

Tripp Donnelly

An Active Participant in Mankind

The drive and vision Tripp Donnelly demonstrated in his youth has catapulted REQ into one of the world's fastest-growing digital marketing companies.

As a rising junior in high school, Tripp Donnelly got the opportunity of a lifetime: entering the Congressional Page program and working in the halls of power. He'd been interested in politics practically from birth; both of his parents had worked in Kennedy's White House, and as a child, he often interacted with Washington heavyweights from both sides of the aisle.

"Politics was the family business," smiles Tripp. "Back then, it was a different time. Now people, especially new arrivals to DC, see politics as a bloodsport. When I was a kid, everyone wanted to win, but there was a civility to it, you didn't want to crush your fellow man. It was part of civil service, public service; you served together and you wanted to serve your fellow man."

After college, he landed his dream job and joined Bill Clinton's White House staff. However, his experiences there as a young aide, witnessing the impact of a robust economy and the balancing of the federal budget with the aid of economic experts and private sector advisors, pushed him in a new direction—the world of business. Inspired to go to business school and strike out into the world of start-ups, Tripp joined InPhonic, coming onboard as one of its earliest employees and watching the company grow to over 1,000 employees over the course of seven years.

But as that business grew, so did Tripp's ambition. He became particularly fixated on a service gap in the marketplace that he encountered in his communications work. In 2008, the internet was still in its adolescence, and social media sites like Facebook were new and little-known; others, like Instagram and Twitter did not yet exist.

However, at a time when few did, Tripp saw that managing brands and public opinion about those brands on the internet was going to be a crucial part of any company's communication and marketing strategy.

Thus, REQ – originally called RepEquity – was born. The pitch was simple: brand reputation is a more valuable form of equity than almost any other asset. "I believed then, as now, that it's the currency that drives everything," explains Tripp. "People are losing that equity if they don't monitor it and actively engage with what's happening online."

Today, REQ has recently completed a fourth acquisition, boosting its staff to over 140 teammates, with \$50 million in annual revenue and offices in five cities. As CEO and Chairman, Tripp has overseen this phenomenal growth in a mere 11 years, and attributes REQ's success to its ability to anticipate movement in the marketplace and continue to evolve the offerings of the company. "Speed matters. And when

you live in the digital technology landscape, it really, really matters," Tripp points out. "This stuff is moving at lightspeed, so we have, at our core, a culture of innovation. We're still always looking for the next thing; you have to be adaptive; you can't say this is what we do, and we're immovable objects."

This attitude guided REQ's three previous acquisitions, all of which looked to expand offerings to meet changing client needs in an expanding market. At first, REQ's work was largely crisis-driven, but over time, search engine optimization (SEO) has become a staple of any comprehensive communications plan. By 2010, two years after REQ's founding, Tripp knew that the business had been very successful at managing search rankings and search presence for brands, but didn't have the capacity for any front-end or back-end development. "We didn't have a creative



director,” observes Tripp. “In short, we couldn’t build websites, we couldn’t build platforms, we couldn’t create videos for YouTube. So, we weren’t able to provide a lot of content generation needed in building, sustaining, and managing brands online. We found that in our acquisition of Virilion.” A 14-year old company, Virilion was an early front-runner in digital advocacy.

A few years later, in 2015, REQ again expanded with the acquisition of Unison, a company that specialized in user experience and design in mobile applications. After that, they decided to go after PR capability, acquiring a successful tech PR firm called SpeakerBox. “When you develop a full brand management marketing solution, there’s something called PESO—paid, earned, shared and owned,” explains Tripp. “Paid is advertising—for example, you pay for an ad in the *Washington Post*. Earned is when your PR team puts you in the *Washington Post*, i.e., they’re reporting on you. This adds to reputational currency, because it’s third-party validation. Shared or social is Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. And owned is your company website. We already did paid, social, and owned extremely well in the marketing stack. Our acquisition of SpeakerBox was very deliberate to get that ‘earned’ piece.”

