An Interview With John Pollard, Founder & CEO of Jott

Hello, my name is Lon Safko, co-author of *The Social Media Bible*, published by John Wiley & Sons, the most comprehensive book every written on the subject of Social Media. Today we are here with John Pollard, one of the Founders and CEO of *Jott*. Wow! We are going to be speaking about *Jott*, digital convergence, and Social Media. So, John, gosh it's great to have you here today.

JP: Happy to talk with you, Lon.

LS: This is great! You have been a big supporter of this book, through this very long, arduous process, and I truly appreciate that. Thank you.

JP: Well, I'm looking forward to seeing it all come together.

LS: Well, thank you. John, can you tell our listeners a little bit about your background. It is kind of impressive. Can you tell us about who you are and what you do?

JP: You know I have been in technology maybe for 20 years (something like that) starting in the late 80's where I was working with pretty big companies helping them figure out system-integration problems. I moved from that into Microsoft in the early 90's, working on some consumer products there. And at the time when I got there, only 5% of PC's had CD-ROM drive. There was no web; there was nothing like what you see today. And we were trying to build, sort of, a content business, and that was just fascinating. We made a lot of really, really great products at the time and I had a nice career at Microsoft doing *Sidewalk* and *Office* and a few other things and, ultimately landed in the travel business in a product called *Expedia*, which is one of the biggest on-line travel sellers in the world now.

My job there, specifically, was taking *Expedia* overseas, and at the time, (this was the late 90's) the U.S. was quite ahead of overseas' markets in terms of web development and in terms of e-commerce development. And so I built a team of people to do that and that remains one of the highlights of my career, just working on great technology with wonderful people all over the world.

To make a long story short, I left Microsoft in 2005 (actually early 2006) and started this company *Jott*. In many ways it is, sort of, the culmination of a lot of things that I had seen in my career. I wanted to do something that had global impact, which worked on mobile devices/cell phones, that was simple, had very high utility, had great "brand," and really did things for people. I didn't want to build something that was trivial; I wanted to build something that had high value for people. And so I founded the company with a gentleman named Sri Madhavapeddi who I met at Microsoft and who is a brilliant technical mind as well as a brilliant businessman. We've been going at this since about April, 2006, so almost two and a half years now. It's been a great ride.

LS: It's exciting! So you left your nice, secure job at Fortune 500 Microsoft to go off and be an entrepreneur again.

JP: (Laughter) Right! That's right. My father-in-law was asking me if I was crazy, or not. But, you know….

LS: Well, that's what the French word for "entrepreneur" is….

JP: (Laughter)

LS: …mentally insane! (Laughter) Aw, geez! Well, I think that the fact that you are going after mobile technology and you are supporting and providing a service for mobile is awesome. From many previous interviews that we have done, like Kakul Srivastava from *Flickr,* quote that right now there are actually three cell phones per human being on the planet….

JP: (Laughter)

LS: …that's astonishing!

JP: Yeah, where are we going to put all those batteries!

LS: Yeah, that's also astonishing! (Laughter) And I spoke with Amanda Vega and she was saying that in a lot of the Third World countries, especially Africa, where they really cannot afford computers or internet access, everyone gets their email and web access through cellular technology.

JP: That's exactly right. It is an alternative way of accessing the internet. In some ways, the cellular infrastructure is completely bypassed. Landline infrastructure (you know the back hold that was done in the developed world for so many years) just has not really been done in the developing world in some places. It has really been remarkable and it's a great thing in general.

LS: And I think you are on the wave; it seems like that's what you have done with your entire career, stayed on that crest. I really think that this is going to be the next big boom, not only in Social Media but also just the internet as a whole; the whole mobile side of it.

JP: Yeah, you know I am a firm believer that there are going to be different ways of accessing the internet and that in some populations it's going to be primarily mobile-driven; and in some economies, some geographies, it's going to be a healthy mix of a desktop and a mobile phone. But I am a big believer in mobile and I think sometimes things are over-hyped and people over-estimate what's going to happen to one degree or another. However, we think it is here to stay.

I know one of the essential things behind *Jott* is that people look at their mobile phones, (whether it is an iPhone or it is just your humble average phone) they really look at it as a trusted appliance; this thing that they have with them all the time.

LS: ….all the time.

JP: And we're taking advantage of that.

LS: Well, let's get to that. First of all, I love *Jott*. I talk about it at all my conferences when I do keynotes. I even have a slide on you people, because I cannot live without the technology now that I am hooked, by the way.

