

Amber

Welcome to Raising Tech, a podcast about all things technology and senior living. I'm your host, Amber Bardon, CEO of Parasol Alliance. Today, we have a very special guest, Jack York, co-founder of iN2L, an engagement company for older adults and senior living communities. Jack, thank you so much for joining us today. You've been in this industry for quite a while, and I would really love to hear your story and how you got started in this field, and how that led you to co-found iN2L. Can we start with having you share your story with our listeners?

Jack

Oh, you are right, a long while. I call myself the Jimmy Stewart of agent and technology companies, but most people don't know who Jimmy Stewart is, so I need a different analogy. I spent my early career in the Silicon Valley world working for a large semiconductor company called Siliconix, and then Vishay and people think I'm a technology guy, I was a total sales and marketing guy. And when I was moving in on 40, a friend of mine, Leslie Sweeney, who's one of the co-founders of the company, she had the idea to donate some computers to a local assisted living community in Long Beach, in Southern California. And never thinking of it as a business, I had money and no time and she had time and no money. So we donated some computers and it was just, it was fascinating to see what happened. It was very small, you know, this is 1998, right as the computing world was starting. So it was way ahead of the curve in terms of the technology impact in older adults. But it really struck a chord with me. And then it's a long story that I won't go into all the details, but about six months after that my mom died and I was turning 40 and it just, yeah, I just wanted to do something that I felt better about. And so my nickname has always been, "Ready, Fire, Aim." So my brother and I and Leslie jumped off a cliff, and started the company without having any idea of what we were getting into.

Amber

I am curious about the name. How did you come up with the name of the company?

Jack

Yeah, so we kind of go by iN2L now, it's abbreviation, but it was, "It's Never Too Late." And it was funny, cause it looks like we were trying to be clever with the number two, It's Never Too Late. And it was just a matter of trying to find a URL in 1999 that we could use. We were trying to be, It's Never "T-O-O" Late "T-O," all these things. We couldn't find it, but it was with that number that we got it. But, and I like it when people ask the question, because it was my brother. My brother unfortunately died about four years after we started the company, and the name was all him, and it was really just trying to convey a context of don't put limitations of aging into doing something that's new and different, and that's really, that's what it was, what it was, what it was kind of all about.

Amber

Can you describe how that initial donation of computers led to the creation of the software and what exactly it is, and that it does?

Jack

Yeah. Well, I think, I mean, you know, in a 22 year retrospect, I think it was beneficial, frankly, that I didn't have any experience in senior living, cause I didn't look at it through, you know, 'well, we do things this way because that's why we do things.' And so, like I said, I had no idea about the industry. I had no idea about what we were kind of getting into. But as I talked to people and as I observed, you'd go into a community and you'd see people that were there were full of life and vibrancy, in their seventies, eighties, nineties. And when you looked at the activity programming, you know, incredibly well-meaning people, but they were being treated like 10 year olds. It's teachers and welders and lawyers and doctors and, you know, whatever they were in their life. But you'd walk into an activity room and they're like, you know, let's throw a beach ball around. And things that just made no sense to me. And so I think it just was a lot of, you know, there's gotta be a more dignified way to do this, but still let people enjoy where they are; wherever they are physically or cognitively. So one of the things really, to answer your question about the product, one of the things that was really interesting for me in this industry, relative to what I came from, I came from this, like I said, this whole Silicon Valley world where a Compaq, wasn't going to tell a Dell, wasn't going to tell an Apple what they're doing. Everything was so closed that it was fascinating for me, how open senior living providers were. And so you'd ask them for advice, and you'd ask them for this, you want to try this and would we try that? And people, so many people, opened their arms up to what we were doing, to my brother and I, and it was such a cool industry in that context. And so we just started trying to figure out, you know, I look at our early systems, it's kind of like, I'm almost embarrassed. It was, at that time, it was state of the art, but it felt like touch screen was a relevant thing to do, but to do touch screen in the early nineties, early two-thousands, you had to have a docking, a laptop go into a docking station, and then the wires all connect out of it. It looked like, you know, it wound up looking like something out of an old Twilight Zone episode, what the systems were. But it was what we've, really, what we've done from the beginning, and haven't changed, is try to just become a content company, and no matter where people are physically or cognitively, you want to be connected to things that are meaningful to you. Whether it's your music, or your spirituality, or your family, or games you want to play, or newspapers you want to read. And so what we've tried to do is just curate content and then make it just readily accessible, both in a group context for an activity director or a therapist, but also from an individual standpoint. You know, my parents have been gone forever, but my dad, if I was helping build a profile for my dad, and that's kind of how our software works is that each person has their own experience, I know that my dad would have The Wall Street Journal, the rosary, the Nebraska Cornhuskers, and I know exactly the music he would like. And again it has nothing to do with how old we are, we all just want to be relevant. And that's what we try to do with our technology is make it relevant for that individual person.

