

## An Interview With Bill Jula, Founder & CEO Of Fast Pitch

Hello, my name is Lon Safko, co-author of *The Social Media Bible*, published by John Wiley & Sons, the most comprehensive book ever written on the subject of Social Media. Today we're here with Bill Jula, Founder of CEO of *FastPitch* and we'll be speaking today about Social Media, *Fast Pitch* and, more specifically, Social Networks. So Bill, it's great to have you here today.



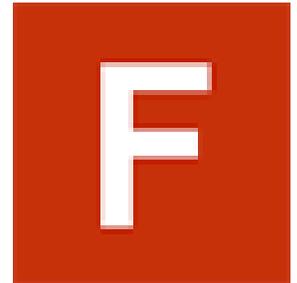
**BJ:** Hey, thanks for having me on, Lon.

**LS:** This is cool. So let's just jump right into it. Tell our listeners, first, a little bit about yourself and your background.

**BJ:** Well, myself personally I'm, as you said, CEO and co-Founder of *Fast Pitch*. My background: I graduated from the University of Florida back in the mid '90's, went on to get a Master's Degree at the University of Kentucky, so I stayed in the Southeastern Conference there for about a good six-seven years' worth of schooling. I then left

Kentucky. I took on a job Major League Baseball with the Tampa Bay Devil Rays for a season, doing some different sales and marketing.

Then I really got into the world of technology. I met up with a couple of colleagues of mine from the University of Florida, moving down here to where we're located right now with *Fast Pitch* here in Sarasota, Florida, just south of Tampa. We're doing some very high-end web-development kind of stuff for ERP systems such as SAP, *PeopleSoft* and different systems like that. And that's what really got me involved in technology, truly understanding it and, more importantly with my background being more of a marketing side of things, how to market a company that's involved in the internet age.



From there I worked in a couple of different capacities with a couple of different companies, eventually breaking off and starting to do my own thing with *Fast Pitch*. It initially started out in 2003 as a networking event company where we did what we called at the time "Speed Networking" events. It's like a "Speed Dating" concept but for business people. To my knowledge we were the only company in the world where we actually had these events going in about 20 different states at any one time. I had different people contracted out around the country hosting these events on a regular basis and, ultimately, it was the experience that I had, not only touched my technology background and my marketing background, but the experience of dealing with, literally thousands of business professionals around the country, that led to the creation of what *Fast Pitch* is now, which is an online business network for professionals. And a lot of that experience that we had, one-on-one, with a lot of the people that we connected with in all these different states and cities has led to the creation of what we now have and, kind of, of tool set and the feature set that we developed that's unlike any other network on the market right now.

**LS:** Well good. Yeah, let's talk about that. I've looked at *Fast Pitch* and I think it's really awesome and you participated in some of our conferences in the past. And I noticed that you were named "Website of the Week" by MSNBC's "Your Business", voted most popular online business networks, Six-Star Reviews, and then on top of that voted the "Best of Web 2.0 All Things Web". That's pretty impressive.

Can you explain to the listeners what *Fast Pitch* actually is?

**BJ:** First of all we're obviously excited about some of the accolades we've been getting over these past few months. We just celebrated our two-year anniversary from our official launch, which was in July of 2006. We've kind of flown under the radar a little bit, which has actually been fine for now and just recently as you've said, MSNBC and some other big networks have picked up on us, and so we're excited about that.

A little bit about what makes our network and why people are becoming so excited about it. Part of the reason we built out our network is this. We were looking two to three years ago at the landscape and, at the time if you think about it (anybody that is really familiar with Social Networking), some of the dinosaurs in this industry right now are sites like *MySpace* and *FaceBook*. Obviously those those are very socially-oriented.

And then in the business world on the other end of the spectrum we have the networks that have been around the longest, like *LinkedIn*, which is very career-oriented. It allows you to really promote yourself in terms of your resume and your work experience and those kinds of things.