Can you tell our listeners what *Jott* is, how it works, what is the story behind it.

JP: Sure. Sometimes it's…I can talk about the technology or I can talk about the persona, and all of that. I actually do a little bit of both sometimes.

Let me try to put it this way; I sort of ask questions, which are, "Would you hire the following kind of person….

- A person who always picked up the phone for you,

- A person who took dictation,

- A person who sent email and text messages for you (hands-free so you did not have to take your eyes off the road),

- A person who would post messages or post calendar items to Google Calendar just using your voice

- A person that would let you retrieve information from your favorite sources (like the New York Times or TechCrunch, or what have you) with just their voice,

- A person that would never sleep, does not complain, does not whine, and does some of this for free.

Would you hire this person?

LS: (Laughter)

JP: And, of course, the answer is yes!

Really, what *Jott* is is a mobile-productivity tool that works on any phone. It does not require any downloads, it does not require a particular carrier or contract, it does not require anything but what you already have, you simply call a number, 1-866-J-O-T-T-123, and you will be asked a simple question which has many answers, but it is a simple question, "Who do you want to *Jott*?" And if you say, "Yourself" or if you say, "Notes" you will hear a beep and you can say something and hang up; and we will take your voice and convert it to text automatically and then give it to you on your desktop.

And it is really as simple as that. You call a number, you say something, you hand up. Everybody in the world knows how to make a phone call and so everybody in the world knows how to use *Jott* automatically.

In addition, the beauty of it is that that simple sequence of things allows you to capture thoughts, allows you to be more organized, it allows you to communicate with people hands-free. So in response to the question, "Who do you want to *Jott*," I could say, "Lon Safko" and you would hear "beep" and then I could record a message to you and *Jott* would deliver that text message and an email message to Lon Safko.

So, if I was in traffic and I really needed to contact you, I could *Jott* you. It is really quite remarkable that something so simple with such an easy to use "user-experience" does so many things and is so powerful. I think we have really struck a nerve.

LS: I think you did. The people that have used it…as a matter of fact Thursday I was presenting to the Enterprise Network here in Phoenix, about 130, or so, people, and I would say more than 1/3 of the audience actually is currently using *Jott*. As soon as I mentioned it, the other 2/3 of the audience immediately wanted to know how they could start using *Jott*. I think you did strike a nerve.

I use it continually; when I am in a meeting and I have to get some notes, or I have to remember to do something; and like you said if you are in the car, too. I use to keep a pad and a pen in my consol and every time I would get a thought or idea, I would have to try to write it down while I'm doing 70 MPH down the freeway. But now just by hitting speed-dial, it text-messages to my phone and to other people's phones. If we are going to be late for a meeting, all I have to do is say it. I think it is a great technology.

JP: Yeah, it's really cool. You know Sri and I, we met each other at Microsoft in the Windows Mobile group and he and I are big fans of all the latest mobile technology; whether it is the iPhone or some of the great stuff that [09:46.3] has come out with, or is going to come out with…or the Windows Mobile devices. We think that this stuff is fantastic, but what we realized was that we really wanted to build a product that everybody could use. Therefore, the way we did it was to put it behind the phone numbers. And that simplicity, up front, was a lot of hard work, because on the back-end we are doing very, very complicated things.

And that is just terrific and a lot of people stay more organized and are more in touch and are more informed. And we can all use that.

LS: We need to pay more attention to the road. And you said, the "back-end." Can you talk a little bit about that! I was one of the early pioneers of voice recognition, back in the early 80's, even actually late 70's, so I have an extensive background of voice recognition and some of the complexities that go along with it.

JP: Yep!

LS: But this is really the most accurate I have ever seen. So, is it a combination of human intervention and voice recognition? I mean, can you just tell us a little bit about that?

JP: Yes, absolutely. It is that, in fact. What we decided at the beginning of the company was that what mattered to people most was simplicity and quality. It would not make any sense to build a product where what came out the other end was gobbledygook. What we really needed to have happen was to have a super-simple front-end that works the way people work; and then deliver quality results in the back-end. The reality is that people are using *Jott* in real places.

They use it in their car and they use it between meetings. They use it in places where there is background noise, they speak normally, they say names, and they speak the way you and I normally speak. They have some "umm's" and "ahh's" and they repeat themselves, and so they speak normally in *Jott*.

