

# A Network For Your Success From Jennifer Kushell

by **BEN YOSKOVITZ** on January 23rd, 2007

Jennifer Kushell picture Jennifer Kushell leads a busy life. She's co-Founder of **YS Interactive Corp.** and recently launched a social networking site for young business people, entrepreneurs and professionals called [Your Success Network \(YSN\)](#).

She also co-wrote the New York Times bestseller, [Secrets of the Young and Successful](#).

I interviewed Jennifer to get her thoughts on the purpose and value of YSN, the craze of social networking sites and the importance of entrepreneurship to young people.

## Interview Highlights

- Seeing the history of someone passionate about entrepreneurship and young entrepreneurs following their dream and working towards more and more success.
- Jen's list of entrepreneurial and business heroes, particularly the mention of Fred Deluca.

## The Interview

### 1. Tell us a little bit about yourself and your history in the world of entrepreneurship.

I started my first small business painting t-shirts when I was 13. (My partner/husband, Scott, beat me by a year and started a snow shoveling biz at 12.) From there, I had a string of little startups until I hit college and decided to focus on school. That lasted a few semesters at best. Then I ended up starting one of the first online communities back on CompuServe with two friends in November 1993 to help young people starting their first businesses. We ran "World Headquarters" for The International Directory of Young Entrepreneurs (IDYE) out of my first apartment at Boston University. We spun The Young Entrepreneurs Network out of that and before we knew it, we had members in about 75 countries. It was a crazy time. We were all over the media, offers for speaking engagements were coming in from as far as France and Belgium, big companies were approaching us about consulting, and I got my first book offer.

I spent about eight years working as a big advocate (you could probably say evangelist too) for young entrepreneurs trying to establish themselves and get traction in the business world...until the dot com crash. I was expecting a term sheet for a few million from a hot VC firm in NYC the week the market tanked. Long story short, we went off to a beach in Belize, Central America to figure out what to do next with our lives and the day before we were set to take off to Costa Rica for another week, the idea for Young & Successful Media hit.

We sat on the dock for hours mapping out the idea, and Scott determined that we had the chance to create a major media company catering to young people as they made the most important decisions of their lives. When the sun finally set and we ran out of light, we walked back the hotel, canceled the rest of our trip, and jumped on a plane back home the next morning to figure out if there really was such a glaring gap in the market. Long story short (too late?), we started by testing the concept with a book - *Secrets of the Young & Successful: How to Get Everything You Want, Without Waiting a Lifetime*, convinced Simon & Schuster to publish it, and hit the NY Times List right out of the gate. From there we continued consulting to very big corporations on building campaigns that added real value and made an impact on the lives of younger people. Then we were approached by some very big people in the online media world and told that we were crazy not to do all the work we were doing to help young people online. After an enormous amount of research and planning, we finally dove back into the online space and spent the past two years building what today is now YSN.com.

### 2. What's the elevator pitch for YSN.com?

YSN.com, Your Success Network, is an online universe dedicated to supporting the dreams and professional goals of young ambitious people everywhere. Created to provide powerful tools and solutions to young people as they transition into the real world, YSN.com encourages its members to discover who they are, build their professional identity and achieve success in their careers. The network's community of like-minded individuals, along with its one-of-a-kind Self-Assessment tool, allows members to leverage who they are and create an immediate action plan for success.

### 3. How's YSN.com different than something like LinkedIn which generally also focuses on professional relationships?

LinkedIn is a wonderful private networking tool for people who are more

established in their careers. Their members turn to them to discover new opportunities and recruiters love them for their ability to deliver really quality people. (We'd actually love to get some of their members to become mentors on YSN!) YSN.com is set up to foster very robust, open community collaboration. By engaging young people on a much deeper level, we offer an environment where they can feel safe to ask questions, explore who they are, find mentors, formulate their plans, discover practical solutions, and take action, knowing that they're surrounded by people who celebrate what makes them different and support their efforts. YSN also has a very distinct mission, a substantial base of proprietary content, and a strong focus on providing tools for life to help individuals build their own professional platform, create their digital identity, and express themselves. On YSN, people definitely make powerful connections, but they also grow, discover and learn with every interaction, too.

