

A New Angle

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Justin Angle This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

Justin Angle Hey folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today, I'm speaking with Colin Hickey, senior vice president of operations at VidCon. VidCon is a massive conference that brings together up to 75,000 online creators in Anaheim annually.

Colin Hickey "And I remember telling my parents and my in-laws that I was quitting this great Missoula job to go work with this YouTube entrepreneur, and they thought I was crazy."

Justin Angle Colin is a longtime Montana entrepreneur and community leader and has grown the VidCon program to produce conferences around the world, including London, Singapore, Abu Dhabi and Mexico City. Colin, thanks for coming on the show.

Colin Hickey Thanks for having me.

Justin Angle So tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

Colin Hickey I was born in Fort Worth, Texas, and my dad was in the Air Force. So I'm an Air Force brat. I moved every two years until I was in high school. I went to high school in Lompoc, California, central coast there north of Santa Barbara. And I did all four years in high school there. And then I briefly went to the University of Wyoming. I was there for about six months. I just never really liked school that much.

Justin Angle It wasn't your thing.

Colin Hickey When I was in Laramie, I was doing house shows. Both of my brothers were musicians in bands, and I was more of the promoter of the family. So there used to be a bar in Missoula, Montana, called Jay's Upstairs, a very famous dive bar, and they were looking for a booking agent to take over the calendar. I wanted to get out of Laramie. I wanted to get out of college. So I moved up here in 2000 to take over the calendar and shortly joined a band and was booking tours for bands. And that was my life for a good 7-8 years.

Justin Angle Lets just go to press on the college piece. Why was college not the right thing for you at that time?

Colin Hickey You know, I think school in general never was really my bag. I remember getting my first C in fifth grade and I didn't get in trouble for it. And I was like, oh this is the amount of effort I need to put in to get by.

Justin Angle Sure.

Colin Hickey But when I was in high school, I didn't, I was not a great student, but I was great at like junior class president and student body president my senior year. So I was good at the politics of school and interacting with people. But when it came down to sitting down and doing my math homework, I was like, Nah, man I'm not in it for that.

Justin Angle You wanted to do other stuff, yeah. And so coming to Missoula, landing with a bar, promoting music. Talk about that life, what was it that was attractive about producing events and booking and those sorts of things?

Colin Hickey It's the people, but it's also like the planning that's always interested me.

I was, you know, you read on the road when you were in high school and you're like, I want to go and, you know, travel the world. And so when I joined a band, it was like, let's go on tour, let's go on tour. And I was like, yes let's go on tour. So we did three months of touring for probably, you know, 5 to 7 years there, which is tough, especially back then before smartphones. So I also had to make money because you're not making money on tour very much. I did a lot of food service, right? So I was in food service for 15 years, working lines, banquet chef, sous chef, whatever. And it's a lifestyle. And so I think for me it's always been like the planning. Like, I think I just my brain works that way. I could see just whether it's a concert or a kitchen, I think the stress, I think of the kitchen to also like maybe gave me the battle scars and the calluses to handle large events like you need to be able to have thick skin.

Justin Angle Yeah. So, yes, a lot of food service, a lot of working with people. And then at some point you get into technology and coding and building out online calendars and that sort of stuff. So what about the online world drew you in?

Colin Hickey There was about three or four promoters in town, rock promoters I'd say. And we just kept on booking shows the same weekend and not telling each other.

Justin Angle Just going up against each other? Like accidentally?

Colin Hickey Yeah, like small town too. And so, like, I'm putting up my poster for my show at Jay's or the Other Side or wherever, and then I see Josh Vanek putting up his poster for his show and the same weekend, the same day, and I'm like, guys, we're killing each other here, right? There's got to be a better way to inform each other on what's going on, also inform our people that we want to come to our shows. And the Internet was getting better at that time. It's funny to say that.

Justin Angle Yeah, give us some years here. Where are we talking?

Colin Hickey I mean, we're probably talking 2007 and '08?

Justin Angle Okay. Yeah, yeah.

Colin Hickey Around there? And so I was like, I'm going to make a website that we could just put our shows on. And my oldest brother's a network engineer, very smart and he had a friend that's a coder, Hank Donovan, who now owns Rattlesnake Cables in Missoula.

Justin Angle Oh yeah, yeah. And friend of the show, we got Rattlesnake Cables right here.

