

New Career, New Act feat Jared Molton

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Tommy: Welcome back to another episode of “Northeastern Next”. On today’s episode we have Jared Molton, the Vice President of Consumer at Udacity. We will discuss shifting his career from a magician to tech executive, his favorite class at Northeastern, and his memoir, “For My Next Trick”. Let’s get into it.

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Tommy: Alright, hi Jared. How are you today?

Jared: Hey, Tommy. I’m great. How are you?

Tommy: Good, I’m doing well. Thank you so much again for joining this episode of the “Northeastern Next Podcast”. Super, super excited to have you and hear your story.

Jared: Happy to be here.

Tommy: Yeah. So why don’t we just jump right into it? Do you mind just telling me a little bit about yourself and, you know, maybe your Northeastern experience?

Jared: Yeah, sure. So, quick about me. My name is Jared Molton and I lead the Consumer Business at Udacity, which is an EdTech platform specialized in building AI skills. Before this I was with a company called Chewy, which is a pet supplier. I spent three years there in a product leadership role. And, before that, I was with Amazon for about six years.

I graduated from Northeastern University in 2010. I had a degree in journalism but, throughout college and even before college, I was also a professional magician. And so, my goal through school was to leave school, move back to New York City, you know, apply to be a professional magician full-time, apply myself, in that regard. And, that’s what I did.

And so, I moved to New York, I performed full-time. I ended up taking over as general manager of Tannen’s Magic Shop, which is the oldest magic shop in the country. As part of that, [I] grew that business quite a bit both through the physical store, which was a retailer, and also through our online presence. And then eventually I decided to go back to school, get my MBA. Then translated my MBA into a career in project management and tech.

Tommy: Oh, very cool. So, just kind of to go back to the very beginning, you know, [I] would love to hear what initially drew you to magic? What’s the...How did you get involved in that?

Jared: I always been very interested in it my entire life and, you know, passively whenever I saw a show or was at a magic shop the interest would pique and I would get back into it for a little bit. And then when I was in high school, I saw a show in Las Vegas. Lance Burton did a magic show, and he opened up with this incredible routine where he was making doves appear and disappear at his fingertips. And, somehow, somewhere, as a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old teenager, I had the wherewithal to sit there and say you know what this could be a career. Rather than go and buy a trick, instead, why don't I go buy a book, become an expert at the actual practitioner piece of this sleight of hand, misdirection, showmanship and really develop my chops that way. And that was it.

And that kind of kicked off my career in magic and I bought a book called "Expert Card Technique" which I still have and, from there, I started practicing, started performing. Put together a show, started selling myself as a magician, you know, became a magician entrepreneur if you will. [I] started doing shows all over the town where I grew up, which is Montclair, New Jersey, and eventually continued doing that through college so was able to pay my rent in college in Boston doing magic shows. During that time, I worked every Sunday night at a place called Johnny's Luncheonette, which was in Newton, and I did close-up magic there every single Sunday night which was a lot of fun.

Tommy: Wow, that's incredible. So, I mean, I was gonna ask you, it sounds like it's a very self-driven and self-taught, I guess, discipline. So, how long did it take you to learn a trick? Is it dependent on the trick?

Jared: Yeah, you know, when you are a teenager and you're into something, it is just kind of everything you do all the time. So, I was always practicing and, you know, I never left the house without a deck of cards and I was always kind of into it. So that develops over time and then you kind of get the foundational pieces, and you start working on more advanced techniques, you build those into your repertoire and little by little, you know, you become an expert in a field. Very similar to becoming an expert in any other field. It's a matter of repetition and practice and doing it over and over again. And so, once you have those foundational elements, then learning a new trick becomes a lot easier than it did earlier on because you already know to do all of the sleights or techniques that need to be executed in order to do it successfully.

Tommy: That's so cool. So, it sounds like while you were practicing, you were building a show and putting together an act. Is that fair to say?

Jared: Absolutely! Yeah, I scripted an entire act, a kid's show, when I was 14 or 15 years old and started practicing that and making sure I had the lines down and the blocking down and all the different notions of being a performer in front of a group of people.

Tommy: That's incredible. So, I guess I want to know with an act that you put together like you had done, what was that transition like going from performing in New Jersey to Boston? Did you almost have to start over in terms of building a network?

