

The Tangent Pioneers in New York

Six Irish startups went to New York to network and pitch for a week. This is what happened.

Six Irish startups that met at Trinity, went through LaunchBox, Tangent's Student Accelerator, and received help and support from Bank of Ireland, travelled to New York in October for the inaugural Tangent Pioneers programme.

The Tangent Pioneers worked for one intensive week in the heart of the New York startup scene, basing themselves in the Bank of Ireland Innovation Lab in Midtown. During the week, in addition to setting up customer and investment meetings, they pitched to the Digital Irish; learned from Enterprise Ireland about taking their startups global; had office hours with Techstars and Blackstone VC; and got a sense of what it is to work, network, and lead a startup in the US.

From a mix of industries and backgrounds, the Tangent Pioneers represented Trinity, and Ireland on a global stage for the first time. Here they describe their experiences of the week's work.

Sebastian Kuehn, co-founder & CTO, Work Smarter

For us, a successful trip would mean a positive reception of our concept here in New York and I'm happy to say that we've been able to achieve that so far. While we're not ready to scale out to the US market but it's valuable feedback to know that there is potential for us here. Meeting businesspeople in New York has definitely underscored what we already know - Ireland is a small market, but it's an excellent testing ground and a great place to start. For the pitch events we're participating in, we adjusted our numbers to reflect the US market. It's a great feeling to have such massive numbers up on the screen.

New York surprised me in a very positive way. The city gets a bad rap for being unfriendly, but so far, I've only had positive experiences. The people I have spoken with really give the impression they're happy to be here. The city has a unique energy and you can feel it. Jet lag means I've been waking up at 5 am, so I'm one of the only people walking around the city in the mornings. I can highly recommend grabbing a coffee and watching the city slowly wake up.

Ciara Hennessey, COO, Greener Globe

Before the trip, without context or constraint, success for our startup, Greener Globe, would have looked like getting our product into every store in the US. Now, having worked here on the Tangent Pioneers programme, my mind-set has changed; every connection we make and meeting we have had has been a small success, a small step to building a worldwide company.

Being in New York seems surreal and reality has exceeded my expectations. There is a great buzz and people here are extremely friendly, always accommodating and keen to help us expand and develop our company. A highlight of the week was meeting with Adrian Jones, MD of Goldman Sachs here in NY, who has many years' experience dealing with entrepreneurs. The advice he gave was invaluable and eye-opening, a really different perspective.

When we pitched to an American audience at NYU on day one of the programme, they pointed out an aspect in our pitch which we had never noticed before so that was very constructive. It was challenging to pitch to American investors and businesspeople but we have received some positive feedback and useful constructive criticism. The audiences are very direct which has been good for us to keep us on our toes.

Brían Sparks, Seapunk

Now that we are in the middle of the Tangent Pioneers programme our expectations have adjusted and our measure of success has been recalibrated. With two US pitches under our belt, we are relieved that our style and humour translate well here in NY, and we are encouraged by the engagement and curiosity from our audiences. We will consider the programme a success if we can come home with a clear plan on how to enter the US market along with a headful of inspirational experiences.

The increased scale of funding and the target market in New York is the clearest differentiator compared to the Dublin startup world yet it is clear that we can hold our own over here and the support from Tangent programmes is something we can be proud of.

Here are two most useful tips I have picked up from the Digital Irish pitching event;

1. When pitching for investment in the US - don't mention the **specific amount** of money you are seeking as there are legal implications unless you are addressing only accredited, licensed investors
2. Clearly demonstrate that customers are already using your product or service. The wisest words I have heard this week came to me in conversation with Kevin Mulcahy after pitching at the Cornell Club. "If you would like to be a sales person, please use the back door. If you want to become a thought leader you are very welcome in the front." This was a call to action for me for which I am truly grateful.
3. So far, visiting the Bord Bia offices has been the most constructive experience for us. Ruth and Henry provided us with plenty of local leads to explore and some concrete next steps to follow up when we get back home to Ireland. The most inspirational experience was our group discussion with Oisín Hanrahan the CEO and co-founder of Handy. His humbleness, honesty and determination was a breath of fresh air for me.