Colin Hickey Oh there we go. And so Hank and I and Shane had lunch and I was like, here's what I envision it. And they were both like, yeah, that's great, but you're thinking, too small. It shouldn't just be music, it shouldn't just be concerts, it should be everything. It should be arts, it should be education, it should be a calendar of the community. So we did that. I borrowed some money from my brother, and Hank made the first version of what is now called MissoulaEvents.net, which was then called GardenCityEvents.net. And I was doing it all by myself, in my house while working at the Iron Horse and the Lunch Line and then working at Jay's and then touring. So juggling a lot.

Justin Angle That's a lot of pieces.

Colin Hickey Yeah. And I remember at the time, like, you know, I was hoping for this, you know, warm community embrace of like, this thing is so cool. And then there was a short-lived online... it was called NewWest.net, and I don't even know what you would call it these days. It was like a, it was ahead of its time. You know, they covered politics and development and the Northwest. And it was owned by Jonathan Weber, who

taught at the university a little bit. And he was like, we need a calendar version, because they were like in Boise and Missoula and Bozeman and the Flathead and Salt Lake, and he was like we need this calendar, it looks great. And so he was like, I'll buy it off you if you come and run it for all these cities for me.

Justin Angle Okay, so they're going to buy your code and ask you to replicate it in other communities?

Colin Hickey Totally. And I was young and the band was kind of on its way down. We were kind of like, we're not going to make a million dollars.

Justin Angle Sure.

Colin Hickey And so I sold the code to NewWest.net and I had a buyback clause in it, which my older brother told me to do. Very smart.

Justin Angle And that says, like if they shelve it or decide not to develop it, you could buy back it?

Yeah.

The first refusal kind of thing.

Yeah. Yeah. Company goes under, it doesn't work out. I can get my code back and just keep on going. So I went and worked at NewWest for probably two years and ran all the sites for them. They also bought the indoor ad company in town for the bathroom ads that you see.

Justin Angle Oh, yeah, yeah.

Colin Hickey And so I was helping run that too. And that's where I met Molly Bradford.

Justin Angle Right. Molly, a previous guest on the show as well.

Colin Hickey Wonderful, wonderful friend of mine and business partner. And so it started to not work for NewWest. Like I said, they were ahead of their time. Like online advertising was not a thing. So selling online ads was like just foreign language for any business. Molly had her work cut out for her. And so the writing was on the wall, it was like, this isn't going to work out. And then I approached Molly, and I was like, I can buy these sites back. I'm sure NewWest could use the capital. And she and I together

were kind of running the indoor ad business. So we were like, well, let's just buy both and start a company. So we did. We got a loan, First Security Bank, and bought back the code in the advertising business and went at it on our own.

Justin Angle And what is now GatherBoard right?

Colin Hickey Which is now GatherBoard. That was wild. We quickly found that wouldn't support both of us. So I landed back in the kitchen and still working nights doing GatherBoard stuff. Jonathan Weber, who owned NewWest.net was the graduate professor for Hank Green.

Justin Angle Okay.

Colin Hickey So I met Hank in the offices of NewWest.net, and he was finishing his degree. He had just started his YouTube channel with his brother and we just became friends. And so after parting there, we would just see each other once or twice a year and check in on each other. I left my job at the Holiday Inn as a banquet chef and applied to be the marketing events director for the Downtown Association.

Justin Angle Okay.

Colin Hickey And Linda McCarthy, great friend and mentor, took a chance on me. I was the only person she interviewed out of the ten that made the final cut that didn't have a college degree. And I got the job. And I think it was a little bit of all of those things, you know, having this online calendar, having years of experience of promoting huge shows in Missoula. Having that food service experience, like, I think she saw something there. And so I did that job for two years. You know, Christmas parades, Out to Lunch, Downtown Tonight, Roots Fest, car shows. Never, I remember the first time I did the Christmas parade and I was like, I never in a million years would think I would be running a Christmas parade.

Justin Angle Yeah. Isn't it funny how you end up in those moments? Like, yeah, I could not have scripted this.

Colin Hickey And Hank and I had, you know, we would have lunch and he would tell me about VidCon. He had just started it.

Justin Angle Yeah, VidCon started at that point. What are we talking like 2010ish?

Colin Hickey That would have been 2010.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Colin Hickey And he started it and it was the first year was 1,500 people and ballroom of the Hyatt in downtown Los Angeles, our social city.

Justin Angle We should just signpost this for listeners.

Colin Hickey Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Justin Angle What is VidCon? Why was it a unique thing? Yeah, give us kind of the origin story of VidCon.