To have the speech-recognition engine, all by itself, take out the noise, the pops, and the poor cellular activity issues and turn out 100 % accurate transcription is impossible. It really is quite impossible, and so what we have done is we take the voice and we run it through, (actually now), a couple different speech recognition engines. We have gotten very, very smart about this and we pull out as much…we sort of pre-process as much as we can.

And then we have people, frankly, on the other side of the planet (Thank God for the speed of light!) who clean up pieces of this. You know, it is very much like people who work in call centers overseas, who process information; or people who are in the medical transcription business where they write up doctor's notes and things like that. It is very highly organized; it's highly, highly secure, it's very controlled. And it is a real challenge to get it right for a lot of reasons.

One: because a bunch of people are spread all over the place, and two: we have to keep the quality high, and three: we need to do it at a price that will translate, or at a cost that will translate to an affordable product here in the United States. And that is not easy to do, and I am happy to say that because that is not easy to do it makes it very difficult to replicate what we have done.

You know, speech-recognition is going to get better and better and better; and I am excited about the prospects there, because every time there is an evolution in the state-of-the-art there, we benefit from them and so do our customers.

LS: And the one thing, too, that I have to mention is your turn-around time. I want that message almost as quickly as I hang up, and for all intents and purposes, you have achieved that.

JP: Yeah, it is interesting. We have decided that we are not a real time business. That is because we do not need to be real-time because the case that we are modeling in most of our design around is the person sitting in a car who really needs to capture that thought, that action-item or that idea that they had, or that promise that they made to a customer. They need to capture that so they do not forget it. And it is not critical that they get it immediately, or real time. What's important is that it is safe and secure and captured.

Therefore, it can be a couple of minutes delayed; no problem. So that's what we model that on and we usually achieve that pretty well. You know, there are times when we have super-fast turn-around times and some times when it takes a little bit longer; but over all we get the turn around done very quickly.

LS: It really is remarkably fast. And you had mentioned that one of your demographics is somebody sitting in a car. One of the things that I am finding is that your demographic, pretty much, is anyone who has a cell phone. When I pitched *The Social Media Bible* to John Wiley & Sons, the first question they asked was, "What is your demographic?" And of course, the classic answer (that they hate) is "everyone." Because you know that it isn't; but in the case of Social Media, in fact it was.

I really think that in the case of *Jott*, really, your demographic is anyone who has access to a cell phone.

JP: Well, that's right. And we designed it so that it could be useful for anybody. We really believe it and we have this mantra inside the company (you know, in our little office here) that says, "Everybody should have *Jott 123* on speed-dial." And we mean that, whether you are a casual user who uses it a couple times a week, or if you are a super hard-core *Jotter* who uses it many times a day. It is almost like insurance. It's almost like having AAA on you phone. It's just there; you should have it there.

It is so simple that it scales well; from the grandmother who is trying to text to her grandchildren…. (Laughter) to the road-warrior who is reeling off expenses as he gets out of his cab. And it is broad set, and it does not mean we are sloppy and it does not mean we are not targeting people. However, I think everybody has too

much going on these days. Everybody could use a little bit of help, and happily *Jott* morphs itself to whatever need you might have. If you need casual usage of it, great. If you need really heavy usage of it, we also scale for that. So it works out well for everyone.

LS: And I like it because it is a ***24/7 digital pad and pen***.

JP: Yeah, exactly!

LS: You never have to look for a pencil.

JP: Yes, it is robust. There is no downloads, you do not have to worry about whether it is conflicting with other software on your phone. You can even dial *Jott* from multiple lines. If your cell phone is not handy, you could dial from your landline at home if you had that number programmed into *Jott.*

It is really robust, it is very reliable, and it is dependable. Again, it's like that person that I described at the beginning. It is a dependable assistant who does these things for you, and it is a no-brainer.

LS: One of the things that I did notice that you have changed recently is your business model. You have switched over to the somewhat-common industry "freemium," which is great, because you have to pay the bills; you have to cover the overhead. We are still talking "inexpensive."

Can you just tell our listeners a little bit about that new business model?

JP: Sure, we said, really from the beginning of the company (well, not quite the beginning but as soon as it became clear to us) how people were using *Jott* and the demands we would have on the product. We said, "Alright, it is very likely that we are going to have both a free product and as premium product." Therefore, this is a free product that is ad-supported, and then a premium product where ads were suppressed. And this is because we have many business-users, many corporate-types, who use *Jott* and they do not want advertising in the product; and that is very understandable.