Jared: I did. It was a reset to some degree but, it wasn't too hard to do once you got the momentum of it going. So, landing the Sunday night show at Johnny's was massive for me because what that did it allowed me to interact with new audiences on a weekly basis, hand out my business card every week and that had kind of a domino effect where they shared my information with their friend. And before I knew it, I was doing two or three shows on a Saturday and two or three shows on a Sunday every single weekend throughout my junior and senior year at school.

Tommy: Wow, that is so cool. So, how long were you performing at Johnny's for?

Jared: Probably two years or so.

Tommy: That's incredible. That is the coolest story ever, man. That's awesome.

Jared: Yeah!

Tommy: Just to kind of, you know, pivot a little bit back towards Northeastern. Promise, I have more questions about magic later.

Jared: Yeah, no worries.

Tommy: You mentioned you had a degree in journalism, and I remember when you initially submitted your story and when it came across my inbox, you mentioned that taking journalism classes really influenced your business writing and there was a specific class you took called "Social Entrepreneurship" that was super impactful. Do you mind telling us a little bit about that?

Jared: Yeah, absolutely. So, I will start with the journalism piece and then we get into the social entrepreneurship. So, on the journalism side, being a good journalist a lot of it comes down to being curious about the world, actively listening to people when you are speaking to them, just like you are right now in this interview. And then, additionally, being a concise and crisp writer.

Over my career, I started as a Senior Product Manager at Amazon, [I] was part of some of Amazon's most magical product launches, was able to then turn that into a pretty successful stint at Chewy.com, and now I'm in a Vice President role at Udacity.com, which is part of Accenture. And so, a big part of my job over the past ten years has been writing and when it comes down to it, the most important thing you can do when writing is deliver

your story crispy and succinctly. That way, you can make sure you can get your reader there.

From Amazon's side, and Jeff Bezos talks about this at length, they don't use PowerPoints at Amazon, so you really have to be a great writer. One of my mentors mentioned to me this one time, as a Product Manager writing is your currency which is essentially, the better the writer you are, the easier it is going to be for you to drive discussions and debates and align on a decision and then move on. And so, developing those writing chops has been essential to my own career development and growth as a leader in tech. And something I like to tell my team all the time is to focus on the writing, you know, it may seem pedantic, but it is actually really important that you get this right and you practice and refine it.

So that's the piece on writing. The next piece was on the social entrepreneurship question. So, when it came to social entrepreneurship, I had not taken any business courses at Northeastern up until that point. And I took this course, and I did not really know what to expect going into it, and the premise of this course was that there were two bottom lines for all of these businesses which was the profit of the business and the social impact that the business was able to drive. I found that to be a really nice framework to think about business growth because you are not only making an impact on shareholders' wallets, but you are also making an impact on the world in a much broader scale. And, by the way, that doesn't go without saying I actually think there is a lot of good being done by, you know, businesses with one bottom line, which is profit, and they are out there and they are able to still support a lot of good initiatives and projects and providing jobs and all of that.

That said, you know, what we did as part of the course, and I think the final project for that course is that we had to develop a business that had a dual bottom line. And so, I had a project team with two others—who actually coincidentally are now married—so I was the third wheel of that project team. And, as part of that, we developed this business based on a product which we called “Care Carts”, and they were these carts that you would be able to provide to folks in areas of the world where there wasn't access to clean water and they could bring this cart to a water well, they would fill up the cart and pump the water into the cart. And, as part of the pumping process of pumping the water into the cart, it would filter the water so that when they got home, they had clean water, and they had a lot of it. And coincidentally enough, I guess, that was kind of my first introduction to product management because as part of that process, I wrote a pretty detailed spec, I had a friend of mine who was a mechanical engineer [so] him and I sat down and actually built and designed a prototype that we could actually present as part of the final presentation. So, we went into the final presentation with a business model, with a marketing plan, with a prototype, with a product design, with everything ready to go, and it was pretty successful.

If I remember correctly, the class then voted on whoever had the best idea or best business and we ended up taking the cake on that one which was pretty exciting.

Tommy: That is really cool. So, that's interesting that, it almost seems like it introduced you to some values that sometimes get overlooked when people are especially talking about entrepreneurship in general. Would you say that these values kind of carried with you throughout your career?