And so what we did, really, we took a look at the landscape and we said, "Okay, there's a lot going on in the social world; that's tough to compete in. There's a lot going on in the resume/career world with *LinkedIn* and *Monster.com* and those kinds of sites. But there really was nothing filling the void left for business professionals that actually are involved in a company that are given the task of either marketing or doing sales or promoting from a PR standpoint.

So we looked at it from a standpoint of a typical small business owner. What kind of tools would they need in an online network and what can we build? And going back to those experiences of having done a lot of events and the feedback we'd received, we came up with a couple different toolsets within our system that really are designed to help people promote their business.

The experience when you come into *Fast Pitch* is really driven by your company. It's not as much about you and your career path, although you can promote that within our network. The basis is for everything you do is your "pitch" and that's why the name is obviously *Fast Pitch*. It's a really concentrated way to promote your company; what makes it great, what makes it different, the types of companies you are also trying to connect to, and providing a number of different ways for you to really promote yourself within that network.

**LS:** That's an exciting concept, because...correct me if I'm wrong...really it's like *LinkedIn* where you go in and create your own personal profile, but it's not a personal profile. You're company actually has it own personal profile in there and you link companies through your elevator pitch.

**BJ:** Yeah, exactly. It's more or less your elevator pitch put front and center of the experience. And then around that there are, obviously, a lot of opportunities for you to add a personal side to it. And that's where your personal networking comes in; being able to link to other people that went to your colleges, or maybe people that are involved in other networks you're a part of, like Chambers of Commerce's, and leads groups you can leverage. And all of those things are within our network, as well. And the idea for us is to become a one-stop shop for all of these things. You know, you can come on here and you can look for career opportunities as well. But while you're there and you're already working a job, there's opportunity to really push your business. And that's what most people are there to do. And our goal is to really make our community very, very active and very, very valuable to everybody; to the point where they're actively logging in on a daily basis and leveraging our system.

We don't necessarily want to become one of these monster networks that have 20, 50 million users, because we don't really want to have 10 million profiles that aren't necessarily being used or are inactive. There's not much value in that, in our opinion.

**LS:** Good point.

**BJ:** So what we're looking for is the opportunity to build a very vibrant network.

**LS:** And that's also a really a good point. I had the privilege of interviewing David Nour of *Relationship Economics*. And one of the things that he stressed is for example, when you're in a social network it's not as important to have six thousand friends or links, but what's really important is to leverage very specific people who can help each other. So it's more about quality than quantity, and I think that's what I'm hearing as well.

**BJ:** Yeah, I mean, that's our approach internally. I mean when we think about networking here at *Fast Pitch*, that's what we try to impress upon people. It's to really make a calculated decision about who you're going to connect to and be a little bit more, you know, smarter about it from that standpoint. Now you're obviously going to get those people on that are kind of taking a blanket approach where they are shot-gun approach where they connect to everybody and anybody. You know, who's to say whether which is right or wrong. For some people that may work well for. So we're not going to inhibit that, by any means, but, you know, all the messaging on our site is really geared towards telling people to make this a valuable experience, connect with people you know, look for real opportunities here, not just opportunities to spam people for whatever reason.

The idea is to really create value. And just real quick this is an-shoot to that in terms of making our network valuable. One of the unique things that we do is actually force our members to become active on the system. Periodically we'll send out alert messages to members that we see haven't logged in in quite some time. Perhaps their email is getting bounced back. They might not have made any connections, or their profile is not even close to being complete. We'll send a message periodically over the course of a month or two, reminding them to do these things. And quite honestly at some point if we're getting no response back from those people we will actually purge the profile from the system. It won't get purged completely, the person can ultimately come back in, log in and do all these things, but in terms of the experiences for the people that are actively using our site, that person won't show up.

And so that will make the person who's really using the site, have experience that is much more fruitful because they won't be wasting their time trying to connect to somebody that's obviously not engaged.

**LS:** I like that concept, because it makes the information in there much more valuable because it's people that really care about using this type of a service.

