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## Creating a Responsibly Made Product For a Handcrafted Business

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CREATING A RESPONSIBLY MADE PRODUCT FOR A HANDCRAFTED BUSINESS

by

Jordan Khusnulgatin

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Science in Fashion Business and Entrepreneurship  
at  
Lindenwood University

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Jordan Khusnulgatin	<i>Jordan Khusnulgatin</i>	12-3-21
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Author

Dr. Chajuana Trawick	<i>Dr. Chajuana Trawick</i>	12-3-21
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Committee Chair

Ameli Skoglund-Blaser	<i>Ameli Skoglund-Blaser</i>	12-3-21
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Committee member

Randi Chervitz	<i>Randi Charwitz</i>	12-3-21
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Committee member

CREATING A RESPONSIBLY MADE PRODUCT FOR A HANDCRAFTED BUSINESS

A Project Report Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Arts, Media, and Communication  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
at  
Lindenwood University

By

Jordan Khusnulgatin  
Saint Charles, Missouri  
December 2021

## **ABSTRACT**

Title of Thesis: Creating a Responsibly Made Product For a Handcrafted Business

Jordan Khusnulgatin, Master of Arts, 2021

Thesis Directed by: Dr. Chajuana Trawick

The purpose of this project is to build a small scale handcrafted product and business from scratch that incorporates sustainable practices. There are many factors that make up a business. For this project in particular, the main concern will be centered around all aspects of the product and customer experience, including finding a niche, the aesthetic, branding, packaging, pricing, sustainable practices, and creating a business plan. This project will follow the steps described above to discover a niche and the basis upon which this handmade business will be derived from, providing a physical example of what a thoroughly thought-out handcrafted product and startup business plan would look like.

## **Acknowledgments**

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## **Introduction/ Background Information**

There are many choices to be faced with as an entrepreneur and maker – one being what you will sell. When deciding what you may sell it is important not only that you believe in what you are selling but to also establish that there is a market for what you hope to sell. Once you have decided on what it is that you want to sell you must separate yourself from the competition by defining what it is that makes your product different. By doing so you will have developed your niche and what your business as a whole will be known for. This is the foundation from which you will build. Once your foundation is laid, before anything else, you must understand why. You must understand why you have chosen this product and why you want to turn it into a business. This is the essence of your foundation, and something that stands as a root for all that stems from yourself and the business. These are what one can consider to be the most important steps when building a handmade business because it is from this that all else will depend on.

Once you have decided on your product, found your niche, and established your why you can dig into branding. Branding involves a number of things including a logo, colors, aesthetic, packaging, photography, brand story, target customer, and also yourself when it comes to being the maker of your product. You can then move into the side of business by creating a business plan which will include things such as, pricing, conducting sales, marketing, finances, and business management.

The purpose of this project is to build a small-scale handcrafted product and business plan from scratch that incorporates sustainable practices. There are many factors that make up a business. For this project in particular, the main concern will be centered around all aspects of the product and customer experience, including finding a niche, the aesthetic, branding,

packaging, pricing, sustainable practices, and creating a business plan. This project will follow the steps described above to discover a niche and the basis upon which this handmade business will be derived from, providing a physical example of what a thoroughly thought-out handmade product and startup business plan would look like.

## **Literature Review**

There are many aspects that make up a handmade business. For this project in particular the focus will mainly be concerned around producing a product and building a business model that incorporates sustainable practices for that product to be inserted into. As a handmade business, you are guaranteed to have some sort of competition in the category of your product. “An important step in becoming a successful handmade business is to identify what makes your work unique” (Pranger, 2020, para. 3). Some questions to ask yourself in regards to your unique work are, “look at work similar to yours. What makes yours similar, and what makes it different? How does it compare in quality?” (Pranger, 2020, para. 7). Once you’ve figured out what makes your work unique you can then claim this as your niche. According to Johnson (2012):

When you have a niche, marketing and sales efforts are magnified because you’ll know exactly what you are selling, and who you are selling to. You won’t spin your wheels trying to sell everything to everyone. Instead, you’ll invest your energy in selling specific products to specific people who want those products” (para. 9).