Jared: Absolutely! You know, at the end of day, I mentioned this a moment ago, but I will say it again. I think that businesses have a lot of opportunity to provide good to the world. And so most recently I transitioned from Chewy into this new role. As part of that transition, I was looking for specifically a company that I felt that was providing for the greater good and where I could wake up everyday really excited and energized by the work we were doing in terms of the impact we were having on our customers and the world as a whole. And Udacity does that. We are able to help folks develop the skills they need to take their careers to the next level. We have customer anecdotes from folks who are able to get a job that they were never able to get before because they took our course and were able to get those skills. We have customers and learners [who] were able to get a promotion because of our courses. I think we even have or are responsible for the development of the first autonomous female engineer in Saudi Arabia.

Tommy: Wow.

Jared: So, the impact we are having on our learner base is really extraordinary and it is something that motivates me every single day and something I'm really excited about. And so, Udacity is not a company that has a formalized dual structure that I studied in that "Social Entrepreneurship" class, but we are having a massive impact on society as a whole by the good we are doing with our course development and skill development.

Tommy: Yeah, that is really cool because it sounds like not only are you at Udacity making an impact but it also sounds like somebody learning from Udacity can feel like they are making an impact too and that's really really cool. So just for anybody out there listening, how would you be able to take one of these classes?

Jared: Absolutely! So you can always go to [Udacity.com](https://www.udacity.com), that's U-D-A-C-I-T-Y dot com, and we have hundreds of courses across really interesting topics. As soon as this Thursday I am actually hosting a webinar with our instructor for the "Quantum Computing" course, and we are doing a webinar on quantum computing and why it is important for business leaders. And there are a lot of interesting topics that we share and that you can sign up for.

Tommy: That's awesome! Yeah, no, definitely if you are out there listening, be sure to sign up for one of these courses, that sounds great! So, I do want to—again, I'm sorry I'm a little scattered—but I do want to steer a little bit back towards Northeastern.

Jared: Yeah.

Tommy: Just one thing that kind of popped into my head so, at this point, you're doing magic on the side to support yourself and, as you said, pay your rent but, it sounds like you are developing skills and business writing, it's really clear to me how much an impact this social entrepreneurship had on your career trajectory. Did you by any chance participate in a co-op that maybe helped you refine your skills?

Jared: I did one co-op. So, I worked for a Go Ahead Tours, which was part of a larger conglomerate called EF Education and I think it still is and I think if I look back at that there is probably some irony in it that I now in EdTech and, you know, while I was with a co-op with EF Education which is obviously focused on helping young people become educated, more culturally than anything else.

But I did one co-op, I was a Customer Accountant Coordinator which at the time meant that I was processing a lot of the credit card transactions and different transactions that came through and helping with support. Looking back, it is pretty funny to think that you had a co-op intern sitting there processing credit card transactions because it tells you how long ago this was that, you know, technology did not yet exist to automate a lot of that, right? Like Square was not a thing, like you couldn't do that right on the spot. And so, I learned a lot in that role. More than anything else, one of my big takeaways was that the people there were incredibly smart, they were super focused, but, you know, as I continue to think about what I wanted to do in my career, it was really magic and that did not align with my career goals. So, I made the conscious decision at the end of that co-op that I don't know if it makes sense for me to do another co-op here and, instead, let me get through the degree as fast as possible so I can go and give this professional magician career a go. And so, that was a really helpful learning for me as well.

Tommy: Yeah, it's a great perspective to have. Just talking to the many alumni I have talked to over the last couple years, obviously the co-op helps you understand what you want to do in your career but, at the same time, I think it's also an important perspective to have like, hey, sometimes they co-op can tell you this isn't something for me. So, that is really cool to hear you say that.

Now, back to magic. You know, it sounds like you were very—not to beat this phrase to death—but very self-driven and it's a very self-motivated career path and you even said you were a magic entrepreneur. One thing I would love to know is sort of like, either on the

business side of it or even on the magic side of it, what skills did you learn from being a magician that maybe you were able to transfer to your professional career?

Jared: I think a lot of those skills I learned while I was managing and growing the magic shop because the magic shop is a business and so part of managing the magic shop I learned about margins and why it was important to prioritize a skew selection that drove the right margin. So, what that means is that if I have two different products, in this case my products are magic tricks, and Magic Trick A sells for \$50 but has a 10% margin, I'm only getting \$5 on that. Magic Trick B may sell for \$30 but has a 50% margin, so then I'm getting \$15 towards my bottom line on that. So, if I evaluate both of those and I'm working with my sales team to say, "Okay which one of these magic tricks do we really want to sell?" The answer is Magic Trick B, it is driving a better business impact. And so, I think that is one really good example.

