

**BUSINESS**



# The independent email service she helped start in a Penn dorm almost 30 years ago now has 400,000 users

Helen Horstmann-Allen in Philly and Bron Gondwana in Australia run Fastmail for people who don't want to depend on Big Tech for email service.



Helen Horstmann-Allen, Fastmail chief operating officer, at her office in Philadelphia. As a Penn student, she cofounded an email service that went on to be bought by Fastmail. ... [Read more](#)  
Jessica Griffin / Staff Photographer

by Joseph N. DiStefano  
Published Aug. 29, 2023, 5:00 a.m. ET

Google, Apple, and other smartphone providers manage most Americans' email at little or no extra charge while skimming data to share with advertisers.

That's not for everyone. A handful of independent, low-fee email services have won fans among individual and small-business users. One of the longest-lived is [Fastmail](#), which traces its roots to [POBox.com](#) (Pobox), an email service started in a West Philadelphia dorm room in 1995.

"It's been interesting to have been in the email business for such a long time," said Helen Horstmann-Allen, who cofounded Pobox with software

developer Meng Weng Wong when they were University of Pennsylvania undergraduates. She now services as Fastmail's chief operating officer from its U.S. headquarters at 1400 Market St. in Philadelphia. (Wong moved on to Silicon Valley and then his native Singapore and founded [Legalese.com](#).)

The service, which lured users from Prodigy, AOL, and other internet dial-up connectors, at first cost \$15 a year. (Standard Fastmail is now \$5 a month.) It got enthusiastic early coverage in Wired magazine and was quickly turning a profit in those [pre-Gmail](#), [pre-Microsoft Outlook](#) days.

Early users, Horstmann-Allen recalled, were techies who understood how email worked and sought a reliable provider they could reach on the phone. Later, customers focused on privacy, hoping to shield their communications data from big tech companies.

“It's tough to compete with *free*,” she said. “But we can see now that ‘free’ service is costing us dearly. People want to be a customer, not the product.”

## Controlling your online identity

Most recently, Horstmann-Allen said, Fastmail has attracted users who “are seeking to gain control of their identity.”

Identity — from email? “In a world of shifting reality, your email has become your electronic memory,” said Bron Gondwana, the company's Australia-based chief executive.

The original Fastmail, an Australian email hosting service, bought Pobox in 2015. It kept the Pobox brand for its email forwarding service and also offers Topicbox, a group email management service.

“The internet changes so fast,” Gondwana said. “You don't know if an article you read online has changed from yesterday. But email doesn't change. And that is becoming valuable. A lot of young people are now using email, not so much to communicate with people, but to save their information.”

Fastmail, which is self-funded and privately held, now claims 280,000 email accounts and a total of more than 400,000 users. Gondwana said that includes at least 100 people in each of more than 100 countries, with the largest group in the United States. The company also sells a growing list of communications services. It maintains its own servers — not relying on “cloud” servers from Amazon or other tech giants — at locations including sites in New Jersey and Washington State.

“We work with hardware,” Horstmann-Allen said. “We aren’t spinning your data in a cloud.”

The company employs 60 worldwide, including 25 in Philadelphia.

Horstmann-Allen said the service has attracted more small-business clients in recent years. “The difference between free and paid is when something happens to your Google account, you just about need a son who works at Google to straighten it out. Our support team is one of the best in the business.”

Google didn’t respond to queries about competition from independent providers. Companies such as Fastmail aren’t a threat to internet services that provide connectivity and many other services besides email: “Independent email providers don’t represent a competitive solution [vs.] Comcast Business; rather, these could be one of many communication and collaboration applications” a customer uses, said Matt Helmke, a Comcast spokesperson.

Last year, [PC Magazine](#) rated Fastmail the “best” service “for email geeks,” noting it has evolved from a “feature-rich tool for email nerds” to a tool “as simple and familiar as Gmail” with calendar, contacts, snooze warnings, and pinned notes.

The magazine by contrast praised rival ProtonMail, a larger, Swiss-based independent email service founded in 2014 — initially crowdfunded, its basic service is free — that is popular among software developers for offering an especially high level of “encryption and anonymity.”

