Mela Ventures

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FoundrPwr

The Indian Hardware Founder's Playbook

Lessons from Pramod Ghadge's journey building Unbox Robotics



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Building a robotics company has a different clock to it. Hardware prototyping takes months per iteration. A mistake doesn't get patched in a release; it shows up on a customer's warehouse floor, and the damage travels fast in a small industry. And you are often selling something customers have no frame of reference for, because nothing quite like it has existed before.

Pramod Ghadge has seen this first-hand. He is CEO and Co-founder **Unbox Robotics**, a Pune-based startup that builds modular software-defined robotic systems for warehouse sortation. Six years since its founding, Unbox has deployed 600-plus robots across eight to nine countries, with customers across India, Europe, and the US in e-commerce, fashion, and third-party logistics.

We recently hosted Pramod for a **FoundrPwr session** in which he shared the journey of building Unbox Robotics from first principles — from identifying a real warehouse automation problem during his time at Flipkart to scaling a robotics company across India and Europe. The discussion covered early customer discovery, commercialization, financing hardware businesses, expansion strategy, product thinking, hiring, and fundraising.

The core theme throughout the conversation was clear: deep-tech companies succeed when they stay obsessed with the following:

- Customer problem obsession: Stay focused on the problem and the metrics that matter to the customer, not on the technology for its own sake.
- Lean teams early on: Avoid over-hiring. In the beginning, generalists who can move quickly across functions are more valuable than a large, specialized team.
- Working capital discipline: In hardware, cash flow, vendor terms, customer advances, and inventory discipline can determine survival as much as the product itself.
- Extremely Focused Execution: Focus on a small number of customers. Concentrate on one or two regions. Make early deployments highly successful
- Support and uptime are mission critical.



1. Starting with the Problem, Not the Technology:

A repeated theme in the discussion was that founders should begin with a clearly quantified problem statement rather than with the technology itself. According to Pramod:

- The right approach is to work backward from the problem
- Technology and product form factors can change over time
- What should remain constant is the problem being solved and the metric being improved

This mindset shaped Unbox's early journey. The team identified a warehouse automation use case where current solutions were inadequate, then designed a new multi-robot system to address it. He emphasized that many DeepTech companies fail because they become too attached to the technology and only later try to find a market. In contrast, Unbox anchored itself in customer pain points from the beginning.



2. Validating the Market Before Building:

Before quitting Flipkart, Pramod and his co-founder started validating the market. They reached out to potential customers and industry contacts through LinkedIn and common networks to understand whether the proposed solution was compelling. At that stage, they had:

- No production-ready system
- No full prototype
- Only a concept and a strong hypothesis

Yet they still began conversations with the right stakeholders globally. Their ambition from the start was to build a global product, not just an India-only solution. This early validation played a critical role in reducing risk. **It gave the founders confidence that the problem mattered and that there could be demand if they succeeded in building the system.**



3. Creating a new category required education before evaluation:

Because Unbox was building a new category of warehouse robotics system, early customer conversations were less about evaluation and more about education. Their product was a first-of-its-kind mobile robotics system for parcel sorting in constrained spaces. Customers had not seen this kind of setup before. To communicate the vision, the team created:

- 3D Conceptual videos
- Diagrams
- Process flows
- Presentation decks
- Simulations

They used these materials to help customers understand how the system would work in practice. Since a single robot prototype could not demonstrate the full value of a multi-robot system, visual storytelling became critical.

> *Even for Fundraising, a particularly smart practice was building strong collateral such as technical notes, written materials, videos, white-paper-style content and a well-prepared data room.*
>
> ***This helped investors understand the company in depth, especially in a category where the product and market may not be easy to grasp quickly.***



4. Avoid Free Pilots unless there is clear strategic value:

Pramod's recommendation was to stay away from free pilots as much as possible. In his view, free pilots often indicate that the customer has no real "skin in the game." In many cases:

- The internal champion may just want to show innovation activity
- Budget may not exist
- Organizational alignment may be weak
- The pilot may never convert into a contract

If a startup must do a free pilot, he suggested securing something in return, such as:

- Written permission to use the pilot for marketing
- A case study
- Customer references
- Introductions to prospective customers

Understand what is acting as a roadblock, instead of fully free pilots, and use alternative commercial models such as subsidized deployments, rental models, conversion clauses into future purchase orders.

For their first sale in India, they deployed a 20-robot system on a monthly payment structure. If agreed metrics were achieved, the rental fees would be adjusted against a final purchase order. This reduced risk for the customer while still preserving economic discipline for Unbox.

The broader lesson: pilot structures should create commitment on both sides.



5. Building Frugally is super crucial:

Customers were invited into the journey as early adopters. The team regularly shared updates, explained benefits, answered technical questions, and involved prospects early.

- **Early Prototyping is expensive.** To reduce prototyping costs, he recommended:
    - Heavy use of simulations
    - Testing in virtual environments before physical builds
    - Catching design mistakes digitally rather than through repeated physical prototypes

- **Involving customers early during prototyping**. Rather than building in isolation for months and then unveiling a product, startups should:
    - Share milestones with customers
    - Gather continuous feedback
    - Make course corrections earlier
    - This is especially important in hardware, where individual components may take months to procure and iteration cycles are slow and costly.

