

# Five Founders

paulgraham.com · Paul Graham · 2009-04 · [source](#)

---

| | |

|  
April 2009

Inc recently asked me who I thought were the 5 most interesting startup founders of the last 30 years. How do you decide who's the most interesting? The best test seemed to be influence: who are the 5 who've influenced me most? Who do I use as examples when I'm talking to companies we fund? Who do I find myself quoting?

## 1. Steve Jobs

I'd guess Steve is the most influential founder not just for me but for most people you could ask. A lot of startup culture is Apple culture. He was the original young founder. And while the concept of "insanely great" already existed in the arts, it was a novel idea to introduce into a company in the 1980s.

More remarkable still, he's stayed interesting for 30 years. People await new Apple products the way they'd await new books by a popular novelist. Steve may not literally design them, but they wouldn't happen if he weren't CEO.

Steve is clever and driven, but so are a lot of people in the Valley. What makes him unique is his sense of design. Before him, most companies treated design as a frivolous extra. Apple's competitors now know better.

## 2. TJ Rodgers

TJ Rodgers isn't as famous as Steve Jobs, but he may be the best writer among Silicon Valley CEOs. I've probably learned more from him about the startup way of thinking than from anyone else. Not so much from specific things he's written as by reconstructing the mind that produced them: brutally candid; aggressively garbage-collecting outdated ideas; and yet driven by pragmatism rather than ideology.

The first essay of his that I read was so electrifying that I remember exactly where I was at the time. It was

High

Technology Innovation: Free Markets or Government Subsidies? and I was downstairs in the Harvard Square T Station. It felt as if someone had flipped on a light switch inside my head.

### 3. Larry & Sergey

I'm sorry to treat Larry and Sergey as one person. I've always thought that was unfair to them. But it does seem as if Google was a collaboration.

Before Google, companies in Silicon Valley already knew it was important to have the best hackers. So they claimed, at least. But Google pushed this idea further than anyone had before. Their hypothesis seems to have been that, in the initial stages at least, all you need is good hackers: if you hire all the smartest people and put them to work on a problem where their success can be measured, you win. All the other stuff—which includes all the stuff that business schools think business consists of—you can figure out along the way. The results won't be perfect, but they'll be optimal. If this was their hypothesis, it's now been verified experimentally.

### 4. Paul Buchheit

Few know this, but one person, Paul Buchheit, is responsible for three of the best things Google has done. He was the original author of Gmail, which is the most impressive thing Google has after search. He also wrote the first prototype of AdSense, and was the author of Google's mantra "Don't be evil."

PB made a point in a talk once that I now mention to every startup

we fund: that it's better, initially, to make a small number of users really love you than a large number kind of like you. If I could tell startups only ten sentences, this would be one of them.

Now he's cofounder of a startup called Friendfeed. It's only a year old, but already everyone in the Valley is watching them. Someone responsible for three of the biggest ideas at Google is going to come up with more.

## 5. Sam Altman

I was told I shouldn't mention founders of YC-funded companies in this list. But Sam Altman can't be stopped by such flimsy rules. If he wants to be on this list, he's going to be.

Honestly, Sam is, along with Steve Jobs, the founder I refer to most when I'm advising startups. On questions of design, I ask "What would Steve do?" but on questions of strategy or ambition I ask "What would Sama do?"

What I learned from meeting Sama is that the doctrine of the elect applies to startups. It applies way less than most people think: startup investing does not consist of trying to pick winners the way you might in a horse race. But there are a few people with such force of will that they're going to get whatever they want.

|  
|