So we always knew that we were going to have this split; and the question for us was, "How do you do this in a way that is most affective for most people?" And we think we have come up with a formula that is good.

So, it is a terrific free product. It is fantastic. It allows you to *Jott*, you have a website that you go to for retrieval of your *Jotts*, or you have this option we built called "*Jott-Express"* which is very, very slick. People are beginning to realize how cool this is. It is a download that sits on your desktop and it is a little list- manager and it is lightening-fast and it works in "offline mode" It is a very, very nice piece of technology.

So "free" people get to use those, and then premium-people do not have ads; but they also get to receive their *Jotts* in emails; and they get to send other people Jotts. We made a decision that said that we are going to take out the ability to send other people *Jotts* in the free plan (because we did not want to put advertisements in *Jotts* that you are sending to others). We talked to many people and they agreed. They said, "People I'm sending a *Jott* to do not want an ad in the *Jott.* They do not want to get spammed by me." Therefore, we said, "Alright, emailing to other people is going to have to be an ad-free experience, and thus it is going to have to be in our premium product."

In addition, the good news is that our premium product is extremely affordable. It is about 13 cents a day, so that is about $ 3.95 a month; there are annual plans as well. We call it a "Double-mocha Plan," because it is the cost of a double mocha per month. For that, you get the ability to capture these ideas, any one of which could be worth $100,000's to a businessperson. You get the ability to text and email people "hands-free" in the car, which is a legal requirement in some states, and a whole bunch more.

Therefore, we felt that we designed the free-plan really well and the premium-plan is super-affordable. In addition, the reactions that we have gotten since we've come out of beta have been overwhelmingly positive. There have been some people who have been disappointed; I will not lie. There are some people who just cannot conceive of paying for anything on the web, and they feel really….you know, good about that. But, I would say 95% of people, maybe even higher than that, have been very supportive because (and this is what it comes down to) they basically said, "Look, I love *Jott*, I'm committed to it, I want it to stick around, I want you to be around; and therefore I want you to have a business model that's not some "bet".. We want you to have a real business over the long-term."

And so they are more than happy to pay $3.95 or more, and so it has been a really interesting experience; frightening in some ways because the days before we came out of beta we literally lost a little bit a sleep because we knew that we were going to be disappointing some of our customers. But ultimately, it has been a great thing.

LS: I think you brought up a couple of good points. First of all, you listened to your customers. That is the root of what Social Media really is all about. That's that it is user-generated content, and actually is having this two-way communication; and I appreciate the fact that you, as a Founder/CEO of the company will actually listen to your customers to ask them what they want.

The other thing that I hear, too, is that the premium model does seem to work and anybody who is not happy with it, really, are not intelligent business people; and I am not trying to insult anyone. If you do not make money, two years from now you will not be there any longer for them.

JP: That's right, that's right. You know, some people joke that some start-up entrepreneurs have a business model, and that business model is to "be acquired."

And that is not necessarily a bad thing, but we cannot run the business that way. We have to run the business and design it in a way that allows us to stick around for the long-term. Most people are very, very understanding. It's a small minority (that are negative), and in that small minority I know where they are coming from. I know times are tough. It is not as if people have money pouring out of faucets in their house; they are pinching pennies, and I agree with that.

However, *Jott* provides a gigantic value for people and so far, so good.

LS: And you brought up a really good point, too. I mean, we are talking about the cost of a fancy cup of coffee.

JP: Yes!

LS: And that is a small price to pay to have a digital assistant.

JP: That's right, that's right!

LS: Is there any kind of statistics, any kind of a user-based info, or any kind of information that you can give us so we have an idea of the order of magnitude of you guys?

JP: Sure, we do not release specifics, particularly at this point yet, but *Jott* is approaching half a million customers, which is an extraordinary number really, given that we haven't spent any money on marketing and we haven't signed up with AT & T or Verizon, or some other carrier, for distribution.

We are just, you know... the community has gotten excited about *Jott* and they have pulled it along and we have gotten to this point. So, we are fairly big. We've gotten good activity in the sense of our active user-base showing in that number, and so things are going very well. You know, we are growing month after month at a nice clip. It will be interesting to see what happens to that post-beta, in terms of that growth declining just a little bit or settling down just a little bit. I imagine it would.

