

# Usabilla



**Roel Jansen,**  
VP of Sales - Usabilla

**Industry:** Software as a Service, B2B

**Mission statement:** "Build future-proof customer experiences. Collect both qualitative and quantitative insights from users to make the right optimization decisions."

**Headquarters:** Amsterdam (Rokin 16, 1012 KR Amsterdam)

**Founded:** 2009

Visit the website of the company Usabilla and you'll notice an understated but important sub-line under their logo: "by SurveyMonkey" - that's because Usabilla was acquired by the tech giant in early 2019, for a cool \$80 million. Usabilla creates technology that improves customers' experiences on the websites and apps of big brands and opens up responsive communication between brand and customer. We spoke with Roel Jansen, Chief Commercial Officer and Co-Founder of Usabilla, to track its New York trajectory.

Key takeaways:

- Have some U.S. clients in place before setting up there
- Consider where most of your U.S. clients will be based
- Consider time zone differences with the Netherlands
- Make sure you have enough budget to fuel your expansion
- Start marketing early
- Don't office-hunt too early
- Hire via recruitment agencies
- Differentiate yourself in the eyes of potential employees
- Hire locally to know the culture, language and what's happening in the community
- Be inclusive, always making your U.S. office feel part of the bigger organisation

### What initially motivated you to expand to New York City, Roel?

“It was about three years ago, I think, when we moved to New York. We wanted to move abroad; to open up an office in a different location and for us, the United States was really a growth opportunity market. We are in the feedback business; we are a voice-of-customer (VOC) solution, and so we tend to work in markets that are digitally-savvy, where there’s already some e-commerce going on and all that kind of stuff.

Countries here in Europe, for example, are maybe less digitally-savvy, at least (they were) a few years ago, compared to the Netherlands. The U.S. is of course a huge market – it’s bigger than all the European countries or markets combined, and it’s just one market, one language, one culture. So, it was fairly easy to point at the U.S. as the next big growth opportunity for us.”

Roel emphasised that they wouldn’t have gone into the U.S. without a footprint of sorts there already:

“Our strategy has always been to enter a new market after we have established a certain footprint in that market; after we’ve already acquired a few customers. Then we would go there. I think by then we already had quite some revenue coming from the U.S.; we had customers such as Nike and Hilton, and a bunch of others that had come to us via inbound enquiries. Maybe they saw our solution on a different website, a competitor or whatever, and then they reached out to us saying hey, we’re interested in your solution, tell us more.

And eventually we sold (to them) virtually from the Netherlands, with video conferencing and screen demo’s. So all of this gave us a level of trust that we could make it in the U.S. - we already had customers there without even having a presence there yet.”

### Why New York over Boston or San Francisco?

Roel underscored the New York advantage of relative proximity. The time difference between New York and Amsterdam is just six hours, allowing for some overlap of business hours. San Francisco, on the other hand, is nine hours behind meaning no overlapping business hours, as well as longer and more expensive flights:

“We decided not to make the mistake of some start-ups or scale-ups from Europe who went to San Francisco. We just wanted to be in a big city that had a lot of headquarters located there and was easy to fly in and out of. It just made sense to go for the East Coast. We didn’t want to go for Boston, because there are a lot more headquarters in NYC. And, in Boston, you could maybe find more engineers - but we weren’t looking for engineers, because our engineering department is really still in Amsterdam. We were looking for salespeople.”

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### Did Usabilla go into the U.S. full scale, or start out small?

“We’ve been kind of ‘bootstrapped’ since seven years ago. The company got a little bit of funding in 2011 - that was \$1 million - but had used that all up by the summer of 2012. I joined at that time and we pivoted the company to focus on a different product, reskilled the team and really put focus on a different go-to-market strategy; a different pricing strategy as well. Ever since we applied that we went on to break even and then became profitable. Yet after that first round, we never really took additional funding.”

Roel emphasised the costs of launching and scaling up in the U.S. as something other Dutch entrepreneurs and companies should really consider.

### Deep pockets required

“I would say, if you want to go to the U.S., you need to make sure that you have deep pockets because it’s quite an expensive endeavour ... talent is more expensive, offices are more expensive, everything is just more expensive. So if you want to go there full-blown immediately, with multiple people on the payroll, with a decent office and all that kind of stuff, you need to make sure that you have enough funding, or that you are profitable enough to basically fund it yourself. We did not take additional funding; we had to fund it from our own cash flow, and that made it challenging. So we did it step by step.”

The first step was for Roel to go over with an American colleague who had been working for the company in Amsterdam. They moved over to New York and started recruiting people - locals always. Whenever the company launches in a new country, Usabilla’s approach is to hire locally. The staff component grew steadily over two years, until the NYC office had about 18 people.