Skiff.com, a 2-year-old, San Francisco-based email service, in an online comparison last spring called ProtonMail and Fastmail “[the new and the old](#),” rating ProtonMail’s security as “more advanced” but gave Fastmail an edge for “more diverse features,” such as rich text search and storage for hundreds of aliases.

## A focus on customer service

At least a few of Fastmail’s business users are hometown-proud Philadelphians. “When we opened our brick-and-mortar store in 2018 and we had to choose an email, we weren’t into the whole Google thing,” said Bill Rhoda, cofounder of Philadelphia Typewriter, a 10-person repair shop and parts maker on East Passyunk Avenue in South Philly.

“All the businesses around me are using Google — the spreadsheet, the drive, the email — but on my personal Gmail, there’s always huge amount of spam, just nonstop emails that have nothing to do with me or

what I am interested in,” Rhoda said.

An early employee told him about Fastmail, and Rhoda got excited: “It wasn’t in the mainstream. It’s kind of this cult thing, and when I realized they were actually based in Philly, that was really cool.”

Rhoda signed his company up. “And now I don’t have spam issues. They are really good at registering what is spam based in my inbox and what I don’t want to see. I like that it allows me to focus on what I need to focus on.”

He also likes being able to call Fastmail and get help from human employees.

“We’re a scrappy start-up, and it’s great to be able to support a Philly-grown business, instead of one of the big guys,” said Samantha Wittchen, director of programs and operations at Circular Philadelphia, a Kensington recycling-system designer, which uses Fastmail, as do two other enterprises she helps lead.

When she started in business, Wittchen used email from her internet service. “I was not loving that. A lot of spam got through,” she said.

“There were filters, but it was difficult to set them up for people who were not super-tech-savvy.”

Checking Google’s email offerings, Wittchen said, “you had to figure it all out on your own. They have a knowledge base, they have instructions, you can map the servers; I know how to do that. But one of my business partners was struggling with Yahoo’s really clunky Web interface. Moving us all to Fastmail was so much easier.”

She especially likes that Fastmail makes it easy to set up free specialized email addresses and multiple accounts.

Horstmann-Allen said a career in email has taught her the value of multiple addresses. “They are a form of control,” she said. “I can give you different e-mails for Amazon or Apple [correspondence]. Give one to a politician, you discover very fast how quickly they share them” with fundraisers.

“There are very few people I will give my phone number to,” she added. “With email, I can just block it.”



Joseph N. DiStefano  

I write about people and money in our community and beyond.

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## TRENDING IN PHILLY

Penn president Liz Magill faces intense pressure to resign; Pa. lawmakers say Penn Vet funding at risk over her comments

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Andrea Bocelli tells Wells Fargo crowd he can't perform

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Developer Eric Blumenfeld lost control of a South Philly condo building where 'everyone has something to complain about'

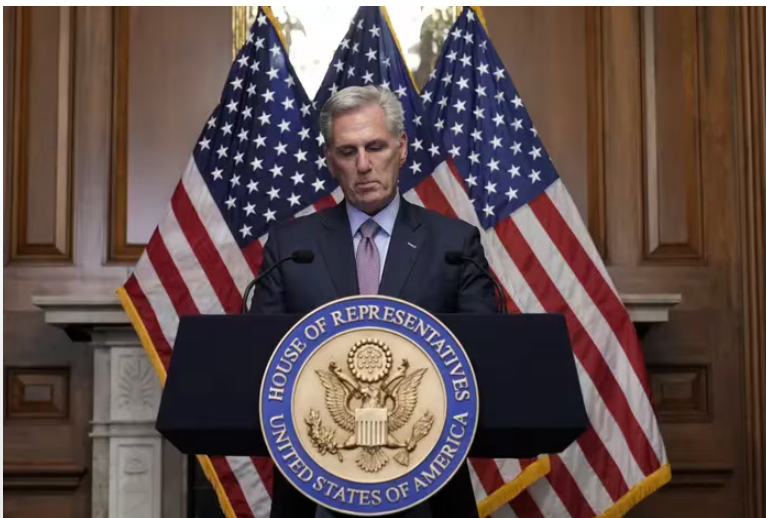
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Eagles beat writers make their predictions for the Cowboys game in Week 14

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Jim Kenney dishes out shade for Democrats who lost the primary for mayor

## NATIONAL POLITICS



### **Kevin McCarthy was booted as House speaker two months ago. Now he's leaving Congress by year's end.**

Republican Rep. Kevin McCarthy says he's resigning from his congressional seat in California two months after his historic ouster as House speaker.