**BJ:** Right. I mean, everybody's time is valuable these days. The last thing you want to do is log into a system and spend an hour connecting to 10 or 20 people and only have two or three reply, and to have part of the reason why they're not replying be that their not even really there. That's why we're not in that market at all. We're not trying to play that game. We're not an advertising-based company; we're not dependant upon advertising revenues by any means. So we have the luxury of not having to worry about click-throughs and impressions and all these different things. We're approaching it from a subscription-end.

**LS:** And again, I really like that because we're talking about quality, not quantity. And to camp onto your comment about spam, we interviewed Amanda Vega who is an expert on *Comment Marketing* and the morning that we interviewed her she told us somebody who was on *LinkedIn* actually spammed the entire *LinkedIn* network that she had access to, saying, "This is what I do for a living, I'm available for consulting, I'm available for speaking." And I think the term she used was that she "got flamed". That really ticked off the *LinkedIn* users. So I think there's a certain level of appropriateness with Social Networking. Do you agree?

**BJ:** Oh, absolutely. I mean, there's definitely etiquette to it. And we're very conscious of it. We've been pretty fortunate so far that we haven't had too many people do things like you just mentioned, but we're conscious of it. So anytime somebody on our network sends us an email to report somebody doing something like that, we'll keep a close eye on it. I think there have been maybe only a handful of times we've actually had to kick somebody off of the network. So I think it all starts with your initial approach as a company. And a lot of the messaging and things that you're conveying, from the top down, to impress upon all of the members that, "Hey, this is the attitude we're taking here on this network; and if you are looking to just spam people and take these shot-gun approaches, there maybe other networks that give you a better opportunity to do that."

So, yes there's definitely etiquette to it.

**LS:** And that's one of the things I like hearing you say, as well, is that in Social Media one of the prevailing trends is integrity.

**BJ:** Yes.

**LS:** I like that! Can you give me a specific example? I go to *Fast Pitch* and create a profile of my elevator pitch; where do I go from there? What do I actually do with it?

**BJ:** Well, the way we present *Fast Pitch* to people is to think about it in terms of two major things.

**LS:** A two-elevator pitch!

**BJ:** (Laughter) two things you definitely want to do when you're on a site like *Fast Pitch* is: 1. Obviously networking. That's a huge component to it. The first thing you are going to want to do, obviously, is to go to our profile, put your pitch on there and put together a good message. So then when you are communicating with people and making that first impression you have a nice picture up there. You've got a fully-completed profile that really tells a nice story.

That's your first step to networking. The second, and in my opinion the more important aspect to social networks like *Fast Pitch*, is the marketing side of things. And that's where a lot of people actually do not pick up on when they join a social network; it's the power of marketing within the network. And let me give you an example. On *Fast Pitch* a lot of the features we've created allow you to add a lot of content above and beyond just your initial pitch about your business. We've got an entire press distribution system within our network, we've got a blog syndication feature you can import all your blogs from your blog to your profile and out to our blog site, which gets picked up on a feed.

We've got a whole event-distribution section where you can promote events and highlight events you may be attending to help market those. There's a classified section and there's the opportunity to post video and

podcasts and really make your profile interactive. There's also the opportunity to attend what we call "virtual" trade shows. That's a really popular section of our site where a lot of our members will go to a certain page at a certain point in the day and have one-on-one communication with other members, via live chat or two-way streaming video. And that's something that no other network has rolled out, other than ours.

So back to your question. It's all about networking but more importantly, it's about marketing. The more content that you can add to your profile, the more colorful it becomes and the more opportunity there is when people are searching Fast Pitch for certain types of people and certain types of industries for your content to get served up in those results. So somebody makes a search for a financial planner in Phoenix, Arizona and ultimately comes across your press release that you posted, which is obviously tied to your profile, which is tied to your website, which, hopefully drives some business in your direction. And then, lastly, we were just talking about the marketing side of things.

You know, not only by posting content in our network are you putting a footprint on our network, but you are also building your footprint outside of *Fast Pitch* which is probably even more important. There's opportunity now as search engines like Google pick up your press release or pick up the key word in an event announcement. They're getting picked up on Google, so now people outside of *Fast Pitch* are now coming across your profile or your press release and then taking that vicious cycle into seeing your profile, learn about you, learning about where you went to college, learning about your company and hopefully, again contacting you at the end of the day.