### On key cultural differences

“Well, of course Dutch people are more direct! So it’s clear if they want to engage, or not with you and your product. You really know whether it’s a yes or no. And maybe with Americans, it’s a bit more ... you need to read a little bit more between the lines. They would say that’s interesting and it’s great but then actually they mean yeah, well maybe not for me, or not now. So you have to just keep that in mind. Maybe you think, when you land there, oh, everybody’s super excited about my product or about my business. We’re going to do loads of business. Yes, eventually you will, but it just takes time. While it might be ‘high energy’ over there, it’s not necessarily the case that doing business goes faster; it takes as long as it would take here in Europe to build a business and build a network.”

### The secret to hiring top talent in New York ...

“It’s important to focus on the cultural aspect,” says Roel, “because you want to differentiate yourself from the American competition. Usually the American competition pays a bit better than maybe a Dutch start-up can afford. So you need to make sure that you offer something else; that it’s not only a decision about the money. Because it is kind of a rat race. If you don’t convince talent that it’s really great to work with your company; that you’re offering other perks or a very good work/life balance (which they aren’t used to); if they are not convinced about that, then it will be just about the money and that’s most likely a rat race you’re going to lose. You really have to focus on these other benefits that you’re offering and then they’ll choose you.

That is something that we did. We really focused on a great work/life balance. So you don’t have to work on the weekends; we don’t expect you to email during your vacations while you’re lying on the beach; if you deliver, we don’t expect you to stay as long as the boss...”



Usabilla team

### Preparatory steps for a U.S. expansion

Roel mentions getting his visa as the first hurdle:

“We have an agency here in the Netherlands that helped with getting me a visa. There are no shortcuts - you just have to abide by the rules and then eventually you will get it, you just have to be patient. So that’s one of the bigger things.”

As far as getting office space goes, says Roel, that is not too difficult:

“There are a lot of workspaces in New York City; there are a lot of offices on the market, and a lot of turnover of offices. We started to look for offices months in advance, before I was really going to go there, and that’s not really necessary. And it’s not really useful - because they will say, well, this office might not be on the market next month anymore. It’s a more short notice kind of thing. So if you need an office you go there two weeks or maybe even a week before you can move in. Whereas here (in the Netherlands) it can take months or half a year, if you sign, before you can rent or lease a space. So you don’t have to worry about that. Yes, offices are expensive. That’s part of the game of coming to New York.”

### What about recruiting people in New York?

Roel answers that if you do not have a New York network as such, you should reach out to the Dutch Consulate, and to other organisations that help people to go abroad. He advises using a recruitment agency to hire staff, given that it is hard to recruit people when your company is most likely not that well known in New York yet, from a branding perspective.

### What are some of the benefits that came out of Usabilla’s expansion?

“Now, of course, it’s contributing significantly to our revenue. About 35% of the overall company revenue comes from the U.S. In a couple of years it grew tremendously, so I think that’s a really good thing.”

Roel talks about the acquisition by Survey Monkey:

“I think already being in the U.S. and having an American customer base definitely contributed to the whole acquisition. Otherwise, we might not have ended up on their radar as a potential acquisition candidate. So if you have a plan to at some point do an exit to an American company, it makes sense to already have some boots on the ground there.”

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### Is there anything Roel would have done differently, looking back?

With hindsight, he would have wanted deeper pockets for the move - to have a bit more in the bank account so as to enable bolder decisions about the hiring process; to be more ‘American’ from the hiring and even the firing perspective.

Another key learning: start building your brand early. “We started relatively late with local marketing in the U.S. We only hired a local American marketer after having been there for a year and a half - and I think with hindsight, we should have done that earlier. Right away maybe, when we started putting boots on the ground, we should have also started adding marketers to the team, not only sales. That is a common mistake. It’s a common mistake for us, at least. We have to be constantly aware of this mistake that we sometimes make. If you want to open up a (new) market, to not only send salespeople but also start with marketing. It takes longer to build brand recognition.”

Also important, says Roel, is to maintain some Dutch presence in your New York Office. As at the time of writing, Usabilla has no Dutch employees in its New York office - that can make it harder to keep relationships close with your Netherlands office (HQ).

### What about bringing new people from the U.S. over to the Netherlands as a culture-builder?

“We definitely do that with new people,” says Roel. “New people come to Amsterdam for a week or two, half a month - and we try to send over the other people, I think, once every two years. For satellite offices it easily feels so remote. So we really try to engage them with team meetings when they are dialling in; it’s super important to let them be part of everything. It’s very easy to just focus on your surroundings. Then (you’re) dialling into a conference call and not really paying attention to the other people that are also dialling in. That for them then feels really remote or distanced. That’s something you need to constantly work on - keep your satellite offices close - that’s a constant challenge.”

Culture-building is something Usabilla - which is in several countries - clearly prioritises. For its ten-year anniversary, the company plans to fly everyone in to Amsterdam:

“Everyone from New York, everyone from Sydney, Berlin, London, Paris, Vienna and Italy. We’ll fly everyone in and have a full week. First it’s all business, so we have workshops, and then we have our big annual customer event, which is 500 attendees, so a big event. And then right after that we have our company team outing. So with all of our 145 employees we’re going to go on fun activities, with two nights somewhere in the country - it’s still a surprise.”