Another good example that I learned when I was operating the magic shop was how important it is to develop an exclusive offering of inventory. And so, at the time, this is 2010 to 2013 more or less, there are a lot of different trends happening in the magic supply world. A lot around different cards that were coming out there so playing cards, when I say cards, I mean playing cards. As well as some other tricks that were hot. Any trick that was hot was being sold by a supplier that was supplying the entire industry. So, what that meant is that you could buy it from them and customers had demand for it, they wanted it, but there was not differentiation for you to carry that trick versus somebody else because it had to be offered at the same price and they could get it from anywhere else. And so, as part of our strategy in developing our shop, we made a concerted effort to go after high-end exclusive offerings and what that mean was working with independent magic manufacturers, taking on a higher inventory risk where we would take on more than what we normally would but, in doing so, we would actually be able to promote that item as exclusively available through us, through Tannen's. Super successful strategy. We were able to take on a number of really prestigious tricks, working with great creators, and being able to drive a bit of engagement and momentum flywheel for the business.

And the last thing I learned from a business perspective was the importance of marketing, and what works and what doesn't, and how to make sure you are focused on the right customer. And so, a really good example of that is, and I don't know the year off hand, and I will tease this right now: I did just publish a book that outlines my story going from magician to tech exec. So, I think that I have the date in that book somewhere. It's called "For My Next Trick: A Magician Transforms into a Tech Exec!"

As part of that I talk about this one story where 880 radio, which is the radio station for the New York Yankees, approached us and said "Hey, we are doing this bit where we are doing

this magic number for the Yankees where the Yankees have to win X number of games to hit the playoffs. And they call that the magic number. Do you want to sponsor the magic number? At the time, we had a really good year, a lot of the different projects I just mentioned really hit for us: the exclusives, the margin-focus. So, we had the cash to experiment, and we were like “Yeah, let’s do that! We can be the official magic shop of the New York Yankees?” The New York Yankees are one of the most prestigious brands in the world, we should absolutely do that.

Tommy: Yeah.

Jared: So, we put together an ad with them where it was the magic number is 7 days from Tannen’s Magic Shop, the oldest magic shop in the U.S.A., and that would run on the air anytime they mentioned the word “magic number”. We then developed a way to track it, where I had a custom discount that if folks heard the radio message, they could come back to Tannen’s with that custom discount, and we would give them 20% off or something like that.

Tommy: Wow!

Jared: So, we launched the radio ad and nothing. And a week later, nothing. And a month later, nothing. So now the magic number is over and either they made the playoffs, or they didn’t make the playoffs and the rep comes back to us and they’re like “Ok, how did it go for you guys?” And, you know, we might’ve spent like \$5,000 on the whole thing so it wasn’t a crazy investment for us, but that was definitely more than what were doing in a lot of other circumstances. And we realized this just wasn’t the right approach because, at the end of the day, somebody who is listening to baseball on the radio is not very interested in becoming a magician.

And so, it is really important that as, especially, an industry as niche as magic that you are focusing your investments and marketing on the areas where your customers actually are. And they are not baseball customers who are listening to the magic number.

So, it was really important learning and something I was able to take with me throughout the rest of my career.

Tommy: That’s interesting. Yeah, that’s really cool because, you know, I can understand why, from your perspective, the New York Yankees approach you and that’s about as tempting as it’s going to get. But, to your point, really knowing your customer base is the root of it. So, that’s cool. One of the things I always like to tell guests is that a lot of our listeners skew on the younger side in terms of just being undergraduates at Northeastern or young entrepreneurs from Northeastern who are kind of interested in seeing what their

degree can do for them. So, I think that is a really cool story and really cool tidbit that will resonate with a lot of them. Thanks so much for that.

Jared: Yeah, glad to hear it. I hope that those listening find value out of that.

Tommy: Yeah, absolutely.

Jared: Don't make the same mistake we made.

Tommy: Well actually I'm glad you brought up in a previous answer, but I was about to ask you about your book, "For My Next Trick". So, what was the inspiration to write about your experiences?

Jared: Yeah, so I often get asked, especially when people find out I-... you know, in my career I usually don't go around saying, "Hey, I'm a professional magician." Right? I have all of these other responsibilities and I'm managing an entire business unit and we're answering for the results of that business unit in C-Suite meetings.

But, when it does come up and when folks find out that I am a magician, they ask that question which is, "How did a magician get here? What was that story like?" And I got asked that question so many times, I thought to myself, "There is got to be something to this thing that others can learn from." And I think there are a couple of really important vignettes or themes is maybe a better word from my story going from a non-traditional background into a tech exec role. There [are] a couple inflection points.