- **Working Capital Discipline is super crucial.** Pramod described working capital optimization as one of the three things every hardware founder should obsess over. His guidance included:
    - Get as much advance from customers as possible
    - Negotiate longer payment terms with vendors
    - Avoid locking excessive capital in inventory
    - Use open purchase orders or reserved stock arrangements where possible

The idea is to compress the cash conversion cycle and shift working capital pressure away from the startup wherever possible.



6. Building Finance Capability at the Pre-Series A or Series A stage:

In the beginning, Unbox did not hire a senior finance leader. One person handled accounts, finance, HR, and other admin functions. The founders learned on the go, supported by investors and peers.

However, after reaching a certain scale, they hired a finance controller. Pramod emphasized that this becomes essential once the business starts dealing with:

- Larger inventory
- More suppliers
- Payroll complexity
- Debt or external financing
- More sophisticated finance operations

> *His recommendation was that by the pre-Series A or Series A stage, a startup should bring in dedicated finance leadership rather than trying to manage everything amongst the founders*



7. Partnerships and Channel Strategy for expansion in International Markets:

To support global expansion, Unbox used channel partners and system integrators.

What did System Integrators bring to the table?

- Knowledge of local markets/local language capabilities
- Access to decision-makers
- On-group support presence. This is especially important because one of the first questions international customers ask is how post-deployment support will work.

How did they select right System Integrators?

Pramod explained that they worked with smaller and mid-sized partners rather than only large companies. The smaller partners often moved faster, had stronger conviction, and were more willing to actively promote new technology.

An effective tactic they used to expand System Integrator network was selling demo systems to partners at a discount. Those partners could then:

- Showcase the robots at trade fairs and run local demonstrations
- Share marketing costs and help in building the brand in-region

For physical products, he noted, trade shows and local demonstrations remain highly important.



8. What Milestones to Track Before Revenues Start to Kick In?

For DeepTech businesses, he argued that the first important milestone is not margin optimization — it is proving that the system works at scale in a real customer environment. In the early phase founders should focus on:

- The system is solving a real problem
- The product works reliably in customer environment
- Customers derive value and ROI becomes clear
- Customers are willing to advocate for it

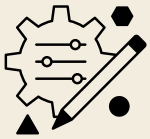
Once that proof exists, the company can begin to improve margins through scale, supply chain leverage, in-house manufacturing, and better pricing discipline.



9. Product Expansion Philosophy:

The product expansion philosophy remains consistent:

- Do not build just because it is possible
- Build where there is meaningful differentiation
- Expand revenue per customer where adjacent products make sense
- Balance low-hanging fruit with breakthrough opportunities



10. When should startups customise:

Enterprise customers often ask startups to build custom products or features. Pramod warned that excessive customization can become a trap, especially in hardware, where it is expensive and hard to scale. Founders can use the following framework:

- Evaluate the long-term revenue potential
- Estimate development cost
- Assess whether the ask can become a standard product line
- Determine whether the customer can commit volumes upfront
- Avoid becoming a one-off turnkey project company

Where possible, startups should productize demand. Instead of rebuilding from scratch for every customer, they should create configurable product families and reusable modules. That allows scale without losing flexibility.



11. Maintenance, Uptime, and Support are non-negotiable:

Pramod was unequivocal that maintenance and uptime can be deal breakers in enterprise robotics. Unbox tracks uptime closely through dashboards at both system and robot levels. Their maintenance approach includes:

- Spare parts stocked on site
- Escalation layers from simple issues to advanced support
- Training for customer teams and partners
- Preventive maintenance schedules
- Remote support from India
- Different support models depending on geography and customer needs

He emphasized that founders should feel every minute of downtime as a serious issue. This mindset is what drives the trust required for enterprise scale.



12. When to hire Sales leaders:

In the early years, sales at Unbox were heavily founder-led. The first sales hire came after Series A, and even then, it was not a senior sales leader. The first senior sales hire came after the company had:

- A working playbook
- Customer proof points
- Deployment credibility
- Sufficient product maturity

This reflects a broader pattern in deep-tech sales: **Early customers want to hear directly from founders** because founders carry the story, conviction, and product depth in a way no early sales team can fully replicate.



13. Building Moats in Robotics:

Pramod argued that moats in robotics do not come from a single algorithm or component. They come from the integration of many subsystems over time, refined through real deployment experience. In other words, the moat is not just the initial invention, it is the accumulated operating knowledge and iterative improvement built from years of deployments.

Someone can copy the visible hardware, but reproducing the efficiency, reliability, power optimization, and system behavior developed through real-world learning is much harder.

Pramod's journey with Unbox Robotics offers a compelling playbook for building DeepTech companies from India. The company's progress did not come from trend-chasing or overcapitalized scaling.

It came from patient problem-solving, early customer validation, strong operational discipline, and relentless refinement in the field.

Mela Ventures

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