BBBT Podcast Transcript

About the BBBT

The Boulder Business Intelligence Brain Trust, or BBBT, was founded in 2006 by Claudia Imhoff. Its mission is to leverage business intelligence for industry vendors, for its members, who are independent analysts and experts, and for its subscribers, who are practitioners. To accomplish this mission, the BBBT provides a variety of services, centered around vendor presentations.

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Claudia Imhoff: Hello, and welcome to this edition of the Boulder BI Brain Trust, or the BBBT. We're a gathering of international consultants, analysts, and experts in business intelligence, who meet with interesting and innovative BI companies here in beautiful Boulder, Colorado. We not only get briefed on the latest news and releases, but we share our ideas with the vendor on where the BI industry is going, and help them with their technological directions and marketing messages. I'm Claudia Imhoff and the BBBT podcasts are produced by my company, Intelligent Solutions.

I'm pleased to introduce my guest today. He is Zach Taylor. Zach is the Product Marketing Lead for Looker. Welcome, Zach.

Zach Taylor: Thank you very much, Claudia, delighted to be here.

CI: I'm delighted to have you here. Let's start off with a little bit of history about Looker. It's a pretty new company. Why don't you to tell me about that?

ZT: Looker is business intelligence software. We were founded three years ago and have been publicly available for two years. We've been growing very quickly. We now have approaching 300 customers across a very wide range of verticals and company size. We're present internationally in Asia and Europe, as well as South America.

We recently closed a 30 million dollar round lead by Meritech, with participation from SAP, First Round Capital and RedPoint, so that bring us to 48 million total. We're growing really quickly and we're excited to talk a little bit about what we're doing and share the product with you.

CI: Let's talk about why you're growing so quickly. You claimed to have a quote, "Better way to explore complex data," that's kind of your tagline. My first question is, what do you mean by complex data, and then what's better about your approach?

ZT: When we say complex data, what we're really referring to is multi-dimensional, multi-faceted data, data that's coming from different entities. One of the things that we've seen as a trend in the industry is a movement towards consolidating data in a centralized store, and unlock the value in that data using a descriptive modeling layer that lets you deeply integrate different entities, describe relationships between different

entities, and basically encode complex analysis into a unified model of your data.

That's what we mean when we talk about complex. I think the companies that really do well with Looker are companies that have data from a lot of different sources. If you have event data about your application, you have your transactional data, you have data from your customer support tickets, and you want to be able to unify that data and understand your business holistically, that's something where Looker really excels in providing the flexibility with the modeling language to integrate those sources and describe data in a unified way.

CI: All right, fair enough. Let's talk a little bit about your customers, if you don't mind. You had quite a list, the NASCAR slide that everybody has, you put up about five different verticals. A lot of them were companies that are new themselves. Is there a common theme across these customers?

ZT: Yeah. We've done very well with modern companies. I think what you're probably referring to is you saw a lot of the newer tech companies. The reason for that being, I think is they're taking a modern approach to data. They have a little bit less pre-built architecture, so they are more flexible in choosing modern tools and they tend to prefer a modern approach.

We're really aligned well with a modern data approach, both from a warehousing standpoint and from an internal data strategy, really having a data-driven culture, where data is democratized across the organization and drives different operations. That's where Looker excels. We see that most young tech companies are embracing that philosophy. We're winning those deals. The other thing, I think from a technology standpoint is these newer guys are interested in SaaS Model and a cloud-based solution and I think that Looker aligns well with that as well.

CI: New deployment options, new technology, or new approach to the technology as well. Why don't you tell me about a couple of the customers? Let's drill into them a little bit more in detail.

ZT: Sure. I had the pleasure of meeting with Craftsy, who's one of our customers here in Colorado, yesterday. I had a discussion with their Director of Technology and Operations, Lucas. I talked to him about how they're using

Looker internally, what they see as the key value, why they got it initially, and how that evolved within their workflow at that organization.

They rolled out Looker about six months ago. They now have 100 users on Looker and Lucas was kind enough to look at the data on how it's been being used. He saw that 86 percent of those 100 users have used it in the past two weeks and in the past month, those 100 users have generated 3,000 queries. What that speaks to is the fact that it's become very deeply integrated across the Looker users.