Now happy with the full range of communications capabilities offered by REQ, Tripp and the team have set their mind to geographic expansion, and recently acquired the large performance marketing West Coast company IMI. “We have known IMI for many years, and they are very similar to us in terms of search engine marketing and digital advertising solutions,” elaborates Tripp. “They have an extremely good data science group, attribution modeling, and their scale is impressive, handling digital campaigns into the tens of millions of dollars.” The main portion of the staff will be split between Washington, DC and San Diego, with other practice teams in New York, Boston, San Francisco, and Northern Virginia. Their clients are nationwide, some global, and span just about every industry.

Tripp points out that the broader geographic reach allows REQ to provide the personal touch he believes is crucial to conducting business. “High touch matters,” he says. “It’s no longer that classic model it once was where everybody comes in and makes a pitch and the

client goes with the ad campaign they like. There are competing ideologies, philosophies around what we’re doing, and in many cases, we are making a paradigm shift for them. Maybe they’ve been more focused on traditional venues like TV and radio, and we are convincing them to go long on digital. It’s important that our clients trust us, believe in us, and see the vision. Accessibility and proximity to clients is a part of that.”

It’s perhaps no surprise that Tripp emphasizes the importance of relationships when conducting business; both of his parents were social beings, and as a young boy growing up in DC, Tripp was attending dinner parties and meeting political luminaries from a young age. Former Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill was a good friend of his father’s, and Tripp was often introduced to other Members of Congress. A sense of gratitude and respect for public service and those who answered the call were instilled in him from an early age. Tripp’s father was a decorated veteran of the Korean War and is even featured, along with his war dog, on the Korean War Veterans Memorial. “It’s worn down because it’s at kid-height, and kids put their fingers on it because of the dog,” smiles Tripp. “My father, his two brothers, and all four of my mother’s brothers served in the military, so I grew up with a great deal of respect for the military.”

So much so, in fact, that after attending a private Catholic school during his elementary and middle school years, he insisted on attending a military high school, St. John’s College in Northwest DC. There, Tripp thrived academically and athletically, serving as captain of the soccer team, and rose to lead the entire corps as Cadet Colonel—the student commander of the school—in his senior year. St. John’s had a rank structure, with students moving up the ranks based on their performance, and Cadet Colonel was the highest rank possible. His parents were supportive, but didn’t micromanage or pressure him, instead empowering him to make his own decisions and trusting him to get everything done.

Outside of school, Tripp always stayed active, abiding by his father’s motto to “be an active participant in mankind.” The two went fishing and camping together, and would go out in nature or throw a football around. Tripp’s parents were older—44 and 42 when he was born. They had long-since accepted that they weren’t going to have children. Tripp was the pleasant surprise that

strengthened their already strong 21-year marriage. "What I got from them is the spirit of partnership," Tripp acknowledges. "They were two people that were very much in love, and they demonstrated how to be strong for one another. I think some people become defined by their children; my parents were extremely supportive, extremely proud, but they already had their own purpose after 21 years together. I saw very well-grounded teammates. That kind of strength of partnership is something I wanted to find and something I have found in my own marriage."

For college, Tripp was drawn to Georgetown University for its prominent reputation and strong academic offerings, particularly in the field of politics. Right away, he encountered culture shock as he transitioned from military school to the civilian educational experience. On his first day, he stood up as the professor entered the classroom. Quickly noting, that he was the only one standing, he sat back down before he was noticed. "Fortunately, I was sitting in the back row," laughs Tripp. "I was standing at attention, meanwhile the teacher comes into the room and kids are like, 'Hey, what's up John?' It was definitely an adjustment!"

Each summer, Tripp was able to go back to the Hill as an intern and build his political experience and connections. He also worked at the notorious Tombs, a bar just off campus frequented by the students, remembering the experience fondly as a looser environment where he could earn good money and spend time with friends. One semester, he interned for four-time presidential adviser David Gergen, who became a mentor for the young man. Initially, Tripp planned to follow David over to the US News and World Report after graduation, where he'd been hired as the Editor-in-Chief; however, it was then that he received the offer to work in the White House. "David was great. He was extremely supportive of my decision," Tripp recalls. "He said, 'I've worked for four Presidents and this is the start of your journey, you should go do this.'"

For four years, Tripp worked in the White House in Communications, Legislative Affairs, and Advance, travelling around the country and the world for President Clinton, and getting a real taste of how political sausage is made. It was during those years, working closely with the many businessmen that Clinton's administration brought into the White House, that Tripp decided to get a

business degree. He attended the London School of Economics, where he studied international business and management. Upon his graduation in 1999, Tripp moved back to the U.S., settling in New York City.

