





# Branding and Early-Stage Marketing

Crafting Your Identity and Early Growth

Startup Management, Aleš Špetič, 2025





# Recap from Lecture 6

## Building what matters, faster

-  Defined MVPs and tested assumptions
-  Applied Agile and feedback loops
-  Prioritized with RICE and MoSCoW
-  Identified when to say no to features

# Learning Objectives

## What you'll learn today

-  Understand the fundamentals of startup positioning and messaging
-  Learn how to craft a compelling early-stage brand
-  Compare organic and paid growth strategies
-  Explore referral tactics and growth loops for traction

# Positioning

## Why your product needs a place in the customer's mind

- Positioning defines how you are perceived
- Answers: Who is it for? What problem does it solve?
- Helps differentiate from competitors

WHY YOU?

WHY NOW?

# Positioning Framework

## The five key elements

- Target customer
- Problem you solve
- Unique value / differentiator
- Product category
- Proof / reason to believe

# Positioning Example – Gmail

**A better way to manage email**



- **Target customer:** Everyday internet users and professionals
- **Problem:** Traditional email was slow, cluttered, and hard to search
- **Unique value:** Fast, threaded email with smart search and huge storage
- **Category:** Web-based email client
- **Proof:** Mass adoption, Google ecosystem integration

# Positioning Example – Duolingo

Language learning that feels like a game



- **Target customer:** Casual learners, students, travelers
- **Problem:** Language learning is often boring or expensive
- **Unique value:** Free, gamified lessons with bite-sized practice
- **Category:** Language learning app
- **Proof:** Global user base and viral growth through engagement loops

# Messaging Basics

## Clear words win minds

- Say what it is, who it's for, and why it matters
- Avoid jargon—use customer language
- Match tone to audience



# Main Messaging Types

## What you'll write and repeat

- **Tagline** – short, memorable value phrase
- **One-liner** – who you are, what you do, why it matters
- **Website copy** – expands on features and benefits
- **Pitch sentence** – used in emails and intros

# Messaging Example – Figma

**“Design, together.”**

- Tagline: **“Design, prototype, and gather feedback—all in one place.”**
- One-liner: **“Figma is a collaborative interface design tool that works in your browser.”**
- Positioning: **Real-time design collaboration for teams**

# Bad Messaging Examples

## Why clarity beats complexity

- ❌ "We leverage proprietary AI-driven synergies to revolutionize omni-channel user journeys."
- ❌ "Our platform is a next-gen, vertically integrated ecosystem for holistic digital transformation."
- ❌ "Redefining scalable hyperlocal experiences through smart contextualized automation."

# Messaging Evolution

## From vague to clear and compelling

- **Original:** "We deliver a cutting-edge digital ecosystem that transforms mobile wellness experiences."
- **Better:** "A personalized health app that tracks your habits and gives daily tips."
- **Best:** "Your pocket coach for better sleep, fitness, and nutrition."

# Example – Instagram

## From filters to community

- Early messaging: **"A simple photo-sharing app with beautiful filters."**
- Evolving focus: **"Capture and share moments instantly."**
- Later messaging: **"Instagram brings you closer to the people and things you love."**



2010



2010



2011



2016 - NOW

# What Is a Brand?

## More than a name or logo

- A brand is the emotional connection people have with your product
- It includes your voice, visuals, values, and experience
- Great brands create trust and recognition

# Brand Identity Elements

## What makes up a brand?

- Name and logo
- Color palette and typography
- Tone of voice
- Brand story and values
- Visual consistency across platforms



# Brand Identity Example

**Bold, cinematic, and data-driven**

The Netflix logo, consisting of the word "NETFLIX" in a bold, red, sans-serif typeface. The letters are slightly irregular and have a hand-drawn feel.

- Signature red-and-black palette
- Minimalist, immersive design
- Confident tone with global reach
- Strong storytelling in both brand and product



# Brand Identity Example

**Design-led, premium, and human-centered**



- Clean visuals with iconic product photography
- Minimalist typography and messaging
- Emotionally resonant storytelling
- Consistent emphasis on innovation and simplicity

# Tone of Voice Examples

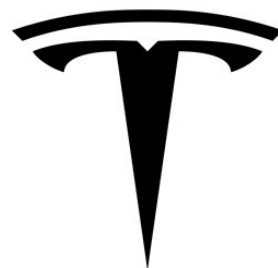
## Choosing how your brand sounds

- **Friendly & Supportive:** "Hey there! Let's make this easy—just follow these simple steps."
- **Confident & Premium:** "Engineered for performance. Designed to inspire."
- **Playful & Bold:** "Smash your goals, ditch the fluff, and let's go! 🌟"