#### **4. Does the world really need one more social networking site? What are others not doing well that YSN.com does better?**

We don't really consider YSN a typical social network, again, because our value proposition goes so far beyond a simple network to aggregate and connect people. You could certainly say we have a social networking element, but we're really apples and oranges apart. As far as the need goes, I don't think young people necessarily need another place to hang out and kill time online, but they certainly need a lot of help in building their careers. When it comes to that, I don't think there's any place out there that offers as much as we do.

#### **5. What's the coolest / most interesting / unique feature on YSN.com?**

That's a tough one. On one hand, I think the idea of tossing your resume out the window and building a really cool online portfolio that gives the world a much more accurate view of who you are as an individual is pretty compelling. But then there's the self-assessment, which the top experts in the field are saying is the most innovative tool they've ever seen. Plus, no one has ever put something that typically looks like an SAT test into an interactive game that's interesting, relevant, doesn't need a scientist to decode, helps you figure out what to do with your life, and offers a custom action plan all in about 30 min, for the price of...FREE. I'm also a big fan of the Industry Q&A section where you can ask questions about dozens of industries and get really insightful answers back. And then there's the group functionality, which could very well be the best tool on the market today. 24/7 mentoring is a popular feature too. Frankly, we don't really do anything without trying to raise the bar significantly to create the maximum possible value to consumers. So, with all these new releases, it's hard for me to choose just one!

#### **6. YSN.com has a system of mentors, where you can add mentors to your profile. How does the mentor system/relationship work? And how important do you think a mentor is for young entrepreneurs?**

Mentoring is critical for young entrepreneurs...for everyone in fact. Again, we tried to be really innovative here when we added the mentoring system. First, we believe that anyone can be a mentor to someone, and we try to encourage everyone to help others whenever they can. The concept of finding "a" mentor is also outdated. Any successful person knows that you need a mix of great advisors, role models, and supporters, with different experiences, perspectives and expertise to share to truly give you the best guidance possible. We also realized that the traditional concept of mentoring - the one on one relationship - implied an inherent responsibility that made the commitment prohibitive to a lot of really successful people. On YSN, mentors can build out a simple mentoring profile to share their experience and background, indicate their level of accessibility, upload articles, links to speeches, podcasts, worksheets...anything that could be of interest to others who want to learn from their success. Then people who are interested in what they have to offer can post comments and questions for them, send them fan mail, and the mentors are notified through the system as requests come in. Instead of fielding emails and calls through their offices or homes, they can come back to YSN at their convenience and engage at their discretion. In that sense, it really does simulate the real world process of finding people who can help you and convincing them that their time is well spent investing in you. We just happen to serve up very willing candidates on a platter for our members.

#### **7. How are you going to assess whether YSN.com is a success or not? I know it's still in beta, so when is the official launch?**

Success to me has always been about the impact we make on people's lives, and in that sense, our members tell us we're off to a great start. From a business perspective though, success in this online world is all about scalability, so only time will tell how big we can actually grow. Our official launch was just a few days ago, January 13, but we intend to stay in beta for some time as we really fine tune the site and strive to provide value to our users with every single interaction.

#### **10. Who are your entrepreneurial heroes and why?**

Walt Disney and Steve Jobs for their incredible vision, innovation, creativity and tenacity. Richard Branson for his spirit and insistence on always rewriting the rules. Fred Deluca for achieving such tremendous global scale, for starting Subway at 17 with only \$1000, and for looking at the most established companies in his industry and saying "I can do that"...then doing it. Anita Roddick for confirming that "pathological optimism" doesn't make you crazy, but rather a stronger candidate for success. And my family – every last entrepreneur in the bunch – for allowing me to believe that anything is possible, for teaching me how to weather the inevitable bumps, work harder than anyone, and never stop fighting.

#### **Conclusion**

A big "thank you" to Jennifer Kushell for taking the time to complete this interview. Please go take a look at [YSN.com](http://YSN.com) and see if there's value there for you.