Colin Hickey Yes. So, Hank, you know, YouTube had just started up, it was a thing, it started to go away from just cat videos to like these personalities and channels, right? The vloggers or whatever. And Hank saw that. He saw that what the future of YouTube was going to be very quickly. And saw other shows like his and his brother's that got this kind of online cult following. They created these amazing fanbases and he was like, there needs to be a place for all these people to meet, not just the creators

themselves, but also their fans, right? In person. And he was like, if I don't make this, someone will and they'll have worse intentions than I do.

Justin Angle Hmm. Interesting.

Colin Hickey And Hank being, you know, the nicest human being in the world just created a really fun event. And that first year, it was small. It was just like, you know, just a couple small panels who are now some of the most famous people in the world hanging out in this ballroom. And it just started to grow. And he had hired a production company. He doesn't know anything about live events. He was like, I just need to hand the keys to somebody, to run this thing. I'll give them my input on what creators will bring in the program and should be. But like how big the stage is and and what color the carpet should be was not something he wanted to be in charge of. And Hank's like, well, yeah, my show's now moved to this convention center and I think we're going to have 6,000 people this year. And I was like, whoa! And so I had him and his lovely wife, Catherine, over to dinner. He had been, he told me he was like, I just need someone on staff that, like, knows events and marketing.

Justin Angle Yeah. So he's having second thoughts about outsourcing this operation at that point.

Colin Hickey Yeah, I think he saw that it was quickly getting out of control.

Justin Angle He needs to trust somebody in that seat.

Colin Hickey Yeah. And the company that was running it, they were great. They were based in San Francisco, but they were a large event company. I think he wanted just to have a tighter grip on it. And he does, he was busy. I mean, if you know, Hank, he has always probably 30 million ideas and seven businesses. So he was, you know, at the house, he was like, I'm looking for someone to do this. And I was like, great man, well if I think of anybody, I'll let you know. And then he leaves and I'm laying in bed and then...

Justin Angle You got to learn to read some context clues here.

Colin Hickey Yeah, yeah, I know. I mean, in hindsight. So I remember laying in bed that night with my wife and I was like, I think Hank was talking about me. She was like, yeah dummy. You were the only one at that dinner that did not read into that. So I texted him the next day and I said, hey, I think I could be that guy. And he was like, yes.

And we start talking about it. And then I just took a leap of faith and I said, I'm going to do it.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Colin Hickey You know, I had to tell the downtown association that I was leaving. It was a hard moment because I just really love working with Linda. And I remember telling my parents and my in-laws that I was quitting this great Missoula job to go work with this YouTube entrepreneur. And they thought I was crazy. They were like, you can't do this. You know, you have a young family like, are you sure this is going to be around? And I'm like, I just believe in this guy.

Justin Angle We'll be back to my conversation with Colin Hickey after this short break.

Justin Angle Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking with Colin Hickey about the amazing world of VidCon.

Justin Angle Now it seems like such an obvious choice, although at the time, who knows what's going to happen? Who knows that YouTube is going to become what it

is? That Hank Green's creative empire is going to do what it does and that VidCon will do what it eventually has done.

Colin Hickey Yeah.

Justin Angle So I can see how in that moment you would, and it just represents this sort of new thing that people aren't familiar with, and if you don't see the potential in it, you're going to think that's not a wise choice.

Colin Hickey I think the invention of the smartphone and then like, you could take YouTube with you. You know? And then what YouTube has done and then what other platforms have done since then. Where social media has gone since 2010 until now is insane, right? So obvious choice now and 2013, not so obvious.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Colin Hickey But sometimes you got to follow your gut.

Justin Angle Sure. And so now, VidCon, let's fast forward a little bit. You know, I think your max attendance at one of the Anaheim shows around 75,000 and some

disruption during COVID but now shows around the world. Yeah, kind of give us the summary of that explosive growth that you experienced but also led as well.

Colin Hickey Michael Gardner, who was the CEO at the time, he and I started hiring people and we were definitely in over our heads. We made a team out of just folks in Missoula and folks that were just kind of diehard Hank fans, Hank and John fans. And we did a show in 2014, the attendance doubled that year. Sold out, you know, in days. And that was the explosion of YouTube fandom that year. Like, I remember waking up that first day and there was a line out the door that was around the block. People started lining up at like 3 a.m. to get in line to meet whoever they wanted to meet that year. It was wild.

Justin Angle YouTube personalities. This is the sort of origin of influencers online and that kind of whole genre of celebrity in many ways.

