

Mint founder Aaron Patzer on Fountain, his new app

16 July 2015, by Levi Sumagaysay, San Jose Mercury News

How do you follow a success like Mint.com? Aaron Patzer's looking to answer that with a question. Or lots of questions.

Patzer, founder of personal-finance app Mint, has turned his attention to the on-demand world with Fountain, an app that lets users quickly find experts and text, talk or video chat with them to answer home-repair questions.

Fountain flowed out of Patzer's experiences maintaining his New Zealand home, which he bought after selling Mint.com to Intuit for \$170 million in 2009, then working for Intuit for a couple of years. Googling wasn't cutting it - the answers weren't tailored to his problems. He believes Fountain, which charges \$7 for every 15 minutes of consultation with experts - potentially saving users from more expensive house calls - can change that.

The app is on iOS and the Web. An Android app, as of writing, was set to come out in July.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.

Q: Right now Fountain is focusing on home and garden. What other problems do you think it can help solve? When will you branch out?

A: We will be expanding in July to any service that can be delivered remotely: a math tutor for your teen, an accountant for your tax or small-business questions, or a veterinarian to ask a late night question to when you have a sick pet. All you have to do is ask a plain question in English, point your camera at the problem, and a Fountain expert will help you out.

Q: Can you explain the technology that's unique to Fountain? What's to keep competitors from using FaceTime or something like it?

A: Fountain makes it easy to solve any problem.

Just say, "My tomatoes keep dying," and you'll be on with a gardener, or, "What color scheme would look best for this room?" and you'll be on with an interior designer. For the asker, Fountain finds an expert and connects you in about a minute. For the expert, Fountain brings business from across the country and handles billing and timekeeping - something Skype and FaceTime can't do.

Q: How do you recruit and vet the experts? How many experts are available through Fountain?

A: We've looked at experts who were top-rated on places like Houzz, Porch and Angie's List. We interview everyone (using Fountain!) and only accept them if they are both personable and knowledgeable. There are about 300 experts on Fountain.

Q: How do you hope to attract users?

A: Our real growth strategy is satisfied users - it's pretty amazing what you can accomplish when you have an expert in your pocket. I have fixed a hot water heater, rewired a lamp, learned to trim olive trees, and re-landscaped my backyard for \$2,000 when the quotes I got were for \$10,000 or more.

Q: What are your thoughts about the on-demand economy and the concerns about whether it's good for the laborers it depends on?

A: We match questions with the top five to 10 experts capable of solving the issue. That means [experts](#) can ignore questions if they are busy. Because geography doesn't matter, we can connect a heating specialist from Texas whose work has all but dried up in March to someone in Boston, where it's still quite cold. It's work that comes to the expert - without a drive, without marketing costs, and whenever they want it. This is different than on-demand startups where the "labor" is required to dress in a uniform and the company controls their time - those are employees.

Q: What lessons from starting Mint are you applying to this startup? What's different this time around?

A: At Mint it was organizing your finances. Fountain is different, as it's a marketplace, so growing supply and demand at the same time is tricky. That's one of the reasons we chose to focus on home and garden help first, to guarantee a quick and consistent response time. But I personally can't wait to use this for instant tech help - my parents, friends and girlfriend are always asking me to solve every hardware and software issue (as if being in tech I just instantly knew the solution). Soon, they'll simply be able to call Fountain.

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AARON PATZER

Age: 34

Position: Co-founder and CEO of Fountain

Previously: Founder of Mint.com, general manager of Intuit's Personal Finance Group, then vice president of Product Innovation across Intuit

Hometown: Evansville, Ind.

Current city: San Francisco

Education: Bachelor's degrees in computer science, [electrical engineering](#) and computer engineering from Duke University; master's degree in electrical engineering from Princeton

FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT AARON PATZER

1. He once competed in an under-18 amateur bodybuilding contest.
2. He's obsessed with fruit, and he's always on the hunt for weird fruit you've never heard of. Fruit is the best food in the world, he says.
3. He likes to climb trees.
4. He owns a farm in New Zealand.

5. He wears a bike helmet painted like a watermelon. Again, because fruit is the best.

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