Amber

Is the software used primarily in the skilled setting?

Jack

Yeah. You know, I mean, it can be used in any setting. I think I am kind of equal parts so proud, and equal parts frustrated. But a lot of times we've kind of been pigeonholed into a memory care context, the dementia context. And I think a lot of that is, it's so hard to find meaningful programming for people living with dementia, especially mid to late stage, and we've really excelled at that. But the ability, the content that we have on our system is we pride ourselves on the fact that it really does span the horizon cognitively. And you want to kind of balance the content with 'where is that person,' and you don't want to make it demeaning, and you also don't want to make it too difficult. So a lot of the games and some of the interactive content we have in the system is curated for different levels of cognition. So someone that is more independent, and they want to go to Paris, they're going to have a different experience than a person far down the cognitive path that wants to go to Paris, where that would be a little bit more visual and audio, as opposed to a quiz about The Louvre or things like that.

Amber

Your product is the original resident engagement application, and resident engagement applications are such a buzzword now. And it's something we hear so much about is a must have for communities and a competitive edge, and I'm curious to get your perspective on how you've seen technology in this space change during the time you've been in the industry.

Jack

It's funny you say that because everybody has their own definition of engagement, and people turn on a vacuum cleaner and go, 'oh, this is an engagement: vacuum cleaners.' I mean, it's like an adjective that goes in front of everything. So I mean, I think our definition of engagement is just what makes a person enthused and captive, and want to be connected and want to be relevant. So, you know, to be honest, I feel it's kind of funny because, I don't mean this to sound self-serving, but I do personally get a lot of compliments as to how ahead of the curve we were, and innovative we were, and to me it was just like such common sense, you know. What would my mom or dad want? Just make it. It's such a simple concept that you're just trying to let people get what's relevant for them, make it age appropriate, make it relevant, make it non demeaning. There's an art to doing all of that, but the concept itself is just very simple. To be honest, I think the reason we survived and have thrived when so many people haven't is, I, and I'm such an aberration compared to other startups, it's funny, it is the funniest thing for me, Amber, when I go to say this to like people starting a company and they asked for my advice, cause it's just like the biggest buzz kill you could tell a 20 something is, cause what I did is when I was like 25, 26, I knew I would want to do something later. I didn't know what that would be. So I just started diligently saving money and saving money and saving money and investing that money and saving money. By the time I was 40, I had enough money to start a company. And then the spark came to me through the donation of the computer, but I didn't have to, for the first six, seven years in the company, I didn't have to spend one minute looking for money. And if I would have had to do that.. It took me eight years to get a paycheck, it took the company 10 years to turn a profit. Any normal investor would have shut us down. And I think that that's the big difference to me in my old life to this new life. My old life of technology in the Silicon Valley is, customers would make quick decisions with no loyalty. In the world of senior living, at least the experience I've had, has been people take forever to make a decision. But if you do a good

job, the loyalty is unbelievable. And I think that's what, you know, we've gone through some transactions and have done some things over the last few years, but it was from a position of strength, not a position of gravelly for money. Now, I did. Eight years into it, I ran out of money and I had to go through the 'grovel for money' stage. And so I've kind of lived all that different stuff, but I just think that, I dunno, long way to answer to your question. I love to see different companies popping up. I love to see how engagement does matter to people now. COVID so accelerated that, it's a great thing. And so I love the fact that what we're doing now is not a novelty. It's much more mainstream, which is great.

