money to pay for canvas, frames, paint, and other

items needed to actually produce the paintings.

The project ended with an exhibition of the entire series at the Blue Ridge Arts Council in Front Royal during World Series week, Oct. 23-31, 2013. The opening featured all-American ballpark fare of hot dogs, peanuts, and Cracker Jack.

“I was actually looking for a project that might be good for doing on Kickstarter,” she said. “I like painting things in series from time to time. I tried to come up with something I could do that would have a wide enough appeal that supporters would want to fund it.”

Keys to success

One the biggest challenges faced by everyone seeking funding on crowdfunding sites comes down to simply spreading the word. With so many projects on the site, artists find it difficult to stand out in the crowd. Without constant pro-

motion, their projects fall further down the list and become buried by other more popular endeavors.

Also, the all-or-nothing funding model for Kickstarter places tremendous pressure on artists like Walker who had to start painting her 30 ballparks well ahead of the fundraising deadline just to make sure she finished all the paintings in time for the October opening.

“If you’re a full-time artist and you’re throwing yourself out there for a project and then wind up with not enough people to fund a project, you don’t look like a very successful artist,” Walker said. “There was a lot of pressure to get there.

“I needed to stay ahead of it in order to get the 30 [paintings finished] in 30 weeks. I think I had already painted three or four before [the fundraising campaign] actu-

ally closed,” she said.

And the biggest fear for many comes from seeing their project lose momentum and fizzle out before the relatively short fundraising window (often 30 to 60 days) closes.

“I do worry about it losing momentum, but I keep hitting it every day and sending out new emails,” Nicholls said of his campaign. He regularly asks his 500-plus friends on Facebook to like and share his Kickstarter page.

Viral marketing — good old word of mouth — remains the best way to raise the profile of a crowdfunding project. If every one of Nicholls’ 500 Facebook friends shared the project’s website link, the potential reach would extend to thousands of potential donors.

Since Rijke’s project had only 29 days to reach the \$2,000 fundraising goal, his team targeted its efforts on

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spreading the word via the film's official Facebook page and in a number of newspaper publications, including the Fauquier Times and other local media outlets.

"While we laid the foundation for the campaign, we gained momentum through word of mouth and the support of people sharing the Kickstarter page on their respective social media pages," Rijke said. "We tried to do as much research and preparation before we launched the campaign in order to make the funding period as effective as possible."

Walker said organization is critical to crowd sourcing success. "You need to be organized in what you're doing, especially for whatever time period you have it up there," she said. "You have to be organized enough that you can promote, promote, promote during that time period."

In her case, Walker made



PHOTO BY ALISA BOOZE TROETSCHER

'The cool thing for me as an artist is a couple of people who funded me through the Kickstarter project have bought other paintings since then,' Front Royal-based artist Kelly Walker said.

regular posts on her blog at www.lifeofadailypainter.com. She's been blogging for several years and has quite a following, which helped spread the word when she launched the ballpark project. Of the 82

people who contributed to the project, Walkers said she knew about half personally; the rest she thinks came through her blog.

"The cool thing for me as an artist is a couple of people

who funded me through the Kickstarter project have bought other paintings since then," she said. "People started following the blog from Kickstarter. If they see something they like, they send me a message, and then I sell a painting."

Rijke said the single greatest factor that contributed to the "Fifth Street" campaign's success turned out to be support from the local Fauquier community. "I have lived in Warrenton for most of my life and growing up in the town was a chief inspiration for the film," he said. "To then receive such generosity and support from my hometown gave the cast and crew the affirmation we needed to complete 'Fifth Street.'"

Follow the instructions

Both Rijke and Walker advise potential crowdsourcing people to pay attention to the



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advice offered by the Kickstarter website, as well as by others who've successfully raised funds for their projects. A simple Google search uncovers tons of useful commentary on how to prepare and promote a project. Articles and blog posts explain the advantages and disadvantages of various crowdsourcing sites, such as Kickstarter, Indiegogo, and Crowdfunder.

An important first step, though, involves understanding the nuances of each fundraising method to determine which one best suits your project.

"Before launching your campaign, I would stress the importance of developing and publishing professional content on your crowdsourcing site," Rijke said. "You have to build a level of trust and, of course, interest from potential backers."

He said the former can be achieved from having a high

degree of transparency and clear communication on your site. "Also, look to other successful online fundraising campaigns that have funded similar projects. Do your homework, and spend time learning how to apply their strategies."

Walker believes the big key to reaching a fundraising goal is "read and believe" the information presented on the crowdsourcing site. "If somebody gives you advice about what works, believe it," she said.

"Kickstarter is not putting stuff on the site for the hell of it," Walker said. "They may make money when you do well, so they want your project to be funded."

Editor's Note: Dylan Nicholls' project, "The Shedrick Thompson Case: Virginia's Last Lynching," can be found at: https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/820575926/the-shedrick-thompson-case-virginias-last-lynching?ref=nav_search.

Which model is right for your project?

Kickstarter, Indiegogo, Crowdfunder, or any of the nearly two dozen funding sites available — the choice of which to use depends on the type of project you're seeking to fund.

There are three primary funding models among the two dozen or more funding sites for artistic or investment projects: all or nothing; keep it all; and bounty.

All or nothing means that when the fundraising period ends, the project gets funded only if the monetary goal is reached. While somewhat risky, the advantage of all-or-nothing is the sense of urgency it gives to your project. The disadvantage? Fall a few dollars short, and you don't get the money.

Keep it all allows the creator to keep the collected funds regardless of whether the funding goal is met. Whether or not you have enough funds to complete (or even begin) your project, it's up to you whether you refund money to your donors.

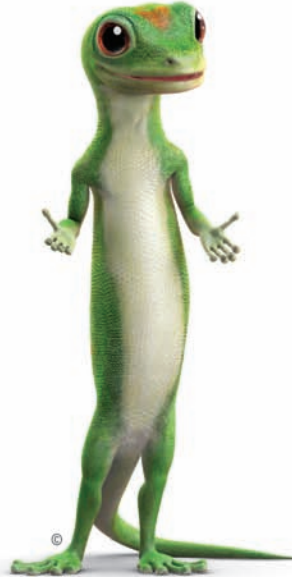
The bounty model provides funds for someone who successfully provides a requested service or a solution to a particular problem.

Kickstarter takes 5 percent of the total raised and another 3 percent to 5 percent to process payments through Amazon Payments. Indiegogo takes 4 percent of the total raised if the funding goal is met, 9 percent if the goal is not met, and charges a 2.9 percent payment processing fee.

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