

Drew Bartkiewicz, CEO of lettrs, testimony – House Small Business Committee – November 17, 2015

Chairman Chabot, Ranking Member Valezquez and Members of the Committee:

I am delighted to be here today to tell you a story about my company lettrs and a brand new method of communicating meaningful messages, of reimagining, reinventing and reviving the national pastime of letter writing...but all in a new mobile medium to capture the imagination and insights of the next generation. It is the story of using cutting-edge, up-to-date mobile platforms for people who care about more substantive and lasting communication. It is a story being written today by a group of entrepreneurial veterans who think we need a way to preserve the thoughts that we share with our friend, family, customers, elected representatives and, in some cases, total strangers who may become tomorrow's pen pals.

This is the story of "lettrs" www.lettrs.com – the company I founded because I believe that expressing our sentiments in 140 characters, or through a functional e-mail conduit that does not value the preservation of our thoughts, is insufficient. As a father of three I realized that we needed to harness technology to power deeper, broader and more nuanced language than those short-form snippet-services allow. In essence we needed to reimagine the personal letter for a new world.

There are times when it is important step out of the flow of our functional communications to compose "messages that matter." I am a student of letters, a product of their power and fervently believe that deep personalization of messaging – of mobile letter writing – is a new frontier, distributed across mobile, social, email & native messaging. In today's world of fast social media, the art of communicating in a personal, expressive, and impactful way is being lost...until now.

By way of background, I graduated from West Point in 1989 and served as an Army Lieutenant in the 82nd Airborne during the first Gulf War. What I learned during my military experience directly shapes my entrepreneurial approach today. Like every small business, especially technology start-ups, the Army taught me how to build and lead a team of diversely talented people without the benefit of perfect market intelligence and under very constrained budgets, and do it all in a climate where our adversaries – competitors, if you will – were determined, adaptive and patient. My Army unit in Northern Italy and then Iraq was a hub of necessary innovation, rapidly reacting to a changing threat and demanding adaptive actions to persevere and succeed. The skills I learned then I apply to many of the decisions our company makes today.

I am convinced that military education and service can be a magnificent way to learn how to be an entrepreneur. It certainly helped me graduate with an MBA the Yale Management School in 1994 and served as the foundation upon which I've built my private sector business experience – a pathway that has taken me all across the globe. It is where I learned that no matter what language people speak, they have a common desire to communicate with others, especially with the personal hope of having communications that leave a lasting impression. Letters were in fact the very foundation of my relationship with my wife, Araceli, whom I met in Madrid Spain in 1994. When I shared these letters

with our three teenagers a few years ago I was stuck by a force that was as compelling as it was contrarian: *to save social messaging from itself*. I quit my day job and started the mission to design & deploy mobile technology to bring letter writing to my kids were...on their smart phones.

So we have been on this journey for 2.5 years, powering more deliberate and expressive communications. We have filed 4 non-provisional patents as a proud LLC, won a Google Play Best App Award in 2014 and recently won the trademark for our name “lettrs” from the USPTO. And we are just beginning. *We are becoming an expression network for all the world’s letters that may have otherwise never been written.*

Freedom of expression is a very powerful motivator for human beings – it is timeless in fact - and making it easier for people personalized and lasting thoughts is at the core of what is driving the adoption of the lettrs app. Today our mobile social messaging and media platform allows personalized expression using letter-writing elements, such as calligraphy, stationery, stamps and even mobile signatures - more than any other mobile messaging application. We are an award winning original content management network for branded messages, fan mail and social media messaging. Even you all here in this hearing could write a stamped, signed, and original letter to a cell phone number, an email address, and even through other social networks. We are a small business doing something different, as all small businesses must do to craft their way to growth.

Our unique network literally powers hand signed mobile fan mail (what you might call constituent communications) that fuses people, pictures, prose and personality. It allows for communication that is automatically translated into 80 different languages with a pen pal network spanning 170 countries. And lettrs allows for personalized, mobile social stamps to promote an idea, a brand, a social cause or a commercial product. Our vision is catching on across the world. As of last week, our social stamps have received over 950 million views since we introduced them this year. Vint Cerf, the “father of the internet,” recently conducted what he called the “Internet letters initiative” and using the lettrs application the network powered over 1,000 letters from 32 countries, helping to drive a new writing desk version on the web.

Our fastest growth market is India where lettrs is giving over a quarter million people a voice in letter writing that they would not otherwise have. And while we are still compiling metrics on it, in the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks this past Friday, we are already hundreds of passionate letters expressing their global desire for resilience and resolve...for sanity.

We are a small business story few would have even seen coming. Just when the world thought letters were dead, a relic of the physical past, we have made them come to life again with passion, purpose, and personality. From our small offices in Brooklyn, New York, we touch people around the world - from popular NBA celebrities, to accomplished writer Paulo Coelho of the Alchemist, to an eager young person in an emerging economy. The expanding platform invited people to communicate with each other in a meaningful way, in the tradition of letters but with the ease and expressive capabilities that a modern mobile device now offers.

We are not naïve, but we honestly believe we have the right social platform to change the world for the better and I am proud to say that 2% of our company is already allocated to the lettrs Foundation (www.lettrsfoundation.org) , having created charitable stamps and campaigns for the United Way, Wounded Warrior Project and the Sundara Fund. This is our effort to unlock mobile letter writing for free for any school or non-profit organization wanting to elevate their message that matters.

During National Entrepreneur Week our panel today represents but a nano-fraction of the people who are trying to pursue their dreams by creating business opportunities. It is not enough to have a good idea. Entrepreneurs need access to capital – human and financial. We did not even attempt to approach the Small Business Administration. Their application and approval process is quite tedious and is really designed for companies with physical collateral that can be pledged as a loan guarantee. Our collateral at lettrs – in contrast - is not physical but digital, they growing social and mobile assets, powerful emotions that have invited over 116,000 hours of more deliberate words in the last month alone.

As a veteran founded small business we have created the world’s largest database and cloud platform of signed digital letters from across the world – that now has led to a new book publishing concept with National Geographic, an emerging vintage stamps partnership with the Smithsonian and a long term partnership with the National Society of Collegiate Scholars to power the next generation of letters - from high school and college students who know they can and should ask more of their mobile communications. To my amazement, there are already more than 77,000 love letters on our network that inspires and invites a truly positive movement in social technologies.

In closing, I want to say thank you to my country to which I proudly served, the United States.

I funded lettrs the old fashioned way, through diligent personal efforts, persistence, sacrifice, managing early stage business risk and building incremental trust with our investors through large leaps in innovation. Individual investment in lettrs has come from many who are veterans themselves, Service Academy graduates, and also from individuals formerly of Amazon, Apple, Google, and salesforce.com, all who have faith in a veteran founded technology company.

Through some of my West Point classmates, I was introduced to a group of angel investors who focus on companies started by graduates of the military service academies. In addition to investing seed money in lettrs to help us get started, they have invested in other small businesses, including one started by my friend, Andrew Kemendo, an Air Force Academy graduate, who is sitting behind me this morning. Andrew’s company, called Pair, has developed an augmented reality technology that is just remarkable and I hope you will have a chance to look at it after this hearing concludes. I would also like to show you how to download the lettrs app, personalize your own account to compose and sign your more deliberate & passionate communications, thereby inviting & inspiring your constituents to do the same.

Thanks again for the opportunity to testify this morning. It is an honor to be here. I look forward to your questions about my experience in building my company www.lettrs.com and how we plan to power the world’s next generation of lasting mobile communications.