**LS:** Geez! And of course, one of the questions is how does *Fast Pitch* fit into the bigger term Social Media, more so than just the more vertical term of social networks, but you answered that. But can you just reiterate, quickly that shopping list of what the Social Media tools are that actually are built into *Fast Pitch*? That's surprising.

**BJ:** Yeah, basically we've added every form of Social Media or every tool that's out there that we think is advantageous to a businessperson. But we have nine times out of ten built it internally into our system. And so again, a couple of those that we've added to our system that we think are valuable right now are a press-distribution service, blog syndication and distribution service, event marketing service, a place to place classifieds, a place to imbed video, podcasts. There is a recording system that lets you evaluate the success you're having on *Fast Pitch*. So it tracks all the times your profile and your press has been served up, actually how many times these things have been clicked on. It can let you know who has clicked on your profile to make things a little more transparent for you. There's obviously the whole virtual trade show component we've built that allows you to have instant communication with other members.

Another new feature we added recently is an internal feed system much like you'd see on *FaceBook* where you can add your immediate status, kind of like microblogging about what's going on in your life. We've got that imbedded in our system and what's unique about that is we've actually got that tied to our *Master Fast Pitch* Twitter account, which is followed by the people on *Twitter*. And so if you're a member of *Fast Pitch*, adding a feed within *Fast Pitch* is getting added to our *Twitter* account, which is also getting broadcasted out to people outside of *Fast Pitch*.

**LS:** Wow.

**BJ:** So yes, a lot of stuff. Sometimes it's maybe too much for a lot of people to take, in but the key is to get in there, create the profile, get the ball rolling and once you get in there you really start to see all these features and they start to open up to you. Some people take advantage of all of it, some people take advantage of 10% of it, but the point is that there's something there for everybody. That's our goal.

**LS:** So just roll up your sleeves, just do it, get in there, do what you feel most comfortable with first and then just kind of build from there.

**BJ:** Exactly. Exactly.

**LS:** And you mentioned that you don't really count on advertising revenue. Now most of the companies that I spoke to, that is their sole source of revenue. So you mentioned subscriptions. So can you tell me how you monetize it and maybe what those costs are?

**BJ:** Sure, there are a couple of different levels of membership on *Fast Pitch*. And in our opinion the people who are truly engaged and truly adding value and getting value out of our system are the ones that upgrade and become subscribers. And it's a very small amount in terms of the cost of all these features you get. The dollar value compared to trying to do these things outside of our network is drastically different.

But let me explain the different levels of memberships. So first off, you come on you create a profile. You can have a basic profile. It's free. It gives you a basic presence on the system. It will allow you to invite people you already know into the network and if they come on and join they're part of your network from day one. It allows you to receive invitations to connect, so if somebody on the network finds you, you can accept the invitation and grow your network that way. It will allow you to post press leases and do some of those other features and they are all tied directly to your profile.

Beyond that the next level is the first "paid" level of membership, which is a premium membership and it's \$9 a month, depending upon...you can also buy into a year up front, which makes it about \$7 a month on average. And what that does for you is it gives you credit in our system to immediately allow you to reach out and connect to other people, so it lets you be a more proactive networker. And then, more importantly it will increase your ranking throughout the site. So as people are searching for profiles in certain industries there's the likelihood that your profile is going to get served up higher than somebody that's a free member. So there's a whole internal advertising/marketing component to becoming a member that's very valuable.

Then the next step beyond that is what we call our platinum member and that is basically everything you get with premium, but it's all enhanced. So your ranking on the system gives you three stars so it will allow you to outrank everybody below you. It allows you to have unlimited credits which allows you to connect to an unlimited amount of people a month. If you're this power networker that wants to connect with 200-300 people a month or something like that this gives you the freedom to do that.

