



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

College of Letters & Science

UCSB

# Alumni Spotlight

This month's Spotlight features Jacob, a former Film Studies major, Black Studies minor, who now heads an agency of world-class branding and digital media experts.



**Jacob Tell:**  
**CEO and Creative Lead**  
**Oniracom**

## What are you up to now, post-graduation?

I'm the CEO and Creative Lead of Oniracom, a marketing and media company that helps our clients know where to show up in the digital world and how to best connect with their consumers. We've partnered with musical artists like Jack Johnson; world-renowned entertainment brands such as Sony; Disney, Universal, Goldenvoice, and Warner; consumer brands such as Sonos, ProYo, and Deckers; and a host of non-profits.

I make sure our staff is fully taken care of and that we have a nice family-style environment for everyone to operate within. I build and lead teams, surrounding us with killer experts from all sorts of fields. I also make sure that key clients have my attention, that there's money in the bank, and that we're revisiting our short

and long-range visions as new technologies pop up or other things happen in the world that may impact our goals. I'm able to be very creative and always getting to learn about other people's businesses. They come in here to tell us their stories and we help them figure out how to communicate those stories to their customers.

## How did you get to where you are?

I entered UCSB thinking I wanted to do computer science. In high school in the late 90s, I worked at a computer store repairing and selling PCs and had a knack for early web HTML and things like that. When I got to UCSB, I took a few CS classes and

**"Let your dreams evolve. Life is not a straight line..."**



realized I was not someone who wanted to sit behind a screen and look at 1s and 0s all day. Instead, I fell into the Film Studies major very passionately. I was always interested in media and technology, and Film looked at how to tell stories through those mediums. I'm not afraid of diving into theory, reading, researching, watching the same thing three times before writing about it. Around that time, I took a History of Jazz class and was so engaged, I declared Black Studies as my minor. There was an incredible intersection between the two fields in terms of looking at the world through specific lenses and figuring out a voice or a story that empowers marginalized people. Those skills translated well to marketing too, a field that is all about storytelling.

While we were students, Sean Campos, a good friend of mine at UCLA, and I started building websites for people. We were passionate about technology and still are. Our society takes it for granted now, but

in the early 2000s, streaming a video was very difficult and flash animation was the only way to do most interactive things. He was a back-end web developer, I was a front-end graphics and HTML guy. We proved we could collaborate and produce results. So a year before graduating, we made the insane, naïve, ambitious move of starting a company while still in undergrad. We wanted to deliver media and commerce to people who wouldn't have had access if not for the internet. From day one, we had cool opportunities in film and music, which really caused us to jump out. Sean and I still own and operate Oniracom together, 16 years later.

Of course, I'd never run a business. I knew how to attract talent and build a team. I knew how to lead a bit. But operationally, I had no idea what QuickBooks was, how to invoice, how to track time. A lot of it was just trusting my gut. We made a lot of mistakes, but we learned and adapted rapidly.

When we started in 2001, we were more like a web shop. But we had the mentality of not letting the fear of making mistakes keep us from taking risks, which has allowed us to grow in new ways. We have since built film production, record label, and licensing divisions. So the job description I'd write myself today has completely changed from the one I would have written back at the beginning.

**What was the best thing you did as an undergrad to help you get to where you are?**

On the education side, I took some hardcore seminars in what's now the Film and Media Studies department that weren't mandatory, but that challenged me to analyze the world in deep ways. It was like taking grad level classes in undergrad. They pushed the boundaries of the way I approached problems. The biggest takeaway from my degrees, as I think is something you get from most arts and human-

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ities degrees, was the skill of synthesis: taking in all these concepts and elements and forming them into your own idea. Certainly in our company, but really in any sort of strategic or high level job, that skill is critical.

On the team building side, I got out in the community, whether that was in Isla Vista, the dorms, department events, leadership events, even going to concerts and screenings connected me with people. I have so many valued business relationships now that were built while at UCSB that I wouldn’t give up for the world. As I expanded my social circles, I learned one of the most important skills for working in technology and marketing: listening. Listening to your clients for what they think they want. Listening to your staff as they interpret what clients really want. Listening to the industry for trends. Listening to your intuition on a myriad of things. It’s a good skill to practice early.

### **What do you wish you had known while you were in undergrad?**

I would have done a lot more networking and attended more community events had I known how much value that provided and how much accel-

eration that can give to your group. These days, I’ll go back to UCSB for career panels and am blown away to see students attending. I always tell the audience, “Do as much of this as you can.” Santa Barbara is such an amazing resource compared to a major market like LA or New York because here you’re always a degree or two from any CEO. You can go to coffee with people, you can see these folks at mixers or at startup events all over town. I didn’t figure that out for years. We were in the music industry bubble until we moved into an office building downtown. At that point, we started connecting with the community and our whole world opened up. If I’d known, I would have joined the StartupSB group earlier on.

So, push yourself. Go to that mixer, that panel, that networking event. Collect even just one business card. Follow up. Learn how to talk to professionals. Learn how to listen and ask questions. Doing so will help you with the interview processes, with networking, if you want to start a business, whatever it is. It takes a village to do whatever you want to do, especially if you’re on the entrepreneurial side of your industry.

As someone who’s hired a lot of people, being proactive is hugely beneficial. I’ve hired both interns and employees who’ve just shown up and demonstrated their value. If I really want someone on my team, I’ll figure out a position even if I wasn’t necessarily looking. I know a lot of C-level or executive business owners are the same. They don’t necessarily take the time to put together the Craigslist ad to look for someone. If you really want to work somewhere, go show up, talk to some



“Focus on being in alignment with yourself.”



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If an alum's story is meaningful to you, consider reaching out with questions using the contact information provided.

of the staff that work there, figure out the best way in and just keep presenting yourself as a viable candidate.

### **What was the best thing about being a Gaucho?**

In freshman year, my dorm-mates crammed into a couple of UCSB vans and went up to Pismo to go camping. We convinced our RA to take the van out on the sand dunes and got totally stuck. The tide was coming in. The sun was going down. We all had to get out and dig, push, dig, push, figure it out. That memory represents what I like about the people of UCSB. A diverse group that's willing to work together to fix a problem and have fun doing it.

### **Any final words of wisdom for the current Gaucho generation?**

Be humble. When you're entering a career, be willing to work hard and take on roles outside of what you expect you deserve right away. Enti-

led attitudes don't help an organization, so those in charge want to cut them out of a team rather than deal with them.

Also, I don't hire based on major. I know a lot of other companies don't. We want and expect people to learn on the job. If they've got the core set of qualities as a human being that we're looking for, we'll invest in training them. So don't be paralyzed by the fear about what major you declare. Focus on being in alignment with yourself. Who you spend your time with to what you study to what activities you do—make sure it all aligns with who you are. Listen when your intuition tells you something's off. If it's saying, "Don't major in Computer Science, major in Film Studies," listen. Let your dreams evolve. Life is not a straight line and it's great to meander through it, being open to all the experiences that present themselves.

Go Gauchos!



*Jacob welcomes Gauchos to contact him via email for questions about his career path and his industry. Requests to review resumes will not receive responses.*

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