# Branding samples

How brands signal identity through design and tone

Brand	Tone of Voice	Visual Identity	Key Message
Tesla	Futuristic, bold	Sleek, minimalist	"Accelerating the world to EVs."
Volvo	Safe, responsible	Clean, calm, Scandinavian	"For life."
BMW	Performance-driven	Sharp, refined, masculine	"The ultimate driving machine."
Jeep	Rugged, adventurous	Earthy tones, bold type	"Go anywhere. Do anything."
VW	Friendly, reliable	Simple, approachable, iconic	"Drive bigger." (previously "Das Auto")



# Growth Fundamentals

## What drives startup traction?

- Growth is not luck—it's a process
- Get the right product in front of the right people
- Align growth strategy with product and market

# Organic vs Paid Growth

Choosing the right channels early on

## Organic Growth





- 🔍 SEO
- 📢 Social media
- 🤝 Referrals
- ✅ Pros: Builds trust, low cost
- ⚠️ Cons: Slow, unpredictable

## Paid Growth

- 🎯 Google Ads
- 📱 Social Ads (Meta, TikTok)
- 🗣️ Influencers
- ✅ Pros: Scalable, fast, measurable
- ⚠️ Cons: Expensive, may seem pushy

# Organic Channels in Detail

**Building momentum without buying users**

-  SEO: Evergreen traffic from search
-  Content marketing: Blogs, guides
-  Social media: Authentic audience growth
-  Email: Newsletters and retention

# Organic – SEO & Content

**Slow but scalable**

- Write content around customer problems
- Optimize for long-tail search keywords
- Use educational assets to nurture interest

# Organic – SEO & Content

## Best practices

- Long term
- Scalable solutions
- Audience uses searches to solve problems

## When NOT to use it?

- You need immediate results
- You're in a low-search or niche market
- Your product is entirely new or category-defining (no one's searching yet)



# Organic – SEO & Content





## Example

- HubSpot: Built a blog answering common sales and marketing questions; now generates millions of monthly visits
- Figma: Published free design resources, tutorials, and community files that ranked highly in Google and drove consistent search traffic



# Paid Channels in Detail

**Speed up acquisition—but track carefully**

-  Google Ads: Search intent capture
-  Meta/TikTok: Visual + interest targeting
-  Influencer/UGC: Leverage creator trust
-  Retargeting: Remind users post-visit

# Paid – Ads and Influencers

## Fuel with precision

- Use social and search ads to drive traffic
- Partner with micro-influencers for credibility
- A/B test creatives and copy

# Paid – Ads and Influencers

## Story telling

### When use it?

- Need to build trust
- Need social proof quickly
- Targeting niche or community driven audience
- Pre-launch or early buzz
- Your product benefits from storytelling (not a commodity)

# Paid – Ads and Influencers




## Example

- Canva: Scaled with Facebook ads targeting solopreneurs using design template previews and a simple CTA
- Robinhood: Used referral bonuses combined with Instagram influencer campaigns to attract young investors
- Duolingo: Leveraged humorous TikTok ads featuring Duo the owl to build viral brand awareness among Gen Z



# Organic vs Paid – What's Right for You?

**Consider your stage and budget**

-  Pre-product-market fit → Organic testing
-  Post-MVP validation → Mix light paid and content
-  Scaling → Combine paid and organic, hire growth help





# What Are Growth Loops?

## Self-reinforcing growth systems

- A loop where users generate more users/customers
- Output of one cycle becomes input for the next
- More scalable and efficient than linear growth

# Types of Growth Loops

**Models of growth you can build into your product**

-  Viral Loop – users invite others
-  Product Loop – usage drives more use
-  Content Loop – users generate content that attracts others (e.g., Reddit, Pinterest)
-  Network Loop – value increases with more users (e.g., LinkedIn, Slack, Gmail)



# Viral Growth Loop

## Built-in referrals

- Users invite others to join
- Rewards or incentives drive sharing
- Example: Dropbox's free storage for referrals



# Product Usage Loop

**More usage brings more value**

- The more you use it, the better it works
- Product becomes a habit or central tool
- Example: Figma – team use creates team buy-in



