

A portrait of Sandro Rehder, a man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a pink shirt. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green and red foliage.

Sandro Rehder

Co-Founder & CTO of ListPop

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Sandro Rehder - The Product Guy

There's no doubt that we love the entrepreneurial fairytale of the young up-start taking over big business with a simple start-up... and while we salute those who do, there's a lot to be said for the guy who used corporate life as a rich training ground to go get his start-up on. We chat with Sandro Rehder, Co-Founder and CTO of ListPop – who did just that.

By Joanne Leila Smith | 31 October 2016

Brazilian born, to a German father and Japanese mother, Sandro Rehder, 40, is the kind of guy that embodies 'international' in every sense of the word. Having a keen interest in all things IT since a wee gromit, Rehder taught himself how to code from the tender age of 11. When he finished high school, he was off to university at Sao Paulo – but surprisingly, IT was not his first choice.

"I don't believe to do IT you need a college degree. I think it's much more about being very interested in technology. So, I studied business administration but after three years, I was so bored I dropped out," says Rehder.

After exploring his options Rehder moved to Montreal to take a programmer role at 22.

"I could only speak Portuguese or English. Montreal is French

speaking and my boss was French Canadian. I saw the resume of another guy, Jacques, a French Canadian, and I asked my boss why he hired me instead? He replied that 'he's the worst Canadian – because he's from Ottawa, he's French, but doesn't speak French, so I'd rather hire a foreigner...' We had fun, but it was freezing cold. After the experience of living without electricity under minus 25 degrees for almost a week after the big ice storm of '98, I thought I need to get out of here!" says Rehder.

In 1998, Brazil was in an economic slump (by 1999, Brazil owed AUD321 billion or 46 percent of GDP to foreign creditors and about to hit a currency crisis) so Rehder was not keen to go home. He went to a job fair in Montreal and found it a fertile ground for companies seeking IT talent. After fielding offers from the US and Canada,

Rehder thought about migrating to Australia.

"This guy from NZ invited me to work in Australia. All I knew about it was Crocodile Dundee and Olympic swimmers because Aussies win all the time!" says Rehder.

Rehder arrived in Bondi, saw Brazilians playing football on the beach and was ready to call Sydney home. Working with a US-based software development company, Claremont, Rehder stayed for two years before moving to work with Siemens in Melbourne for another year. His boss, keen to build a new business, offered Rehder equity to join his company, CommOSS as a good technical pair of hands. After hiring seven people, CommOSS made about one million dollars in revenue with Optus and NDC as its main customers in 2003.

“It was a great lesson in entrepreneurship. It taught me the value of building a product to create revenue. We were always relying on building products and securing purchase orders. Sometimes the client would take a long time to pay us back, and I remember my business partner having to sell his beloved car to pay people’s wages for that month because the client wasn’t going to remit us for another four weeks,” says Rehder.

After 18 months of flogging it out, CommOSS’s major client, Optus, decided to consolidate their outsourcing to a larger vendor – HP. Realising that the IP was not protected, the agreement with Optus meant that they owned what Rehder built. So they either had to go work for Optus as an employee – or lose everything. With his business partner taking up an offer with British Telecom in the UK, Rehder made the move to Optus in Sydney.

It was a hard second lesson for Rehder, but his fortunes were about to change. After four years working for Optus, he was introduced to his new boss the MD for Technology and Products at the time – who would go on to become a major influence and mainstay of Rehder’s professional life – Andrew Buay (he is currently SingTel Group Vice President for CSR and Talent, with an impressive resume – being largely responsible for leading the charge with newly created businesses within SingTel such as SingNet, SingTel Digital Media, and SingTel Ventures).

According to Rehder, Buay had a huge visibility across the business and Sandro was the product guy being called into meetings to explain the technical aspects of their products. Seeing potential in Rehder, Buay realised that Sandro could do a lot of things; he nurtured him and taught him how to position products and explain their value proposition.