But "so far-so good," and we are making a lot of people really happy. You know it is one thing to get into a little start-up and get a couple of hundred customers, a couple thousand customers; but when you have hundreds of thousands of customers and you do millions of *Jotts* (and we are now well over 5 million *Jott's* having been done) you get to a different order of magnitude.

It is now a different thing and it takes on a life of its own; and, you know, it is all good!

LS: (Laughter) I've got to say congratulations. I mean, the type of growth that you have experienced (because the first time I talked to you, which I think was last December, the numbers were significantly lower) show you really are exponentially growing. You must be doing something right!

JP: Well, it's just that the product is easy to adopt, you know. It is not painful and it lets you use it the way you use other things at work. It works with *Outlook*, it works with *MacMail*, it works with web-based mail, and it works with any browser. I mean, it is very, very simple and the proposition is, "Look, if I get older here every day I have a reminder that my memory is not foolproof." And so I think this is a common problem. People want to be able to off-load stuff to something that is trusted, and this just works!

LS: And I insist that the reason my memory is going is not because of my age, it is just simply my head is full!

JP: Well, that's right. We live in a day and age where we have the luxury of so much information-access. It is a great thing, really; the web is a wonderful, wonderful thing. And some of the information is garbage, some of it is great; but at least you have the freedom of parsing that yourself, and that can be overwhelming. And we are all expected to do 150%; we are all expected to be over-achievers at work, to be the ultimate parents, to be the ultimate children.

We are expected to "not" compromise on anything, and something's got to give; and oftentimes your brain just (not to be too technical) is on buffer-overrun. You have too much going on and you need some help. *Jott* is a great solution for that.

LS: *Jott* is there for you! Can you tell our listeners (because anyone who listens to this is obviously, going to run out and sign up for *Jott*) if this is an easy process? Where do they go; how do they do this?

JP: The best place to start is our website. We actually have a phone number that is the access-point for *Jott*, which is 1(866) JOT-T123, and you can start that way. However, I would recommend that people go to the website, www.jott.com and start there. And there is a "getting started" button there and you will see all of the different features. It is a very, very straightforward website and you will be signed-up on a free plan or our premium plan within minutes. There are very few hurdles to adoption; it does not matter what carrier you are on, it does not matter what kind of handset you have.

LS: That is terrific! You even make the sign-up start-button big, so you cannot even miss that!

JP: I know! (Laughter) We had an internal debate on the site design and it was like, "Are we making it too big! Are we insulting our customers?" (Laughter)

But no, people appreciate its simplicity. They've got too much going on and they do not want to have to troll for your site and figure out how to use it. They just want simple directions, and that's what we give.

LS: You make it as intuitive as possible, just like the rest of the program. I love it!

Is there anything else that you can think that you can add; any kind of a story or information that you think our listeners might benefit from?

JP: Well, you know, I think I will just leave it to that. What we have designed a simple product that has a powerful application in people's lives, and no two individuals on *Jott* uses it exactly the same way. There is a woman who uses *Jott* to manage the in-home care of her ailing Dad (her aging Dad). She has four or five people who come in during the day and look after him, and she uses *Jott* to communicate with those people. She can send them a group *Jott* in one phone call, or she can send individual *Jotts* with a single call. She is a working woman and so she has to be able to do this at work.

So she had adapted *Jott* to something that is very critical for her in her personal life. We have people who use *Jott* in the business world to take "action-items" and communicate with their teams to be more organized. We have students who use it to take down assignments. We have teachers who use it to broadcast class assignments. We have just every imaginable use-case example being done on *Jott* and I think that speaks to a couple of things. One is that we did not decide (as a company we didn't say this is how you should use it) how you should use the product. We simply said we are going to keep it really simple and you can take it where you want to take it.

And that was a great decision, and I think that's the way Social Media is working on the web. It is extremely democratic!

LS: Yes!

JP: And *Jott* is that way. We have not over-engineered it, we have not burdened it with features; although there are some really cool things, and you can do with it what you want.

LS: I love it, John.

I would really like to thank John Pollard, Founder and CEO of *Jott,* for being with us here today and talking about digital convergence and *Jott* and Social Media. John, truly, thank you for being here.

JP: My pleasure, really.

LS: This was great!

This has been Lon Safko, the co-author of *The Social Media Bible*. Be sure to check out our 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.

And for more information about me, Lon Safko, please go on over to my website that can be found at www.lonsafko.com.

And again, John, that you so much for being here today.

JP: Thanks Lon. Take care.