Amber

I attended Leading Age National in Indianapolis a few years ago, and I attended a presentation where there was several physicians talking about how they had done a case study, where they had removed psychotropic medications in a memory care unit and replaced it with your product and were able to show clinical results of using the software that were equal to the medication. Which I find really fascinating, and I talk about that a lot as an example of how technology can be used in this industry. I'm curious if you have any stories you can share or impacts that you can share with our listeners of something like that or something similar.

Jack

Yeah, no, what's funny is, the whole research thing is hilarious, I'm such a hypocrite. I'll open myself up to hypocrisy. Because the first 10 to 12 years of the company, you know, I was so dismissive of research, and I do still kind of feel this way, is that, I think a lot of times lack of research becomes just an excuse to not do something that you know you should do. Cause like where's the research that a Ruth's Chris steak is a lot better than a McDonald's hamburger. Do you need to research to say that someone putting a puzzle together, if it's a picture of their grandson, they're going to be more engaged than if it's something shoved down their throat. So anyway, but then what I finally kind of started realizing is that research does matter, and outcomes do matter. And so, we were fortunate to be a part of several projects. I mean, I'll kind of answer it broadly and then specifically. Broadly, we had the good fortune to be a part of several case studies, several research projects, and we have Dr. Lydia Nguyen, who works for iN2L now, we have a PhD on our staff. She's phenomenal, and it's really cool to be able to take what we've seen anecdotally over the years and turn it into research. For me personally, I still get more juice out of an email from a daughter saying, mom was so depressed all the time, and now she's doing this or that on our system, whether it's a game or just virtual chat kind of feature. I just, I love going into communities and just seeing people doing things and hearing their stories and all that kind of stuff. So it's nice to be able to have kind of a mix of the big, broad picture outcomes of what we do mixed. You know, at the end of the day, it's just a whole bunch of individual interactions that it's really cool that you know that they do make a difference.

Amber

What was the tipping point for iN2L?

Jack

From a technology standpoint, I was like a kid in a candy store when HP came out with their touch smart, that all of a sudden integrated the touch screen into a relatively compact PC, so that was a technology transformation. We did a major project with Brookdale. In the first 10 years of the company, it was so frustrating because we'd have all these non-profits, that I loved to death, we love the leading age world, but they would go get grants to buy our systems and the for-profit world, I just didn't get it. Cause, you know, you'd read their mission statements, 'we put the residents first' and 'we do this' and 'we do that,' and they wouldn't buy our product. And then we had kind of two things happen fairly close to each other. A company called, well they've changed their name. They used to be Pinion Management in Colorado, and then Brookdale. I mean, those two for-profit entities bought into iN2L, they just budgeted it and bought it. And all of a sudden, it really flipped the switch that, you know what, the families are starting to demand this kind of thing, and then we were able to kind of really be able to have a product that was worth people budgeting and buying. And then also, so much stuff is incremental, but just such cool people along the way, and so many people that have worked for the company. I was a pretty mediocre CEO, but I was passionate. And I think people, I always felt like people would run through walls, for the company. And so that's hard to make it a one-time transformational thing. But I always feel like, I don't know, the analogy I use is that I was good at getting customers to want to date iN2L, but then our team behind us made us want to marry us. And that was just the way we treated customers and we still keep that philosophy to this day. You know as you get bigger, it's harder to do all the same stuff we used to do, but it's kind of fun to kind of put that puzzle together.

Amber

Are you able to share how many communities are using iN2L?

Jack

Oh, sure. Yeah. We're tipping in on 4,000.

Amber

Wow. That's pretty impressive.

Jack

Yeah, no, it was fun for me personally. I remember this tangibly, when all of a sudden I'd hear customers' names that I wasn't involved in. It's like, wow, that's cool. I don't know who they are. I guess we're bigger now.

Amber

Are you able to share what the future holds for iN2L?

Jack

Yeah well, we were acquired by a phenomenal, a massive private equity company called The Vista Equity Partners, and that's always a transformation for the company, because you want to hold on to the culture of what's made you who you are, but they provide a gravitas and a resource space that we've never had before. So I think that our direction is really to keep doing what we're doing in the context of engagement, but just keep making it bigger and better. Start to tip toe into the at-home world. Not so much that we would directly market to the consumers, for now anyway, but to partner with entities that are providing technology, partner with the AAA world, agencies on aging, we have projects going along those lines. And also look at other integrations that take our engagement, and then add some of the more practical applications. We don't need to be that company, but you want it to be that the engagement just seamlessly fits into the whole ecosystem of the clinical side of things. And so there's lots of conversations going on along those lines that are exciting to be a part of.

