

Why The Startup PingTank Hired A 12-Year Old



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If you've ever wanted to make your photos more exciting (beyond using filters), you are PingTank's target market. The Los Angeles startup created an app that allows users to add animated emoticons—think dollars raining down or dancing hearts—to their photos and videos. The app is integrated into [Facebook](#) Messenger, allowing those messages to incorporate 2D and 3D animations. With PingTank it's possible to have animated snowflakes floating in your photo or explosions taking place. You can put hearts and flowers around your child's face or add a sunbeam to a landscape that makes it appear as if sunlight is shining across the photo.

PingTank was cofounded by Jeremy Greene, Derek Myska, Lars Jensen and Christopher Dawes and launched via Facebook Messenger in March 2015. The app is free—users download it and then use it to add an animation to their photo, either within the Facebook Messenger app, Instagram, [Twitter TWTR +2.49%](#), Vine or What's App. Users can also add PingTank animations to photos they take with their phone's camera.

In a little more than a year PingTank has grown to 17 employees, has 400,000 users and has raised \$2.2 million.

A few months ago 12-year old Sammy Parsley started using PingTank, and he had a lot of ideas about how to change and expand it, to make it more appealing to the tween/young teen demographic. Parsley emailed Greene, full of suggestions for new content and visual effects, including an animation that starts with a rumbling sound that grows louder, eventually vibrating and shaking the photo apart. As the picture starts to crumble from the top, a voice screams "Earthquake!"



Jeremy Greene, CEO of PingTank

Greene was smitten. He decided to hire Parsley in May to be vice president of youth marketing—possibly the youngest VP ever [hired](#) by a company. “When I first heard from him I had no idea he was 12 years old. He’s very articulate, very smart,” says Greene. Parsley’s father is an investor in PingTank, but Greene insists that had nothing to do with the hiring. “I hired him because he’s brilliant and the best way to market to people in that age group is to have someone in that age group telling us what they want. I’m 32—I don’t know what the tween market wants.”

Parsley suggested that PingTank take major video games like Call of Duty and Dead Island and create animations out of the weapons used in them. “You’re essentially gamifying social media” says Greene. PingTank created an animation that uses a weapon from the game Dead Island (which involves killing zombies), and cuts apart photos and videos.

While Parsley was in school he worked on ideas for PingTank on the weekends and in the evenings. Now that school is out for the summer, however, Greene says Parsley will probably be in the office twice a week. “He comes in with ideas and we and I listen to what he wants to do and then figure out of and how to implement them. Sammy emails me all the time and we Skype. He’s always got great ideas.” Greene says Parsley is “being compensated” but that because of child labor laws, he’s not being paid in cash.

Although Greene would not disclose revenue, he said PingTank is growing “exponentially.” Revenue comes from PingTank’s integrations with brands, everything from alcohol to video games and movie franchises. The company

creates animations featuring those brands and then users put those branded animations into photos. A photo of three friends on a beach could have an animation added on top that uses a brand of soda, like Coke. When that picture is posted on Instagram or messaged out through Facebook Messenger, Coke gets viral, organic exposure. “The user is basically sending a commercial for the brand out all over the world,” explains Greene.

Brands pay between \$25,000-\$100,000 to have PingTank animations created for them. The company is creating between 25-30 of those brand animations a month, says Greene, and will likely have hundreds of brands on board by year’s end.

As for Sammy Parsley’s take on what’s popular with the app’s youngest users, he says that kids like very different things than adults, especially when it comes to communicating. “We communicate more by text and with images,” he says. Parsley is a big believer in customized emoticon images for kids his age, ones that use what he calls “selfi-mation.” Users take a photo of themselves (a selfie) and can then create a phrase for their selfie to speak. “The animation makes your lips move on your selfie, so it looks like you are speaking the words about the image behind you, like ‘This picture is awesome!’ or whatever,” explains Parsley.

He envisions tweens adding the names of their favorite sports teams or singers to an animation. “Like maybe a picture of you at a game with an animation that says ‘Go Giants!’ ” says Parsley. “Or...whatever.”