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The rise of the drones...

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When the first legal drone delivery on United States' soil took place experts hailed it as a 'Kitty Hawk moment'. This giant leap forward for the commercial drone industry was engineered by a start-up helmed by a 27-year-old Australian.

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On July 17, 2015, drones safely ferried 24 packages of pharmaceuticals from Lonesome Pine Airport to a free medical clinic at the Wise County fairgrounds, in a remote part of Virginia in the US.

Two things were remarkable about the 'Let's Fly Wisely' event. Firstly, it had the unprecedented blessing of the regulator, the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Secondly, the first FAA-approved drone delivery on US soil was undertaken not by one of the 800-pound gorillas of the American tech industry but by a start-up named Flirtey helmed by a 27-year-old Australian called Matthew Sweeny.

"People focus on the technology with Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs)," Sweeny says. "That's obviously important, but companies such as mine had that side of things figured out a while ago.

"What has been preventing a commercial drone delivery industry emerging, is the reluctance of aviation regulators around the world to green light it. And that's in part related to a lingering suspicion around drones among the general public and their elected representatives. It's a suspicion that events such as 'Let's Fly Wisely' aim to assuage."

Sweeny's journey to organising what is likely to go down in history as the first of billions of legal drone deliveries was circuitous. He spent a year as a university exchange student in Shanghai. While there he became fascinated both with the multitude of bicycle deliverymen and the sophisticated toy helicopters available for purchase. After returning home to Sydney, the philosophy and international relations graduate began thinking about how delivery drones could be used in industries such as retail and fast food, as well as to drop supplies in regions devastated by natural disasters. Along with business partner Tom Bass, he launched Flirtey in 2013. The vision was "to create a future where flying delivery robots save lives and change lifestyles".

The engineering department at Sweeny's alma mater, the University of Sydney, helped him develop Flirtey's first UAVs. The fledging enterprise also enjoyed various forms of government assistance, such as participation in an accelerator program called Startmate and office space at the Australian Technology Park, an innovation hub in inner-city Sydney. But as much as he enjoyed his hometown, Sweeny was determined to avoid having to hand over his intellectual property to others to commercialise.

"Australia is a young country and that can-do, pioneering attitude the settlers had is still part of the culture," he says. "Australians are great at inventing. We are responsible for things such as wi-fi and black box flight recorders. But we haven't always been good at taking those innovations to global markets."

Sweeny resolved to crack the most lucrative market of all. In 2014 he moved Flirtey to the US and entered into a partnership with the University of Nevada to perfect the technology he'd developed. The move also meant the Flirtey CEO had readier access to investors who could finance his grand ambitions. Around the same time as the 'Let's Fly Wisely' triumph, Flirtey graduated from Y Combinator, the world's most successful start-up accelerator. It has provided seed funding to the likes of Dropbox, Airbnb and Reddit.

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Sweeny is now seeking to conquer the world by focusing his attention on a small island nation neighbouring his homeland. "New Zealand has the most liberal regulation around UAVs in the world. Since the early days of Flirtey we've done lots of our field testing there," he says. "We've partnered with a courier company called Fastway. We're now planning on rolling out a commercial drone delivery service throughout New Zealand."

Sweeny believes that other countries around the world will follow the precedent he is helping to set in New Zealand. He is confident that by the end of this decade the skies of most nations will be buzzing with UAVs, delivering everything from legal contracts to direct-from-the-farm produce. He's even more confident that Flirtey will be a major player in what soon will be a trillion-dollar industry. That will mean competing with the likes of Google, Amazon, FedEx and UPS, all of which are devoting significant resources to dominating the drone delivery industry.

"I get asked all the time how Flirtey expects to compete with companies like Google," laughs Sweeny. "My response is that, firstly, even with all the resources Google has it's been searching for a drone delivery solution for a long time without finding any results; and if Amazon customers like overnight delivery of their purchases, they will love delivery within 30 minutes by Flirtey. Secondly, if the last couple of decades have proved anything, it's that the nimble start-up usually beats the established player. Google itself overtook Alta Vista, just like Facebook wiped out MySpace and Amazon triumphed over the bookstores. Thirdly, while I'm sure Flirtey will face serious rivals as the industry expands, it benefits from not being one of the behemoths. For instance, I can't see eBay or Walmart using Amazon's delivery drone service. These companies, and many others, will be happy to use Flirtey."

Sweeny is unsurprisingly upbeat about the unstoppable momentum building for the mass take-up of delivery drones.

"You'll soon be able to tap the Flirtey app on your phone and have a flying robot deliver almost anything you want, whenever and wherever you want, in a quick and efficient way. And it's not just about consumer convenience. If you have a heart attack a defibrillator could be dispatched. If you find yourself impacted by a flood, bushfire, volcano, blizzard or tsunami, you could rely on UAVs dropping food and medicine."

While conceding some will be put out of a job by the disruption soon to be unleashed, Sweeny insists the upsides will far outweigh the downsides.

"The history of capitalism is the history of new technologies wiping out some jobs but creating lots of others. Drones are going to improve our lives in unimaginable ways, and it is going to happen far sooner than most people realise."

- [Flirtey \[http://flirtey.com/\]](http://flirtey.com/)