It allows you to see who clicked on your profile; it will increase your rankings across your press releases. All these other things that makes everything magnified with the platinum membership. Beyond that is so that's 90% of our revenues come from subscriptions. Beyond that we have a lot of one-off up sell opportunities where just to give you one example...one of the things that really powerful that you could do with a press release, for example, is: you can have a press release sent to up to 50,000 other *Fast Pitch* members, directly to their *Fast Pitch* inbox and a lot of small businesses love this feature.

It's \$95 for each press release and a lot of people like it because, if you think about it, in the past most small businesses were relying on a PR firm which is pretty expensive a lot of times. And they will then cross their fingers and hope that a local newspaper or magazine picks up on what their doing. And then they cross their fingers again and hope that the people that they want to learn about them are actually reading that newspaper on that given day.

So there's a lot of "what-if's" there. What our distribution system does is it allows you to actually target the types of people at the end of the day that you want to have read that press release and will send it out to the most active and exact type of people you are trying to reach. So the most accurate 50,000 on our network that you would like to read that press release.

So we're cutting out the middleman for a lot of people and it's very inexpensive but it is a part of whole revenue model. There are different one-off opportunities like that for people who do above and beyond just what comes with the subscription.

**LS:** And that's pretty powerful, you're exactly right. Press releases, normal press releases that are faxed are completely ineffective and now because so many people are catching on to online syndication of press releases, they're becoming a little less effective. But what I just heard here was that not only is it targeted, because you can pick your demographic, but it's also part of it's trusted network, which gives it a lot more credibility than anything you can do with it.

**BJ:** Exactly. I mean that's the power...a lot of people weren't understanding what we were doing with our press service in the early days, but the power of what we've gotten with this is because we have an audience and we're not just relying on thin blind syndication that's going out to New York Time that may or may not be really getting anybody, which is what you get with some of the traditional PR services out there.

With us it's, "Hey, that may happen and it may not." We're up front and honest about that. But where we can give you the value you know you're going to get is this press release will go directly to an audience and that audience is built-in within our network. That's what gives our distribution service so much power and it's so unique. Some of the traditional PR...online PR systems...cannot offer that. They've never had a community so it's a nice alternative.

I don't want to say it's better or worse than anything else, but it's definitely a nice alternative and it's a lot less expensive. And again, a lot of these things are geared towards small business owners or a marketing person that's looking for a very cost-effective way to drive some exposure.

**LS:** And that's a key word there, cost-effective. Is there any... speaking of audiences...is there any stats about *Fast Pitch* that you can share with us?

**BJ:** Right now, as I said before we're not as concerned about our numbers. Right now we have 200,000 members on the system and we've only been around, again, for like two years. But again, our focus isn't so much on our numbers. So if you're playing the numbers game with *Fast Pitch* compared to, like a *FaceBook*, we pale in comparison. But again, our goal, our numbers sometime fluctuate. We may go one month where we have 180,000 profiles and the next month we may, theoretically grow by 50,000 more, but we may purge 30,000 because they're just not being active.

So, for us, we always get asked that question. How many profiles do you have, how many members do you have and we'll obviously throw our number out there, but it's not quite as relevant in the grand scheme of things compared to the larger networks because they operate completely differently. They're advertising; they're not as concerned about dead profiles, obviously. We're coming at it from a different angle.

**LS:** So size doesn't matter?

**BJ:** (Laughter) exactly! In this case!

**LS:** Yeah, I definitely agree with you. Is there a success story that you can share; maybe one of your clients have had generated business, is there something that you can share with us about that?

**BJ:** Oh, absolutely. I mean a lot of our success stories are just a lot of "hear-say" that our support team gets on a day-to-day basis. People are calling in and asking about how to use our features. There's just constant feedback about you know, "Hey, I actually met somebody that I never met before that I was trying to get business from and now I did some business", and so forth. So there are a lot of opportunities like that. We're always seeing on some of our communication logs the communication going on between people and you see a lot of opportunities that are happening out there.