Amber

I think the technology world in this industry is really exciting. I think there's so many opportunities and so many new things happening. What do you see as the future of technology in senior living?

Jack

From a broad standpoint, I think that engagement, which, as you said, has different definitions, but I think engagement now has a seat at the table of all of the other applications. And so it's ludicrous to have to buy different devices, different products, that do different things. So I think that there's just going to be over the next, you know, this has been said for a long time, but I do think over the next couple of years, there will be some synergies and companies coming together to do some of that. So, I just think a lot more integration along those lines. I mean, what do you think? You're a thousand times smarter than I am. How would you answer that question?

Amber

I don't know about a thousand times smarter. I think that there is definitely a big application in the home market. Like you said earlier there's an opportunity to bring more technology and more engagement and connection to people in their homes. We see technology becoming almost like a utility at communities, where it's expected that this technology will be there and be available, and not just be available, but be supported. And I think that one of the things we're seeing is communities just struggle with how to pay for that. You know, what's the ROI on that? But it is becoming something that just, it has to be there both for the families and the residents, and the staff.

Jack

Yeah. And the other thing I was going to say is for me personally, I am becoming obsessed with the stories of the residents that aren't told. And I think you knew a little bit about the 60/20 tour that I did a couple of years ago, where I turned 60 and the company turned 20, and I went all over the country in a van. We were doing carpool karaoke, and we had all kinds of cameras in the van. And you know, I'd spent 20 years going into senior living communities and, you know, you'd see the residents and you say hi to the residents, and there's always those guys on the outside that are like in their wheelchairs, usually

smoking that are like the outside Walmart greeters from the senior limited standpoint. But really the reason I was going into a community was to sell iN2L to an administrator, and ED, an activity director, or a therapist, whatever it may be. But the 60/20 tour was the first time that I really engaged with the elders, and the stories they had to tell, and people living with dementia when they'd get out of their kind of confined environment and be their person. So I'm still kind of getting it put together. I don't want to talk too much about it until I get it put together. When you, Cheryl and I are together at our next cocktail event, I'll tell you more and more about it, but I'm really putting something together that's going to be going all over the country, it'll still have an iN2L flavor to it, but it's really, my own way. This sounds hokey, but it's real to me that I just feel like this whole industry, this whole profession has given so much to me, and it's because of the residents. And to be able to kind of highlight their stories and help change the perception of, you know what? There's cool people inside the walls of these communities, and it's kind of becoming the next chapter of my life a little bit.

Amber

That's really fascinating. I really love that that's your focus, and that is what you're obsessed with.

Jack

Especially on the dementia side, it was just fascinating. So, I would take people around for a ride for like 45 minutes, and don't worry anybody, any listeners, there was always staff and people that were with me, but a lot of times the staff would so negatively frame the person. They might do this, or don't ask this, or be careful about this behavior. And, you know, **I probably took a hundred people living with dementia on trips, nothing bad ever happened. It was just joyful. And I think that it was so opening for me**, the stereotypes that I had after 20 years of doing this. And so I think that I have a platform, a little bit now, to run with, and to try to kind of help change that perception a little bit. I'll look for your help, and also the Bridge the Gap folks that I do want to publicly say that Sara does all the work, that as pretty as Josh and Lucas are, it's really Sara doing all the work.

Amber

Sara is fantastic. Well, Jack York from iN2L, thank you so much for joining us today. We appreciate your time and sharing your story with our listeners.

Jack

The work you're doing is fascinating. I think there's things that we could talk offline about company-wise, but I love meeting people, doing creative things for the right reasons. And that's you Amber, that's cool stuff.

Amber

Thank you for joining us today on this month's episode of Raising Tech, and special thanks to Jack York. Tune in next month for new episodes on Raising Tech, a podcast about all things technology in senior living. Thank you for listening.