# Content Loop

**Users create content that attracts more users**



- User-generated content draws traffic
- New users consume and contribute
- Example: Reddit, Pinterest

# Network Effect Loop

**More users = more value**



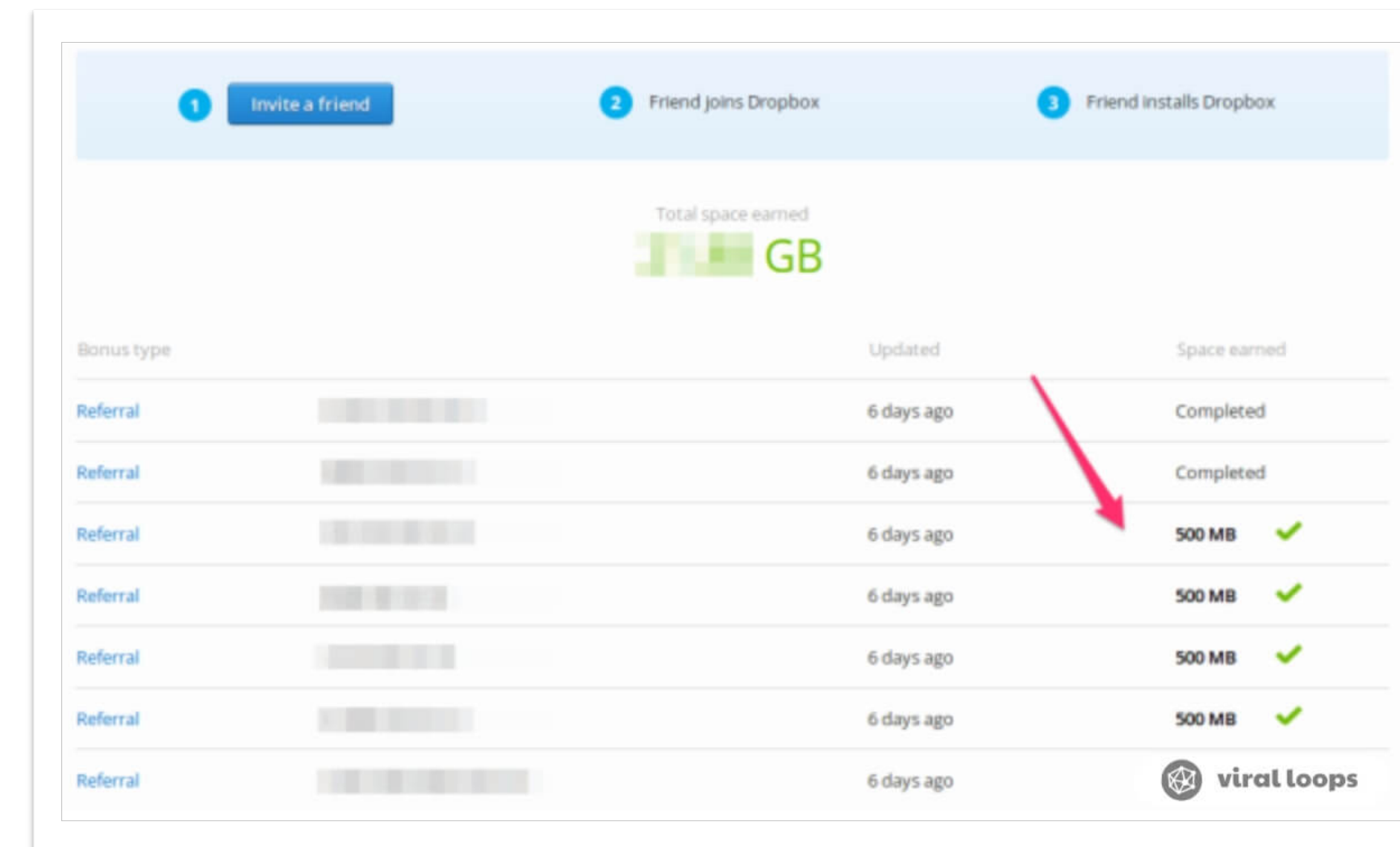
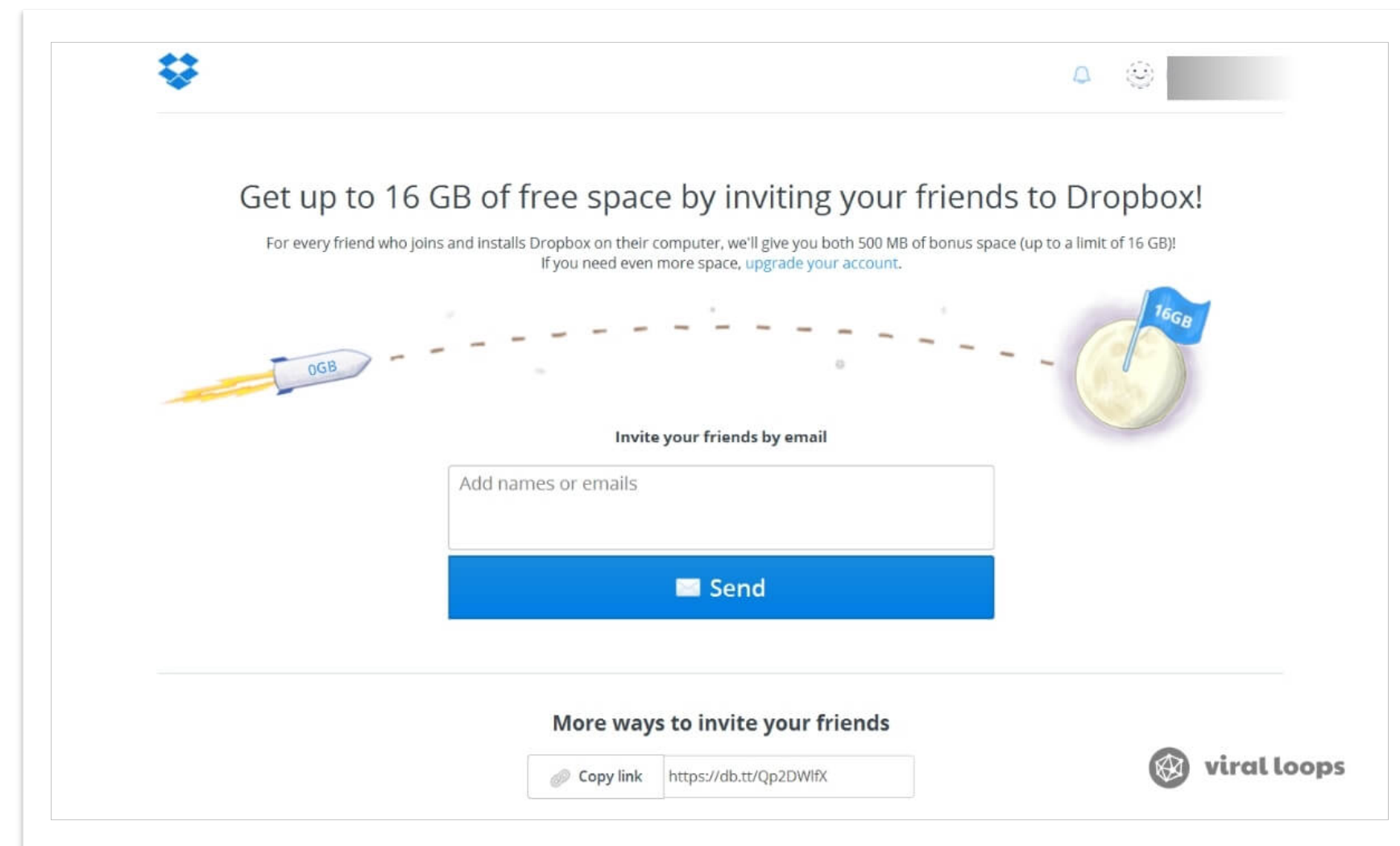
- Product improves as more people join
- Triggers word of mouth and retention
- Example: LinkedIn, Gmail – more users = more connections