Colin Hickey We were not prepared. And that first day was bad. And then we had a great team and a lot of them are still with the team now. And we just were flexible and we figured out how to fix it. And then what we did then was just try to figure out how to tweak the show and grow it, and it was growing from there, almost doubling per year. Like we went from 8,000 to 12,000 to 24,000. We got pretty good at it, to be

honest. Like the show was running really well. There was always a moment or two of controversy, a viral moment where someone wants to do something stupid.

Justin Angle Sure.

Colin Hickey And I think what Hank quickly realized was he and Jon couldn't be, they couldn't own this thing much longer because it just takes one bad live event to kind of destroy a brand that he and his brother had built forever.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Colin Hickey And by then, we were doing shows internationally. We did three shows in Melbourne and we did two in Amsterdam. And ultimately they decided to sell to Viacom.

Justin Angle This is what, '18? Right?

Colin Hickey Yeah, '18.

Justin Angle Okay.

Colin Hickey Which at the time was scary. Back in the day, like YouTube and Viacom had a pretty large famous spat. You know, we lost some staff when we made that transition. I mean, you know, we went from pretty much being 90% in Missoula, to now as of today like half the staff is in Los Angeles, one's in New York, one's in London's, San Diego and then some, and we still have ten or so folks in Missoula. And so then, you know, you get bought by this giant corporation who, to be honest, has been wonderful. They kind of just let us do our thing. They were like, we don't know how you do what you do, but now you have support, you know? Like, so now I have a legal department and HR and a finance team, which before was like me and Michael, like red lining contracts. So, you know, then Viacom merged with CBS and then they rebranded at Paramount. And at that part has just been wild.

Justin Angle Sure, all the changes.

Colin Hickey Yeah. It gives us that opportunity to have those resources, but also bring some iconic brands to the show. I mean, Nickelodeon was already a sponsor of VidCon before we were bought and, you know, they're owned by Paramount, and so and like MTV and Comedy Central. And so a lot of that does make sense at the show. And it also gave them access to creators, but also creators access to these iconic brands,

which has translated really well. And so I think I wouldn't have have it any other way. I think it's actually worked out really well. Since the acquisition, you know, we did shows in London and then that's when the pandemic hit. And that's I think the blessing there is that we wouldn't be around. If it was just on my Hank during the pandemic, he couldn't pay us out of his pocket, right? Paramount took a gamble on us and then were like, what are you guys going to do? And we were like, we are going to pivot online for this year. And a lot of events, you know, we're doing like the online weekend of their show. And we were like, no, let's do a whole summer and make it free. So we created VidCon Now, and it was four or five sessions a week, online. None of us had experience producing online content. It was a tough year.

Justin Angle Yeah.

Colin Hickey And we made it work. You know, we came out of the pandemic with 50,000 people, which was great. And then at that time we were run by our GM, Jim Louderback, who had Hank hired to help sell the company, he ended up retiring a year plus ago. And myself and Sarah Tortoreti who at the time was VP Marketing and I was VP operations, Paramount decided to make us co-leads of the business, which was a big day...

Justin Angle Yeah.

Colin Hickey ...for the guy that dropped out of college. We launched VidCom Mexico City in the fall of last year to huge success. It was, you know, 14,000 plus people, year one. And being on the ground there, you felt that 2015 Anaheim energy.

Justin Angle Nice.

Colin Hickey Now we have this robust research department at Paramount and we say, hey, we want to look at that region. We need to identify how many people come in from 400 miles, what ticket price would they pay, how much merchandise would they buy? Like all of that. And, you know, it takes, you know, 5 to 6 months to get this research. But we get this amazing document that feels like we're making real informed decisions now. Before, when we were just kind of throwing darts at a map. I always, I just feel like the show is relevant and it always will be, because this space isn't going anywhere right? So as long as we're doing it with true purpose and good intentions, I think, how Hank started it with, as long as we stay true to his core values, I think we're doing good stuff.

Justin Angle And I think keeping leadership here in Montana is probably a big part of that, right? It's grounded in that value set.

Colin Hickey Yeah. And that's funny, too, just because, you know, I spent a ton of time on calls with sponsors or whatever and hey we want to take you out to lunch to talk about next year's show, and I'm like, okay well, I live in Montana, and they're like what? What do you mean?

Justin Angle Yeah, where's that?

Colin Hickey And I had to give them that break down of the story. And they're like, wow, that's wild. Like, you didn't move there during the pandemic or Yellowstone that show, you know? Yeah, and Yellowstone's a Paramount show so... I do think there's a certain like the culture of Missoula and of Montana itself like is seen at VidCon still, which I think is really good.