Michael R. Blood and Kevin Freking, As... Dec 7, 2023

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## OPINION



## Speed camera program helps save lives. Lawmakers should vote to keep it. | Editorial

Despite the clear benefit to public safety, Pennsylvania legislators are waffling on whether to reauthorize the use of speed cameras in the state.

The Editorial Board Dec 7, 2023

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### NEWSLETTERS



## A guilty verdict | Inside Johnny Doc's Trial newsletter

The jury convicted John Dougherty on embezzlement charges after roughly 14 hours of deliberations, delivering his second federal felony conviction in as many years.

Jeremy Roebuck and Oona Goodin-Smith Dec 8, 2023

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### EDUCATION



## **Penn president Liz Magill got grilled by Congressional committee over the university's response to antisemitism**

Magill was joined by Harvard President Claudine Gay and MIT President Sally Kornbluth at the hearing in Washington.

Susan Snyder Dec 5, 2023

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### **HOROSCOPES**

## **Horoscopes: Friday, Dec. 1, 2023**

Daily Horoscopes.

Holiday Mathis, Inquirer wire services Dec 1, 2023

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### **MUSIC**



## **A Latin Grammy-nominated composer wrote a tango for a shop cat in Fishtown**

Meet Sheldon, an ageless stray who has lived at the Philadelphia Argentine Tango School in Fishtown since 2017. His owner says he knows a lot about cuddling, and nothing about music.

Beatrice Forman Dec 6, 2023

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## TRANSPORTATION



### THE HISTORY OF SEPTA STRIKES

The Transport Workers Union, now in negotiations with SEPTA, has gone out on strike before. So have other SEPTA unions. Here is what happened in previous strikes.

Thomas Fitzgerald Oct 23, 2023



## PHILLY TIPS



### Need Phillies gear? Here are the 9 best local and official shops.

From official gear to creative shirts and hats, Phillies' fans are eager to get their hands on merchandise.

Henry Savage Oct 3, 2023



## NEWS





## Philly is full of phony wagyu: This Tokyo transplant is on a mission to bring you better beef.

There's true Japanese Wagyu— exceptionally marbled beef from cows raised in pristine environments — and then there's a herd of competitors whose steaks aren't up to the same standards.

Jenn Ladd Oct 2, 2023

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### NEWS



## Philly nightlife takes a hit as noise complaints force relocations, unexpected shutdowns

A few music venue and party haunts have shuttered recently due to noise complaints. DJs and organizers believe the city should value its nightlife.

Earl Hopkins Aug 27, 2023

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### BUSINESS

## Sandwich chain Subway will be sold to Arby's owner Roark Capital

Sandwich chain Subway said Thursday it will be sold to the private equity firm Roark Capital.

Dee-Ann Durbin, Associated Press Aug 24, 2023

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## BUSINESS



### Real-estate influencer Greg Parker faces scam claims: 5 things to know from our investigation

Greg Parker Jr., known online as Big Bizznesss, and his wife Danielle "Nikki" Morris Parker are online wealth influencers who got their start in Philly.

Samantha Melamed Aug 17, 2023

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## FOOD



### Termini Brothers is giving away tiles from its famous bakery floor

Customers shared sweetly-tinged stories of long ago bakery trips and treasured traditions, of sad and happy tears shed on a South Philadelphia bakery floor.

Mike Newall Aug 1, 2023

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## TECHNOLOGY

### Elon Musk says Twitter to change logo to “X” from the bird. Changes could come as early as Monday.

Elon Musk plans to change the logo of Twitter to an “X” from the famous blue bird, marking what would be the latest big change since he bought the social media platform for \$44 billion last year.

Anne D’Innocenzio, Associated Press Jul 23, 2023



## TECHNOLOGY

### Google says it’s developing tools to help journalists create headlines, stories

The rapidly evolving technology is already raising concerns about whether it can be trusted to provide accurate reports and whether it would eventually lead to human journalists losing jobs.