# Case Study

## Engineering viral growth



- 🧪 MVP: Explainer video to test interest
- 💡 Problem: Sharing files was clunky and technical
- ✉️ Solution: Simple sync + referral loop (free storage)



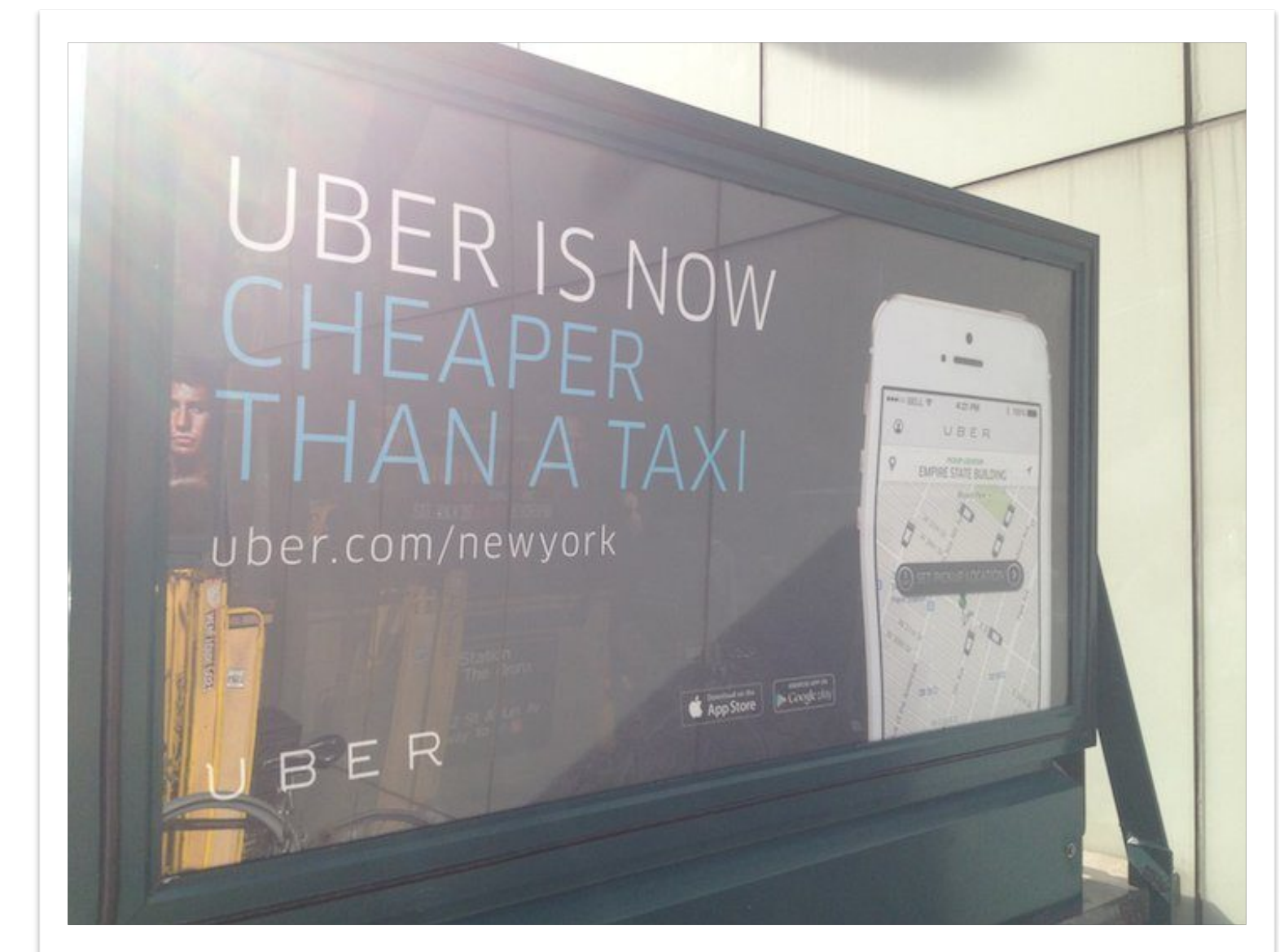


# Case Study

## Driving adoption city by city

- 🚗 MVP: Black car service for SF tech scene
- 💥 Tactics: Free ride credits, influencer seeding
- 📱 Growth: App-based tracking, ease of use
- 🌐 Expansion: Local launch teams and referrals

# Uber



# Case Study

## Using influencers

# Uber

### Influencers Strategy:





- Targeted Tech Influencers
- Exclusive Vibe - invite only
- Social proof through tweets and posts
- Events and sponsorships

### Why It Worked:

- Leveraged credibility and trust of local personalities
- Created FOMO (fear of missing out) through exclusivity
- Used referral codes to convert buzz into signups