“It’s difficult for a tech guy to make a switch to product, but Andrew felt I had a good instinct for it...he gave me so much confidence. He moved me to the digital side of the business and allowed me to put my own team together to build some of my ideas, one of them being a website builder for SMBs...If you went to Optus to get your phone or internet connection, Optus could build you a website that was totally automated for our customers. We were selling SEM on top of that too so it was a great business proposition,” says Rehder.

But one of Rehder’s greatest achievements was how to revamp the whole Optus Zoo portal.

“Optus Zoo was a portal where you would check your account or webmail, and it had a lot of traffic but the bounce rate was very high, because you would do your thing and leave. So we thought, why don’t we make it a news portal? We went to IT and they said it can’t be done – it was going to cost millions of dollars to do it... I was someone who read blogs and I thought, all you need is something like WordPress – but they didn’t agree. My view was, look at CNN, NYTimes, Techcrunch, Mashable... they are all running on WordPress, so why not us?” says Rehder.

After approaching WordPress VIP, they put Rehder in touch with a guy in Silicon Valley who built TechCrunch – Jacob Goldman.

“Jacob was like, this is easy, but it might be a bit pricey, around \$40,000! I couldn’t believe it. So, we built it, and waited until the very last minute before launching to tell IT just to repoint the site. It was a coup, but it worked out well. Mashable had the concept of internet scrolling, which we adopted too because every time the user scrolls down with his mouse, it will load more news that generated more page views, and Optus Zoo was all about crazy click bait, outrageous news, crime, celebrities etc. This exercise taught me the value of market segmentation,” says Rehder.

As most of Optus Zoo readers were stay-at-home mums, Rehder’s team switched the content to focus more on lifestyle, raising children, education, which generated a lot more clicks. This combined with infinite scrolling significantly reduced the bounce rate, increasing page views by tenfold. As a validation that they were on message, one of the Product Managers negotiated a deal to bring in automotive content - needless to say it didn’t attract many views.

After an organisational change, Rehder landed an opportunity to work on an ecommerce product in Singapore with Optus’ parent company, SingTel – Rehder credits that project as giving him a very broad understanding of the digital business. CEO of SingTel Group Digital Life Allen Lew, then moved to Australia and brought his

long-term right hand man – now Amobee Vice President of Business Development, Loo Cheng Chuan (very well known in the start-up ecosystem in Singapore) who became Rehder’s new boss. Chuan invited Rehder to help with the new strategy for Optus, which included revamping Digital, TV and Fixed businesses for Optus in 2015.

“Loo is the hardest working guy I have ever worked with, and really open minded when it comes to innovation. It was an honour to be selected by him to help with Allen’s business transformation. I was part of the strategy team for six months with the likes of Loo, Zeinal Bava (former CEO of Portugal Telecom, elected twice best Telco CEO and three times best CFO in Europe), and a team from McKinsey,” says Rehder.

With Allen’s focus on digital and media, it was key to revisit one of Optus’s core products, Fetch TV. According to Rehder, the business wanted to stop Fetch TV, as the

old guard wanted to resell Foxtel. With Netflix taking off in the US and the world, Rehder understood that streaming content on demand (SVOD) was the future.

“With internet speeds increasing due to NBN, Fetch TV was a great product, it just didn’t have the right content mix. We set about adding more channels on the premise that, if you make the base package compelling enough, like bundling a fixed telephony product with the package – with the right price point, and Netflix to boot, who could say no?” says Rehder.

After negotiating an exclusive deal with Netflix that Optus would be the only company in Australia to offer free Netflix memberships for six months, the Fetch TV product was given new life.

“It generated a lot of growth for the Fixed business and Fetch TV and it showed how important it is to constantly adjust to market demand; that’s what Allen’s leadership stands for,” says Rehder.

After riding the corporate crest, and having a seat at the proverbial inner table, Rehder did the unthinkable. He had an idea that he couldn’t let go.

“I committed career suicide and walked away,” says Rehder.

