

Limerick sisters send music 'huggs' to 122 countries

Founded by two Limerick sisters, Huggnote is an app that enables users to share a connection through music.

[Huggnote](#) was founded by two music-loving sisters from Limerick – Jacqui and Perry Meskell. It's a multi-platform application that curates music by emotion, making it easy to find the perfect song for anything you want to express and send it to friends or loved ones, wherever in the world they may be – using just your phone. Here, founder Jacqui discusses their growing company:

Like all great success stories our journey to entrepreneurship began with a need we had ourselves. I was working as a management consultant in Brussels when a friend of mine was going through a tough time at home and I wished I could simply be there to give her a hug. Then by chance a song came on the radio that instantly brought back memories of happier times for us in college and I knew that was the answer. If I could find a way to gift wrap that song somehow and send it direct to her ears – it would say all that I couldn't.

The need Huggnote is meeting is a critical one. Despite all the communication tools at our disposal today, something is missing because social isolation is a growing epidemic, with a knock on effect on health that's on a par with smoking and obesity. In fact, we are twice as lonely now as we were in the 1980s. And so Huggnote really helps because it makes it really easy to have an emotional connection with someone, regardless of where you are in the world. Sometimes words are not enough and music is scientifically proven to have an emotional and physical effect on listeners. It's well known that the right song at the right time can instantly transform your day.

Why did you decide to start Huggnote?

Unable to let go of the idea, we decided to jump in both feet - applying to exhibit our (still non-existent) app at the Collision Conference in Vegas - and six weeks later we were at our Huggnote stand at one of the world's largest tech events. People have great ideas all the time but fear holds them back. So we decided to make sure we couldn't back out. In Vegas we initially felt out of our depth amongst all these extremely technical founders but soon realised that we were the booth with the queue of people lining up to use our product, because they were all in the doghouse with their girlfriends back home and word quickly spread about how well received the 'huggs' were. So we knew we were onto something.

How did you fund and start the business?

After our successful test with a prototype in Vegas, we knew Huggnote met a genuine need and was an enormous business opportunity - we drew up a business plan and applied for Enterprise Ireland's Competitive Start Fund (CSF). Fortunately EI also saw the potential of Huggnote and they awarded the grant first time. EI's support has been invaluable and the CSF enabled us to create our BETA – which is doing incredibly well, so we're now about to raise our pre-seed round which will really help generate momentum. Watch this space!

How did you grow the business

My background as a strategist really helped as regards Huggnote's roadmap because the starting point for any plan begins with the outcome sought. The first thing we understood was that we were in a B2C/global play – which means the likelihood of having to raise serious capital going forward in order to truly scale. That led us to a decision to bootstrap to a point of growth before raising pre-seed. And so that's been really tough and has meant we've had to sacrifice so much in the interim. But it has really paid off. Since December we now have active users in 122 countries – with hardly any marketing at all.

We believe the biggest reason for that largely organic growth is the focus we place on our users. We built Huggnote from the outside in, with the user firmly in focus. For example we started as a web app so users don't have to download anything to send or receive a hugg. And because of that we're delighted to have BETA users pretty much equally spread amongst all age demographics. And interestingly we now have more male users than female by a small margin. So our advice to anyone looking to grow their business is to focus on their customer or user. Really listen to them. Take the time to understand what they want. Take your ego out of the equation – something that's unfortunately very common in the tech world.

Biggest challenges

Without doubt our greatest challenge has been financial as bootstrapping slows you down and it's not a strategy for everyone. If you don't need to bootstrap – don't! Also we didn't come from a tech or start-up background and while the steep learning curve wasn't an issue because we're both extremely fast learners, not having a network was a challenge. We didn't know anyone in the industry and the value of a solid support network is crucial. To that end we have to give a shout out to Pat Carroll and the crew at Bank of Ireland Workbench, who are doing amazing work in Limerick and throughout Ireland and the world! Indeed we've been invited to present at a Digital Irish event in Chicago thanks to a visit to the Bank of Ireland Innovation Lab in New York. And that's how it goes. Doors open when you're in a network. You don't even know there are doors when those doors are there when you're not.

What has helped you most along the way?

The fact that we're doing this with our 'ride-or-dies'. As sisters we're extremely close and that means we know each other inside-out and always have each other's back. Founding a start-up is extremely stressful, it's a bit like high stakes gambling – but the stakes are years of your life. So when one of us gets despondent, the other steps up. And of course there's value in the fact we can have a huge argument but then forget about it five minutes later. In fact I don't know how anyone found a business with a non-family member.

We've also been fortunate to have benefited from excellent accelerator programmes like Google's Adopt a Start-Up in which we came third nationally and the DCU High Fliers Programme for which we were awarded most Innovative Start-Up. Apart from the awards themselves, which are lovely to receive – the first-class mentoring and the amazing peer support from our fellow founders have really made a difference.

And finally, yoga! I'm also a qualified yoga teacher and have to say that payoff of making a daily commitment to my physical and emotional well-being cannot be over-stated.

If you were to do it all again what would you do differently?

We're still only starting out and have a long but hopefully hugely rewarding road ahead - so perhaps better to ask us again in three years. But as a rule we try not to have regrets. That was one of the key drivers for us starting this journey in the first place. Dreaming big and taking risks is in the DNA of entrepreneurs and making mistakes are always going to be part of the equation. So long as you learn from them that's the key.

To send a 'hugg' to someone you love just go to www.huggnote.com and click start hugging! FREE & nothing to download!