Justin Angle I would love to get you on the lightning round. Pandemic just sort of we experience just a rush of investment and development in streaming media. Where do you think streaming media lands at this stage?

Colin Hickey Each one of them has a couple of like strong anchor shows. And so yeah.

Justin Angle Which makes it hard as a consumer.

Colin Hickey Very hard, yeah. So I'm like, oh, I still haven't seen Ted Lasso because I don't have Apple TV.

Justin Angle Yeah, right.

Colin Hickey And I think at the time the pandemic made a lot of sense, and now it's getting to the point where if you want to watch everything, you need to buy all of them, and then you're almost like, well, wasn't this what cable was? I don't know. I think there'll be a consolidation of a couple more of these big streaming services, probably very soon.

Justin Angle Okay, A.I., writers and Hollywood, writers strike, all of that.

Colin Hickey I don't know. Terrifying. But also, like, is it a flash in the pan? Like, I don't think A.I. is going anywhere. But like, even in the last six months, I feel like I'm hearing less and less. So I think it's here to stay. We should probably be very careful with that.

Justin Angle Regulation on big tech in general?

Colin Hickey Uhhhh...

Justin Angle Monopoly power, undue influences on, you know, young people, etc..

Colin Hickey I would say as a parent, my personal view is, I have a teenage daughter, I am very cautious about what she puts on her phone and I have honest and open conversations with her about what's out there. And I think everyone needs to make that decision themselves. And I'll leave it at that.

Justin Angle Content abundance, right? Like you can get any opinion served to you that you want, and then the algorithms will drive more opinion in that space and more extreme opinion that's based toward you. It tends to polarize us to a large degree. How do you feel about the information, the health of our information ecosystem in general?

Colin Hickey I mean, I think that was always there to begin with though like, if we just took technology away and I just had my circle of friends of ten, we probably all have the same views about a lot of things. We're probably already a bubble, right? Our

bubble's just bigger with more people who we will never meet. I think when I first downloaded TikTok, it was like drinking from a firehose and I was like, I don't need this video, I don't need this video. And quickly it understood what I wanted, and now and I'm on there...

Justin Angle Yeah, maybe even stuff that you weren't aware of that you wanted.

Colin Hickey Yes. And so now when I'm on there, I do feel like it's a good experience. And I still get that experience from YouTube, too, because I've been on there much longer. And so I don't know, there's something about being catered to and I think it's an expectation now. You probably should put a time limit on your phone.

Justin Angle Would journalism and content in general and the user experience be better if advertising was not the sort of central revenue model of how we deliver news and content?

Colin Hickey I mean, you got to pay the bills so...

Justin Angle Yeah, I mean, we have, it's a terrible business model, except it's better than the other ones we've been able to figure out, right?

Colin Hickey Yeah, I think it's important to have journalism. There's a better way to do it. I don't think they've figured it out yet. I don't know. You're always and have advertisers and then you just, the separation of church and state as much as possible. You know, don't let them influence what you're writing and researching, I think is important. I don't know. Find advertisers that share your same values and love of journalism.

Justin Angle All right. You want to take a position on Twitter since we're.... No, I'm just kidding, I'm kidding. But I just thought, I was escalating in my level of controversy.

Colin Hickey I've famously, I don't, I've never used Twitter that much, but I have it. And I remember I think it was like I had a Twitter account for ten years and I tweeted and it was my 100th tweet in ten years. And Hank Green liked it and reposted it. And he because he had had 50,000 or something.

Justin Angle Sure.

Colin Hickey And he was like, I was like, am I doing Twitter wrong? And he reposted it and he was like, I think I'm doing it wrong. And it was my you know, I got like 10,000

likes and was like, oh my. So, I don't know, I think every social media is, you find ones you like, you go with them and then, yeah, Twitter itself I'll leave it at that.

Justin Angle Yeah. People always have the choice to not pay attention.

Colin Hickey Exactly. You don't have to log in.

Justin Angle Yeah, well, Colin, fantastic conversation. Thank you for sharing your story with us and thanks for, you know, doing this good work from Montana and keeping this state, having a voice in some major cultural events taking place in our media world. Thanks for being here.

Colin Hickey Thanks for having me.

Justin Angle Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM alums Michelle and Lauren Hansen. A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business. With additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larsen is our producer. Ella Hall is our production assistant. VTO Jeff Amnet and John

Wickss made our music. And Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot
and see you next time.