To give you a specific; I've got the perfect example. You were telling me earlier that you're based out of Phoenix, Arizona. There was a Social Media Conference out there, as you know, with Matt O'Brien. And he mentioned just the other day that he came in and used our system, posted a press release about his conference that he was having, I guess it was last Thursday, and apparently it got picked up by the major newspaper out there in Arizona and he mentioned the only place he posted the press release was on our system. So the only way they could have contacted him and picked up on what he was doing was through Fast Pitch.

So there's obviously a ton of success stories out there but that obviously a good one, and timely and appropriate for your question.

**LS:** Yeah, it really is. And I appreciate it because I'm one of the Founding Members of that Social Media Conference. That's pretty cool. And that's great. I mean in our local newspaper The Arizona Republic pretty much dominates the entire state of Arizona, so when they pick up on a story, that's usually a pretty big deal. So thank you, by the way.

**JB:** Absolutely, any time.

**LS:** Is there anything else you'd like to share with our listeners about Fast Pitch, anything else you can think of?

**JB:** Not necessarily, just that anybody out there that is, you know, either involved in a social network already and maybe has a certain mindset about what a social network is, either from a purely social standpoint or from the traditional LinkedIn resume approach, I strongly encourage you to take a peak at *Fast Pitch* and take a moment to create a profile, because the experience you're going to have is going to be completely different, and we really, truly feel like we offer a lot of value. To be honest, we don't feel like we compete with any other network out there, must because we are so different. In fact, we feel like we compliment almost everything out

there. There's a place for you to be on maybe five or six networks; don't limit yourself to just one because you never know where your next opportunity is going to come from. It can never hurt to put content out there on all these different sites, because, again, you look beyond just the networks themselves. There's opportunity for you to get picked up on Google and Yahoo and some of these other networks that can drive more traffic in your direction.

So just a piece of advice to everybody out there. And obviously if you've never been involved in a network, go ahead and give us a try, give us a call. Our phone number is all over the website. We're very excited about our support team and we understand for a lot of people, getting involved in Social Media is a brand new thing and we understand that. We're willing to get on the phone and talk to you and talk to you through your business a little bit and give you some insight.

**LS:** I appreciate the difference, as you just said, about what you do and how you compliment all the other sites. Generally speaking, *MySpace* is kind of a social site, where *LinkedIn* is a professional site for individuals, but it sounds like this, for sure, is the first professional site that represents companies.

**BJ:** Correct. You've got it!

**LS:** That is so cool. Can you tell the listeners where they can actually find more information about you?

**BJ:** Yeah, well obviously go to the website. It is [www.fastpitchnetworking.com](http://www.fastpitchnetworking.com). Once you get there it's a typical sign-up process you go through. You create the first wave, or first faze of your profile. You don't have to necessarily make it very robust in the beginning. You can just get your feet wet and then come back to it later one if you'd like.

If you have questions our phone number is (941) 309-5339. I'm never afraid about giving that out because we're very proactive about working one-on-one with people. A lot of the conversations we have had are what has lead us to build some of the features we have, so we are always practicing what we preach from the standpoint of networking and having an open conversation with people about their business and, obviously, how that can play a role in *Fast Pitch* down the road.

**LS:** So you actually listen to your customers.

**BJ:** We try to.

**LS:** (Laughter) that's a big difference, I appreciate that. I would really like to thank you, Bill Jula, the Founder and CEO of *Fast Pitch*, for being with us here today and explaining to us a little bit about is online professional/social website. So Bill really, thank you.

**BJ:** Thanks for having me on, Lon. Appreciate it.

**LS:** Thank you. So this has been Lon Safko, the co-author of *The Social Media Bible*. Be sure to check out the other valuable social media tactics, tools and strategies that can be found in The Social Media Bible book and its companion website, [www.thesocialmediabible.com](http://www.thesocialmediabible.com). For more information about me, Lon Safko, please by all means go to my website at [www.longsafko.com](http://www.longsafko.com) and again, Bill, thank you so much for being here with us today.

**BJ:** Okay, thanks again, Lon.