It's something that they're using in their day-to-day operations. That's what we strive for, and that's what we've been seeing in terms of adoption with the customers that we have. I think it's why we're growing. It's because we are actually succeeding at penetrating to a deep level within this organizations and becoming an integral part of their operations.

In terms of how they're using Looker, it started as an analytics platform for them. It was a very flexible way for them to build out certain components of describing their business. They started with marketing and they were able to encapsulate the logic that was going to drive decision for their marketing team that expands to their product team. Now their finance teams are still using it. It spread departmentally. It all works as this one integrated source, which is this model that they have.

The way that Lucas pitched in internally to the buyer was, "This is going to save us 10 minutes in the beginning of every meeting, because people are going to be able to agree on this one, unified way of looking at the key metrics in our business. You're not going to have somebody from marketing and somebody from growth coming in with different ways of looking at the same metric, like customer lifetime value. They're going to be able to agree, 'This is how we look at this. This is encoded in one place.' It's going to enable us to be more collaborative and definitive around our data."

The other thing he spoke to was this asymmetry, where certain people who had access to data were in a better position to communicate their points than those who maybe didn't have the sequel ability to go and access data directly.

What Looker has provided is this universal access to the data, which enables people without sequel ability to go in and understand the data that's pertinent to their job. That's created a more democratic approach towards decision-making. I think that's a representative of the kind of impact that we're having across organizations.

CI: Any other customer you want to discuss?

ZT: Yeah. Asona recently posted a blog post, which I thought was really interesting and I thought got at the core of what Looker's doing. They talked about how, prior to Looker, the way that business intelligence was communicated throughout the organization was a Q&A workflow. So, you had people within business units asking questions of the data, which went to a data team, they generated a sequel query or dashboard, they passed it back out. What they noticed was the dashboards weren't getting the kind of usage that they were hoping for. There was this endlessly growing queue of questions.

The reason for that is when you send somebody a dashboard, and they want to go look at it in a different way to get an actual thing that's going to make a decision for them, they didn't have the flexibility to do that.

The transition that Asona's been able to make with Looker is instead of answering this Q&A questions, they're able to build this model of the data that supports a very wide range of questions in a self-service manner.

It means that the analysts can spend their time honing in on this model of the data, rather than answering these one off questions.

It means for the business users, they can go in and self-serve, and really explore the data in a dynamic way, to get at the answers that they need to make a decision. The way that they described it was instead of spending all day answering queries, we're able to build a playground that our business users can then go explore. I thought that was good.

CI: That's excellent. In fact, it answers my next question by example, which is terrific. I wanted to drill in a little bit more into the differentiators of Looker, a different approach to BI in analytics again, yes. If you don't mind, let's

spend just a little bit of time, and talk about the differentiators. How are you different from a traditional BI tool or a traditional EDW environment?

ZT: Traditionally, there's a few components that we're different from traditional BI. I'll try to touch on a few different things.

First of all, architecturally, Looker is very lightweight. It connects directly to a database. We don't ETL the data into our own computational engine. That removes a few hardships of maintaining certain architecture. We don't have to maintain two sets of hardware that we scale, which we have to manage. We don't have that ETL pipeline to manage, and we have lower latency. For the business user, instead of exploring a cube or a silo, they're able to just have a direct lense into the database.

What that means is they get access to the full data set. They can always explore to the most granular level of that data. They also have all of the dimensionality that may exist in a broader data set, rather than a cube or silo, which only allows you to answer a restricted subset of questions.

That's one fundamental difference, I think. The user experience is very, very different. We're entirely web-based. We don't have client server architecture. We were built three years ago as a Web application server. That's a very different architectural approach, than some of the traditional players. That said, I think there's been a shift recently towards a lot of self-service discovery tools.

Those tools are really focused on decentralizing data, taking it out of IT's hands and putting it into line of business, and giving people the ability to explore and visualize it in a way that they can get at a lot of their questions in a good user experience with great visualizations.

That's great, because it gets data into the hands of the people that are going to be using it day-to-day to make decisions. We absolutely support that.