David Bauder and Matt O’Brien, Associ... Jul 20, 2023



## CARS



### Kia Telluride continues riding among the top of the three-row heap

The Honda Pilot provided a familiar SUV ride and handling. The Telluride makes a much more enjoyable companion, even down to the sound system.

Scott Sturgis Jul 20, 2023



## BUSINESS



## Whitemarsh train derailment likely caused by sinkhole, Norfolk Southern says. Here's what we know.

A preliminary investigation points to a sinkhole as the cause of the derailment.

Ariana Perez-Castells and Thomas Fitz... Jul 18, 2023



### COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE



## Demolition of historic building approved for new health center in Northeast Philly

Philadelphia's health commissioner talks to The Inquirer about the location of a new health center for Northeast Philadelphia after prevailing at a Historical Commission meeting Friday.

Jake Blumgart Jul 18, 2023



### BUSINESS



## **Toppers Spa files for bankruptcy, leaving some customers with unspent gift cards**

All spa locations are now closed, but some customers still have hundreds of dollars worth of gift cards.

Ariana Perez-Castells Jul 17, 2023

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### **BARS**



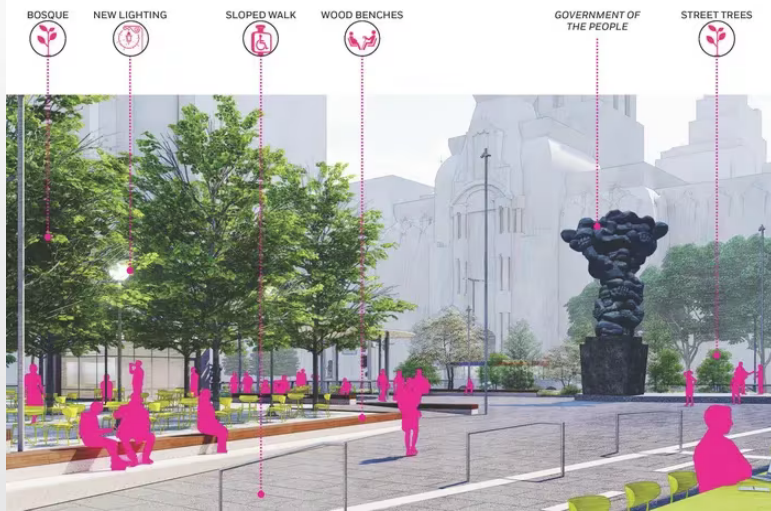
## **Dobbs on South closes following sexual-assault allegations**

The business faced serious financial difficulties in the wake of a sexual assault allegation in February.

Nick Vadala Jul 15, 2023

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### **PHILADELPHIA NEWS**



## Philly recently said goodbye to its famous giant game pieces. Here's how the plaza where they stood could be redesigned.

Shaded areas to sit, accessible ramps, and many more trees could soon be a reality at the plaza.

Ariana Perez-Castells Jul 14, 2023

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### TRANSPORTATION



## Camden residents can now travel around the city for just \$2 a ride

Camden Loop launches a small fleet of minivans as 'microtransit' to fill transportation gaps in Camden.

Ariana Perez-Castells Jul 13, 2023

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### OBITUARIES



## Gabriel L.I. Bevilacqua, longtime lawyer and former chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association, has died at 75

He worked for nearly four decades at Saul Ewing, was chair of the city solicitor's litigation department, and active with the Order Sons and Daughters of Italy in America.

Gary Miles Jul 13, 2023



### NEWS



## Next on 'Abbott Elementary': An actor's strike. What the SAG-AFTRA strike means for your favorite show

After failing to reach a contract, SAG-AFTRA — the Screen Actors Guild — said its members will strike. Here's what that means for your favorite TV shows.

Emily Bloch Jul 13, 2023



### BUSINESS



## **Cowan's Flowers in Wayne closes after 101 years on Lancaster Ave.**

Cowan's closure is the latest in a string of longstanding small businesses on the street that have shut their doors.

Ariana Perez-Castells Jul 13, 2023

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