Our Conversation with Alex Andon

Duke alumnus Alex Andon ’06 started Jellyfish Art in 2008, after majoring in Biology and Environmental Science at Duke and working for a biotech company in Silicon Valley. His story has been profiled in the New York Times, NPR, the Los Angeles Times, and other media outlets. On August 12, 2011, he launched a Kickstarter Project for a new Desktop Jellyfish Tank, with a goal of $3,000. The project quickly went viral and, within 30 days, raised over $162,000, more than 30 times his original goal.

Duke I&E: For those who are unfamiliar, tell us the story of how Jellyfish Art got started.
AA: Jellyfish have been really popular in public aquariums over the past 10 years or so. I saw people completely mesmerized by these exhibits. There are accounts of people crying on the spot because the jellyfish are so beautiful and patients on chemotherapy watching the jellyfish every single day for hours when they’re too weak to walk.

Jellyfish require a special tank called a kreisel that keeps them from getting sucked into the filtration intakes. The first kreisel was designed by a German oceanographer in the 60s, but it's difficult to scale it down in size, so people could not have their own pet jellyfish.

I started Jellyfish Art building large custom aquariums for homes and restaurants. This allowed me to start making money and tinker with an affordable desktop jellyfish tank design, which was my goal from the beginning. I started selling another company's fish tank retrofitted for jellyfish online to test the market and generate more cash flow. Finally I designed the Desktop Jellyfish Tank, which is the first affordable aquarium built from the bottom up specifically for jellyfish. We launched the tank at the pet industry's largest trade show and won product of the year. Then we launched the tank on Kickstarter as a means to take pre-orders and were one of their highest grossing campaigns.

Duke I&E: There's been some great press on you, like the NY Times article "How to Avoid Liquefying your Jellyfish". How did that affect your business? Was it as big a boost as one might expect from an article in the New York Times?
AA: It was difficult to get a boost from that article because there was hardly a business to receive the boost at that point. I was a one-man operation with a bunch of aquariums in my living room. It looked a lot like a meth lab. When they took the picture for the cover of the NY Times, I had to set up a tank on my coffee table and drive four hours to Monterey to get a few jellyfish for the shot.

Since that article, Jellyfish Art has been written up many times. Press seems to always come very organically to this company. Again, I think there is something about jellyfish
that commands attention and keeps people mesmerized. We've been in the NY Times three times, LA Times, NPR, NBC, ABC, CBS, Gizmodo, Entrepreneur, and many others. President Brodhead told the Story of Jellyfish Art in his 2009 Baccalaureate Address.

Press is a great validation for the business, but as an ecommerce company, blog articles are most effective at getting us direct sales. We see a much bigger traffic spike from a linked online article than from a huge newspaper article.

**Duke I&E:** You launched a Kickstarter Project on August 1, 2011. You had already been in business for a while - tell us why you decided to pursue that. Had you pursued other sources of funding?

**AA:** We knew we were going to build and sell the Desktop Jellyfish Tank, but it never hurts to take pre-orders. When you're manufacturing your own product, you have to place large orders with factories. There are also a lot of upfront costs for design and tooling. It's difficult for a small company to put up the capital for new products. Kickstarter is great because it solves that barrier to entry in product development for small companies. Funding growth with early adopters has always been a startup strategy and Kickstarter has made it really easy to do.

**Duke I&E:** Talk us through the first few days of the Kickstarter Project. What happened?

**AA:** We set the goal at $3,000 because we knew we could get at least that amount from friends, family, and people who had already expressed an interest in pre-ordering. We saw from other projects that backers had no problem donating after the goal was passed and you don't get any money if you don't reach your goal. The first few days of the project progressed as I expected. We sent out a lot of emails and got a few pledges per day, mostly from people we knew. About a week into it, my business partner and I were out playing soccer one afternoon and we came back to an inbox full of pledge alerts. A blog I had never heard of called uncrate.com had posted an article about us. Simultaneously, our friend emailed us saying a celebrity had tweeted about the project. We immediately bought a six-pack of red bull and pounded on our laptops all day to tie up loose ends on the Kickstarter page, answer customer emails, get accounts set up to handle the bandwidth, etc. We hired someone part-time to handle all the customer service. It was a great weekend. The pledges continued to pour in and tapered off to a steady high rate until the end of the campaign as other blogs and press outlets subsequently picked up the story. We continue to get pre-orders every day on our website.

**Duke I&E:** It's probably hard to separate out from some of the other marketing channels, but can you give us a sense for how much a role Twitter played in this. Who were some of the notable folks that re-tweeted your project?

**AA:** Kickstarter doesn't offer analytics unfortunately, so it's difficult to determine where
all the traffic was coming from, but I know our link appeared on hundreds of tweets so I'm sure it helped. Jermaine Dupri tweeted about us and we got in touch with him to offer him a free tank as a thank you.

**Duke I&E:** You seemed to put a lot of thought into your Kickstarter video. For those thinking of doing something similar, can you tell us how much time it took and how much it cost to make?

**AA:** When crafting our Kickstarter project, we just looked at what the top 10 projects had done and tried to imitate. They all had professional videos, offered their products at a discount as donation rewards, and told the stories of their passionate founders.

Indeed I think the video is really important. We hired some friends, but I know a successful Kickstarter who raised $350,000 and shot all the video himself. The Desktop Jellyfish Tank is a very visual project and it's very difficult to light the translucent jellyfish and a person in front of the tank successfully. It took a long day of intense shooting to get the 1:30 clip we used on Kickstarter, but I think it was well worth it.

**Duke I&E:** For Duke students out there that are thinking of doing a Kickstarter Project, can you give any words of advice?

**AA:** Before launching a Kickstarter project, make sure you are far along in the product development process, i.e. have a polished working prototype and have factories lined up to get them produced. Kickstarter has been doing extremely well as a company and their acceptance rate of applications is getting significantly lower (Editor's Note: In Summer 2014, Kickstarter opened up the process). Spend the time to make a good video and don't just talk in front of the camera. Tell a compelling short story, show the product from all angles, and give some background.