There, Tripp went through the Bear Stearns training program, thinking he would go into banking or financial services but quickly discovered the field was not for him. "This is a valuable lesson for young people," he laughs. "Go out and do something you really hate doing! I learned a ton and learned a lot about finance and everything else. But in the process, I found out that this was not the path for me. It was not what I wanted to do." Fortunately, it was while in New York that he met the founder of the rocket ship start-up he ended up joining, InPhonic.

Tripp was hired on as the Director of Strategic Development at InPhonic, later moving on to become Senior VP looking over marketing communications, strategic development, and investor relations. "We raised over \$200 million in venture financing and then had a very successful IPO the day after Google in November of 2004," remembers Tripp. "It was an incredible experience to be there for the opening bell on the NASDAQ and to be part of that whole journey—from zero to over nine million customers and from \$400,000 to over \$400 million in revenue. I learned so much and being in a dynamic entrepreneurial situation like that was life-changing."

In 2003, Tripp suffered a personal tragedy when his father, with whom he'd always been close, passed away to cancer. "He was an incredible man, successful in business, in politics, and in life," says Tripp. "He was a powerful figure for me, and when he passed it was very much a shift in my outlook, from more youthful days to taking on the full mantle of responsibility, knowing that he wasn't there for me to call. He always taught me that kindness shouldn't be confused for weakness. Be an active participant, don't sit in the bleachers. There was definitely a maturing process that happened overnight." Tripp considers his late father's watch to be his prize possession, explaining, "He had come from a humble Irish, New England background where any generosity had been to his family and friends. Though he had found success in business, it wasn't until much later in life he felt he could buy himself a few extravagant things. He had wanted a Rolex GMT for years, and for years could easily afford it.

But he would say, 'Oh, I'm not that kind of guy.' Finally, I went with him and we bought it together, 15 years ago. It showed me, put others before yourself. Prioritize your family, your business, invest in your teammates. In many cases, he was last on his own list. The watch reminds me of the generosity he demonstrated to everyone until the end of his life."

In 2009, Tripp married his wife Amy, who has been a constant source of support and encouragement ever since. The two met on November 9, 2006. He knows the exact date, because the night of their initial encounter in a local DC restaurant, Tripp jokingly asked for an exclusive relationship. Amy was an attorney and drew up a "three-month exclusive dating contract on napkins" and got their friends to sign off as witnesses. The contract still hangs, framed, in their home years later. "She has a great deal of confidence, she has the strength to say, 'You know what, go do this.' She's had that same attitude since the day I met her," Tripp says admiringly. "When I told her, I think I want to go start a company, I remember her conviction when she said, 'You should do it.' I like to say that I had the courage to do it, but let's say if I didn't have a partner who was as supportive, I might not have taken a risk, I might not have dreamed."

With Amy's encouragement, Tripp started REQ, attaining success the two may have dreamed of, but certainly never expected. Along the way, Tripp and Amy had a son, in whom Tripp works to instill the same values his father instilled in him: hard work, a respect for public service, an active role in life, and kindness. "My dad was physically strong and mentally tougher. He won many awards on the sports field and was decorated for combat on the battlefield, and yet when he's talked about, people say he was kind," affirms Tripp. "Don't ever confuse kindness for weakness, I see that both personally and professionally. People

throw more shoulder into a situation than they need to. But you'll get further demonstrating empathy and kindness, and showing you're more willing to do whatever is necessary than the next guy."

Tripp carries this philosophy into his CEO and Chairman role, believing that great leaders lead from the front. "Never ask someone to do something you're not willing or capable of doing yourself," asserts Tripp. "The people I've respected most have led by example."

To young people entering the workforce today, Tripp advises taking risks early on. "Go and do something you're passionate about," he encourages. "As you get older, that aperture for risk narrows. It doesn't matter if you try and fail, the thing you need to be able to do is demonstrate conviction, do it with passion. If you fail, you fail; you'll figure it out. Whatever you do, don't be complacent. Don't sit in the bleachers. Get on the field and play to the whistle."

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