Cian Fogarty, co-founder & CEO, Greener Globe

This trip with Tangent Pioneers has already been hugely beneficial to Greener Globe. Our aim coming over was to get a feel for the American market because it's so vastly different to the Irish market. We wanted to broaden our network of connections and establish relationships for when we are ready to step into the American market.

Being entrepreneurs we're used to change, so being here is just another change. Being here and pitching with American teams has shown us the similarities between US and Irish businesses. It's interesting to see how the same general problems are seen in each country and businesses are coming up with similar solutions.

The highlight so far, a truly insightful and greatly beneficial meeting with Adrian Jones from Goldman Sachs. He provided genuine advice and a different perspective which was very valuable for us. Being part of this bustling, inspiring atmosphere of the New York entrepreneurial scene is infectious.

Anika Riley, co-founder & CEO, Work Smarter

Our goal for Work Smarter going into the Tangent Pioneers programme was to do market research and better understand the US market. We set up various meetings and were privileged to meet incredible entrepreneurs and investors at the events here so far. By engaging in our own research and talking with people, we have been able to gather important insights we can use to build our strategy going forward.

My best meeting so far was with a wonderful woman working for a software company in the city. She made me feel incredibly welcome and was generous with her time, giving me valuable insights from her five years' experience working in senior positions within a freelance marketplace. She was able to tell me about the challenges they faced and how they went about surmounting them. It was the kind of insight you just can't find in a book.

I didn't experience any culture shock coming to New York, though it is a bit different to California where I'm from. What really hit me though, and this might sound silly, is how tall the buildings are. I know, ridiculous. Everyone said they would be tall, but it's something you must see for yourself. We worked out of Bank of Ireland's Innovation Lab and they have great offices on the 41st floor. Four days in, it's still surreal to work up in the sky overlooking New York - and I'm still not confident enough to lean on the glass!

Willie Conaghan, co-founder, Change Donations

This week has been an incredibly successful week for our startup Change Donations. The Tangent Pioneers programme has given us access to industry leaders and entrepreneurs whose insights and advice has been so important for our company and ourselves. We wanted New York to essentially be a marketing campaign to potential US nonprofits, as well as a customer validation opportunity to better understand how US donors differ from Irish donors.

Lizzy and I are from the US and worked in New York, and Amelia has had a lot of experience working with US clients in the Entertainment industry, so there really hasn't been any culture shock to speak of. The buzz of the city has been an energetic motivator, and has made our short time here feel like a month's worth of advice and feedback. The most valuable experience so far has been our meeting with Handy CEO and Trinity alumus Oisín Hanrahan. He completely opened up about his whole experience to date: the hardships, his mistakes, his successes, as well some anecdotal comic relief. His understanding of the entrepreneurial process helped us contextualize some of the ideas we were trying to bring down to ground level, and gave us some more clarity as to what we should expect moving forward.

The biggest difference between the Irish investors and the US investors is their directness in rejection. In Ireland, a rejection comes in the form of, "It could be a generational thing, but I'm not sure how strongly this will resonate with your target market", whereas the US rejection is simply, "This will never work". As prior tenants of New York, we were expecting this level of bluntness, but living in Ireland for a year has definitely made us more aware of the cultural differences.

The most enjoyable aspect of this week on a personal level has been the camaraderie of the Trinity community. The Trinity staff, Tangent team, alumni, current students, and affiliates have been incredibly supportive and have shown up in great numbers. Living in Dublin, so far away from my own home, my family, and my network, I know how alienating being alone in a new city can feel. The Trinity brand name has felt more global this past week than it has at any point during my time there.

You can follow the Tangent Pioneers on their international journey on @TCDTangent on Twitter.