# Referral Tactics

## Turn users into marketers

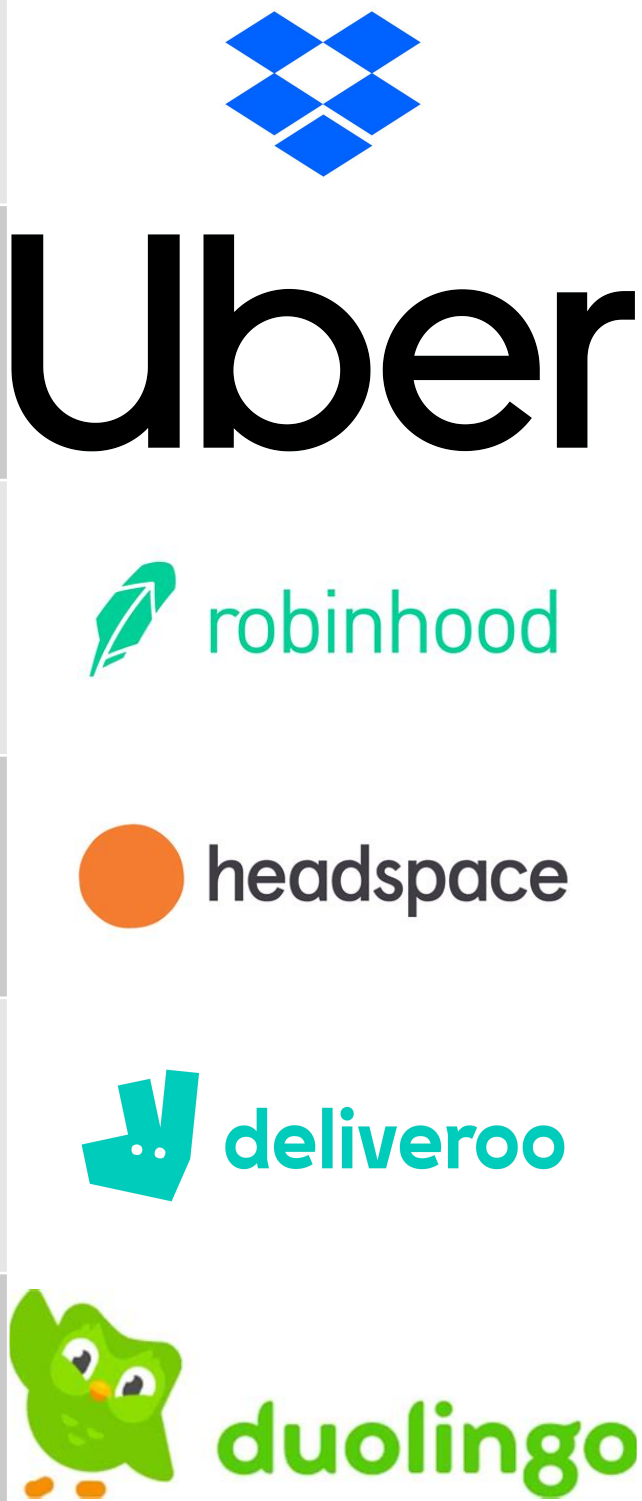
-  Referral codes with incentives
-  Reward both sender and receiver
-  Easy sharing from inside product
-  Track and test effectiveness



# Referral Tactics – Examples






How startups designed their referral systems

Brand	Tone of Voice	
Dropbox	500MB free storage for both referrer and invitee	rewarded utility
Uber	Free ride credits to get friends on board	lowered barriers to first use
Robinhood	Invite a friend, you both get free stock	leveraged stock rewards for network effects
Headspace	Send a free meditation session to a friend	focused on generosity
Deliveroo	Give £10, get £10 on your next order	drove conversions through savings
Duolingo	Invite friends and earn XP + streak boosts	gamified referrals



# Summary






## Key takeaways from today's lecture

-  Great positioning starts with knowing your user
-  Strong messaging is simple, clear, and repeated
-  Brand is about perception, not just visuals
-  Early growth is often organic, then paid
-  Growth loops create sustainable traction



# Assignment

## Apply what you've built

-  Write your positioning statement (Who it's for, what it solves, why it's different)
-  Draft a one-liner and tagline
-  Describe your brand identity (voice, visuals, values)
-  Choose one organic and one paid channel to test
-  Sketch a growth loop or referral tactic

Use Google Docs or Slides to create your pitch deck and share it with [ales@spetic.si](mailto:ales@spetic.si) by the day before the next lecture!

# Further Reading & Resources

Go deeper into branding and early growth

- **Positioning** by Al Ries & Jack Trout
- **Building a StoryBrand** by Donald Miller
- **Growth Hacker Marketing** by Ryan Holiday
- Resources:
  - HubSpot Startup Marketing Hub
  - Canva Brand Kit
  - First Round Review (case studies)