What we think was lost, that I think does exist in traditional BI is this concept of having a governed, curated, centralized model of the data. That's what Looker tries to do, that I think emulates the older approach to BI. We really try to create this one, unified model that's curated, so that everybody in the

organization is functioning off of the same vocabulary of definitions of their data, the same metrics. As you build and build this model, it becomes an increasingly sophisticated honed-in version of describing your data. That's consistent with the old school approach.

CI: There was a goodness there, that I think you're right, got lost somehow in the rush to bring a new technologies. Let's talk a little bit about that data model capability, because I think that is kind of your core. Why don't you describe that in a bit more detail?

ZT: This is one that's maybe a little challenging to articulate without showing, but I'll do my best.

What Looker's modeling layer does is it connects directly to a database. If you have maybe a centralized store on something like a Redshift or Vertica, you connect Looker directly to it. It reads that database and that schema. It finds join logic. It creates the scaffolding of a model of your data, and then an analyst can go and embellish that data. When they do so, they build components.

So, if I were to build something like an aggregate, like a sum or an average, I would build that as a single component, which can then be used in conjunction with the rest of the components of my model in a very reusable fashion.

The result of that is a very efficient way of supporting a broad range of questions for the business user and a much more efficient process for the analyst to support the organization's data needs.

It's fully text based. It has In-App integration with Git for version control. It's basically a modern development environment for very rapidly describing the data and supplying that to business users.

CI: That sounds pretty good to me. You've mentioned business user now several times… and analyst, and that sort of thing…Who do you see as your audience?

ZT: That's a really great question, Claudia. I actually, I prefer not to use those terms, I've sort of fallen into the habit of that but I actually think of it as more

of a data consumer. That person doesn't need to be a business user. What we try to do is empower people without sequel proficiency to be able to access and run analysis that's complex and in-depth. A business user is an industry term, but I don't think it's the right one.

It's more of a data consumer. Somebody that's not going to be writing the code, but is going to be empowered to do complex analysis. That's one of the users of Looker.

Now, that user is supported by the data people. We focus on the data people. We give them a tool that they love for curating an experience that gives this robust data discovery platform to their data consumers.

We target the data provider, the data person, but what we do is we empower them with a tool to empower the rest of their organization. We provide for them, and they provide for the rest of the organization. That's the flow of Looker.

CI: I like that. There's the providers or producers, as I call them, and there's the consumers. One is very technologically savvy. The other one is kind of technologically naive, but they both get something out of the technology. Right?

ZT: Yeah and I think going back to the Craftsy example, the fact that you have 86 percent of the people that have access to this tool using it in the last two weeks...

CI: That's remarkable.

ZT: It just demonstrates that it is something that's accessible to a wide range of people, and they care enough to be going back and using it. Right? That's what we like to see and we see in a lot of our customers.

CI: We got about a minute left. Tell me what's in the future.

ZT: Sure, I think the big things we're focused on now, we recently launched a program called "Powered by Looker," which is our partnership program for OEM and embedding Looker. If you have data that you want to productize, and you want to be able to provide to your customers or your partners,

Powered by Looker is a platform that allows you to take your data, put it into a product very rapidly and flexibly, and provide that to third parties.

So we've launched that. We've seen that's mostly demand-driven. We have a lot of inbound requests for that. We actually have probably 20 percent of our customer based using that without any marketing effort. We've formalized that effort. We want to expand there.

I think the other one for us is international expansion. We already have a very strong presence in the US, particularly in major urban areas, like San Francisco and New York, but all across the country also, Austin and Central US, but I think we really focused on Europe. We opened an office in London earlier this year. We have a very growing customer base there. We have over 25 customers now. We have some upcoming events there in May. We have a "Look and Tell" on May 13th, which is a great place to be introduced to Looker, if you do find this talk interesting and want to learn more, and want to hear from some of our customers and how they use us. That will be a great opportunity for that.

And yeah, those are kind of the big ones for us.

CI: All right. Unfortunately, we're out of time. That's it for this edition of the BBBT Podcast. Again, I'm Claudia Imhoff. It's been a pleasure to speak with Zach Taylor of Looker today. Thanks so much, Zach.

ZT: Thank you, Claudia.

CI: I hope you enjoyed today's podcast. You'll find more podcasts from other vendors at our web site www.bbbt.us. If you want to read more about today's session, please search for our hash tag on Twitter. That's #BBBT. And please join me again for another interview. Good bye and good business!