Rehder’s experience working with the strategy team, meant that he had to read plenty of articles, share them with the team, often via messenger, text or email and it was getting out of control. It was at this moment that Rehder saw a gap in the market.

“I wanted a platform where we can collaborate and have articles in a single place, where we could share that body of knowledge in a closed or open community. So ListPop was born,” says Rehder.

The best way to describe ListPop is it’s like Spotify for content. The user can create a private list of articles, and share between an administrator and selected collaborators. A user may follow

“In the beginning, we had Web 1.0 and info was pushed to the user. Web 2.0 was feedback from the user so technology was a conversation. Dare I say, Web 3.0 – where we have chatbots and IoT, now it’s all about life integration,” says Rehder.



a celebrity or influencer and add items to that list for followers to read it. According to Rehder, Facebook has a lot of noise, commentary, multi-media etc and with the problematic of different time zones, article posts in the news feed may be missed. In Instagram or Pinterest, there's a concentration of images only. So, for ListPop, Rehder wanted to develop a multi-media platform that was people-powered, curated articles.

"ListPop is for the guy who loves reading selected content, is really time poor and just wants to get his interests in one place," says Rehder.

Teaming up with Dennis Goh (a full time startup investor and Co-Founder of Hungrygowhere - the number one restaurant site in Singapore and sold to SingTel for AUD12 million), Rehder feels he is in good hands.

"Dennis has a big content background, so when he flew to Sydney with Loo some years back, we met and connected straight away. Dennis pitched ListPop to Paul Santos, a fellow venture capitalist from Wavemaker (part of the DFJ network - Tim Draper was one of the first investors of Hotmail and Skype) Paul had a look at ListPop and put us in touch with Vincent as a key guy given his background with influencers marketing - which sells viewership to larger companies. Vincent thought ListPop was a great channel for his bloggers and invested in it too," says Rehder.

After finishing the android version in 2015, and with the iOS version due to be launched in Singapore in December 2016, Rehder is

reflective about his journey - and the product which is, in a way, a tangible expression of all his learnings from corporate life.

"ListPop is people powered curation - I want humans to recommend things to me, not an algorithm so this is an ideological - not a business decision. The thing about automation is that nothing new is generated. A lot of the apps that we have, it's a realization of something that already exists - think uber, air bnb...someone put a platform to make an old practice work in an egalitarian, global way. Facebook imitates what we do in life. ListPop is the same. True innovators just look for patterns of behaviour - they connect dots," says Rehder.

According to Rehder, most innovators tend to have a technical background, but their core purpose is not monetary. It's fueled by a desire to create a positive impact on society. Every success 'gadget' needs to have a clearly defined purpose, that in some way, improves how we navigate through the human experience.

"Today technology is ubiquitous. In the beginning, we had Web 1.0 where information was pushed to the user. Web 2.0 was feedback from the user so technology was a conversation. Dare we say Web 3.0? It is much more. We have chatbots and IoT, now it's all about life integration," says Rehder.

While technology has been a huge

influence and blessing for Rehder's livelihood and career projection, Rehder says that looking back over his career, the biggest lessons for him were about humility.

"The amount of resources given to you in a large organisation is amazing. When people are not performing you get rid of them. In a startup, if the guy leaves, you're stuffed. People give their time because they believe in the product. If the guy is on board, he's trying his best... there's a whole level new level of appreciation in start-ups. I think before, because I had the attention of key people, I was spoiled and went over some people and burnt bridges. It was a big lesson for me to try to work with everyone. Good relationships and getting buy in is central to success in large organisations," says Rehder.

As for the kind of leader that Rehder wants to be, should ListPop end up being the next big platform for how we consume content, Rehder says that asking a simple question during interviews will give you a good indication if they are the type of team that will value innovation.

"Always work for someone that lets you shine. When a manager is happy to do the same thing for the next ten years, your creativity will die. If you ask what the manager wants for his business, and he says, 'I want to take the business to a new level' that means he has a business perspective about his role, and that's who you want to work for... and that's who you want to be," says Rehder.

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