

Jason Langheier attacks obesity with Zipongo

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Antoinette Siu *San Francisco Business Times*

While studying at Harvard, Dr. Jason Langheier felt a need to help kids and families eat better and lose weight and get fit. It led him to found Fitness Forward in 2003, a nonprofit promoting healthy lifestyles for children. He also co-founded Proventys, a medical company acquired by McKesson in 2012. Both experiences helped prepare him for his current company, Zipongo.

Zipongo sells companies a digital nutrition platform that integrates with grocery stores, restaurants, recipes and meal deliveries to give employees information on how to eat better. Corporate customers include IBM and Google. Instead of allowing advertising on its app, Zipongo takes 95% of its revenue from health plans and companies.

Zipongo reported triple digit revenue growth for the first several years after its founding in 2010 and has increased its headcount from 65 in 2016 to 100 in 2018. A fresh funding round of \$18 million in January brought Zipongo's lifetime funding to \$50 million. It plans to start testing a new addition to its product, FoodScripts, in the spring. FoodScripts is designed to allow health plans and providers to more directly supply users with treatment information regarding conditions like hypertension and diabetes.

How's business? Really exciting, because we've emerged as a market leader for nutrition. It's a lot different than finding a cure for cancer, figuring out how to redesign alternatives for people on how they shop without being advertised to at scale.

What was your best business decision? One of our most important decisions was to transition from a consumer company – which was getting paid by food makers like a Groupon for healthy groceries in the early days – to a B2B2C company that got paid by employers and health plans.

What's the biggest challenge for your business? We're now getting to the point where we've grown large enough and we have lots of different customers. We have over 300 large employers, and we work with four of the eight largest health plans and many others. The real question now is getting to the point where we really have to re-evaluate our drug spend. Maybe we can educate the food companies. We can't ever advertise for them. It violates the spirit of what we're doing. We're here to be a marketplace without any advertising to help nudge people to the options healthiest for their families. That's the kind of

thing where we can either become the enemy of the establishment or we can find ways to thread the needle and be part of the transition that the establishment is happy to see happen.

Founder and CEO, Zipongo

HQ: San Francisco

Bay Area employees: 100

First job: Recycling at Tops Friendly Markets

Education: B.A., biology, Williams College; M.P.H., epidemiology, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health; M.D., bioinformatics, Duke University

Residence: San Francisco

First choice for a new career: Clinical medicine or start an integrated care system, like a Kaiser, that's very digital in its orientation and takes advantage of all the new tools and best practices.

Most influential book: "Looking Backward" by Edward Bellamy

Favorite restaurant: Osha Thai

Favorite music: James Taylor

What's going to change at your company in the next year? (Our new product) FoodScripts is the most exciting thing that everyone is incredibly energized about. Rather than just calling it a nutrition platform, we call it food benefits management, an analogy to pharmacy benefits management. So if you're going to spend that kind of money on drugs, food is just as important. Everybody eats, and we've brought tools that make it easier and faster to get food on the table at a better price point. Now (doctors) have a system with FoodScripts where they can actually prescribe to the patient on Zipongo, and then in the after-visit summary you can see your Zipongo instruction and the meal kits and the fresh prepared food you get.

What's a company goal yet to be achieved? Our vision is to reverse chronic disease. That sounds



Jason Langheier, CEO of Zipongo

big and ridiculous, but let's take obesity as one example. Particularly with children, we expect that within 30 years we're back to the same rates of obesity among children that we saw 30, 40 years ago. That's a hard line in the sand goal that we have.

What are your guiding principles for good management? Authentic leadership. Really making sure that the people we hire are truly here to actually work on this problem, not just here to make a killing on their stock. We want them to do really well financially, and we need them to feel really secure in terms of being fairly compensated so that they're not looking over their shoulder and saying they should go work at another job. You can't focus and do good work if that's not taken care of.

Why people like working for you? Startups are hard no matter how you shake it. Relative to what you could make at Google or Amazon, there's not too many startups that can compete with that. We're not going to win in that respect, based on sheer dollars. It has to come down to waking up in the morning and feeling like my work means something.

Why people don't like working for you? One, startups are not a place where you can show up and do your 9 to 5 thing and hide in the corner. There's just too much to do. That's not for everybody.