The first being going back to school to get an MBA, master's in business administration. So, that process can be really intimidating, especially for those with a non-traditional background. As a magician, my background was what I learned at Hogwarts, it wasn't in taking a GMAT and being really quantitative in terms of how I was thinking about things. In fact, when I took my first GMAT practice test—the GMAT by the way is a test you need to get into business school—you know, they were asking questions about geometry and algebra that I didn't even remember since high school so it was all very new to me and definitely not in my skill set. And so, as part of the book, I tell the story of how transforming this non-traditional background into getting into a top 25 business school. I ultimately went to UNC, University of North Carolina Kenan-Flagler Business School for my masters.

Then, once I got there, I think there is another really interesting story. How does someone with that background now navigate being in a MBA program that is trying to get you into a job and get you placed right away while staying true to yourself. So, that is an important element to this and something that took me about two years where the first year of business school, I really did not know where I wanted to go from there. I came in with ideas of what I wanted. Once I got there a lot of that changed based on all of the data and

feedback you're getting from your career mentors, from your peers. So, I decided to be like, ok, let me just throw everything at the wall and see what sticks. I think I got lucky, I ended up getting an internship at Dell, that internship was for a role in Product Line Management, uh, I think without that it would've been very difficult for me to navigate into a Product Management role and to stay in tech. I had a great experience at Dell, and I knew coming out of that I wanted to stay in tech.

And then really the icing on the cake was I was able to land an interview with Amazon right out of MBA school and the conversation felt so easy, it felt like I could just be myself during that interview process. It was a very rigorous interview process, but it felt very natural, it felt very easy, and I remember thinking "This is great because if this company accepts me for who I am, that's all I want. I don't want to have to put on a face or a mask or be this picturesque version of an MBA student. I want to just go somewhere that is looking for me and I kind of think I found it."

So, as part of the book, I outline that learning in my own personal development while also talking a bit about how to nail the Amazon interview. How to navigate the career search process as an MBA. And, once we get into the Amazon section, I really dive into what it took to be a successful product leader at Amazon and the different skills and characteristics that I learned and developed over the years, and ultimately, I joined Amazon as a Senior Product Manager, right out of MBA school with no background in tech, outside of maybe that internship at Dell, but background mainly focused on magic and magical things. And, by the end of it, I was able to add a tech identifier to my title. So, I was Product Manager Tech then I was even able to get promoted to Principal Product Manager Tech at Amazon, which is a really prestigious role and not something that many people are able to obtain in their career.

So, as I navigated that process, I share a lot of my learnings there and in the book as well. So, for the folks who are at either Amazon, or at FAANG, or at some big tech company, and thinking about how do I navigate my career in this environment, I think my book, you know, helps them get a lot of those learnings that they can use to optimize their own career.

Tommy: That's amazing. Yeah, no, that is something that, you know, if you are listening, I hope you are able to pick up a copy of Jared's book. Where can somebody purchase this book?

Jared: It is available on Amazon.com. So, again, it is called "For My Next Trick: A Magician Transforms into a Tech Exec!"

Tommy: Awesome, I will make sure to link that in the description. That's great. Thanks, Jared.

Jared: Yeah, thank you.

Tommy: Now, this is my last question, I always like to end the show like this. Since this is the “Northeastern Next Podcast”, what would you say is next for you, Jared?

Jared: What is next? I would say I’m really enjoying my role right now at Udacity and so what’s next is helping grow and develop this business and this team. Hopefully grow us into one of the largest online education platforms available and continue to be present in my life for all things career-wise and non-career wise. You know, my family, I have a one-and-a-half-year-old daughter and just making sure to step up and be there all the time. And I think that is really important.

Tommy: Yeah, absolutely. I think that is a fantastic approach. Well, hey, thank you so much again, Jared. This was a really really fun episode, and I really appreciate you again taking time out of your day to chat with me today.

Jared: Tommy, thank you so much for having me, really appreciate it, it was a pleasure chatting with you, and [I] can’t wait to see this online.

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Tommy: Yeah, absolutely!

Tommy: Thanks for listening to this week's episode of “Northeastern Next”. Are you or do you know a Northeastern alum with a great story to tell? If so, email us at alumni@northeastern.edu to be featured on a future episode of the pod. I hope you enjoyed the episode, and I will see you the week after next.