Your niche is your foundation and from that will stem your product. This start up model will be focused on simplicity – that can and should be included in your niche and your product. Success shows repeatedly in this model, including Eileen Fisher who launched label with a



collection of “four, simple and uncluttered designs that she believed would cut through wardrobe anxiety and therefore make getting dressed much easier” (Donnovan, n.d., p. 60-63). Another success in product simplicity includes Briony of Bundu Textiles. Bundu Textiles creates hand loomed caftans offered in different patterns but only one style, “Each piece is unique in its own way, hand-tailored by one of our three local tailors and seamstresses with time and care” (Briony, 2020, para. 5). Once you have established your niche through simplicity, “you can consider how you can leverage your brand to sell new products, or sell your existing product in different ways. By offering a variety of products in “sub-niches,” Tisha appeals to more people without losing focus” (Johnson, 2012, para. 3). This can be arranged in products with different price points to appeal to a customer at different budget points – without straying too far from your ideal customer.

As a handmade business your consumer is often buying handmade because they like knowing who is behind the product they are purchasing. With this in mind, this model will use the importance of branding yourself. Johnson (2012) explains this concept further:

Handmade entrepreneurs are in the unique position of making the products they sell. This means that when a customer sees your product, whether you like it or not, they also see you. Take advantage of this by letting people experience you personally as you market your products (para. 9).

Yourself and the product as a handmade business go hand in hand when it comes to the overall image and branding. Johnson (2012) explains this further:

As your business grows, you will find more people wanting to identify with more than just your products. Your repeat customers will start talking about you and your products, and in some ways, the two will merge into a single brand (para. 10).

Branding brings about a certain aesthetic and feel to your business that goes beyond just the product. It is how people see you, the way you package your product, the way you photograph your product, and so on. “A brand is an emotion connection repeated overtime” (Megan, n.d., para. 5).

Branding plays an important role when it comes to pricing. “The stronger your brand, the more you can charge for the work you make. And the more you can charge, the freer you are to create more of your best work” (Megan, 2016, para. 4). You can convey a message when it comes to branding, and this can include how expensive or inexpensive your products are. Megan (2016) further explains this:

Everything in my trade show booth is meant to tell you that I am not a bargain brand. The walls, the paint color, the custom display fixtures, the way I display the work itself, what I wear, and how I style myself. Before someone even walks into my booth, they know that I’m not cheap (para. 7).

It’s one thing to sell cheap items but underpricing your work can be detrimental to the success of your business. According to King (2018):

Unfortunately, many business owners simply don't realize that pricing is, in fact, the most vital component when it comes to making money. Price your items poorly, and you're leaving money on the table. Price your items well, and you'll beat out your competition without diminishing the perceived quality of your brand (para. 11).

The product of this business model upon which this project is based is one that intends to produce something carefully crafted and of high quality, therefore should be reflected in the price. As said by Jess (n.d.):

Most of us start off selling our work from a hobby perspective. We have no idea what price we should be selling our work for, so we tend to drastically underprice it. We know how to make it, so we tend to underestimate the skill that has gone into the process. *DO NOT TRY TO COMPETE ON PRICE*. There will ALWAYS be someone selling something similar to what you make for much less than you. Even other talented crafters and artisans (para. 13).

Something that should not be overlooked when it comes to the success of a handmade business is your why. Business has ups and downs you may have an idea that may drift you far from where you started. To avoid any confusion or possibility of giving up it is imperative to have a clearly defined why written down for yourself to look back on. This lays out a foundation to ensure you never stray too far from the core of your brand – after all consistency is what we are looking for here. “Your WHY is what sets you apart from everyone else. It’s your purpose. It’s what inspires you to take action. Your WHY is also what inspires *others* to take action, spread your ideas, or buy your products” (Bokhari, 2019, p. 2). When constructing your why statement it should be simple and clean, actionable, focused on how you will contribute to others, and expressed affirmative language that resonates with you (Bokhari, 2019). The most important aspect of your why is that, “It should also be “evergreen,” meaning that it should be applicable to everything you do, both personally and professionally—without separation” (Bokhari, 2019, p. 3).

To ensure consistency within the business along with your why the business itself should have a set of standards to be applied to all aspects of this business. One of these that every business needs to take into consideration is sustainability. “To you the consumer, sustainability means being consciously aware of each purchase you make and taking the time to know how a piece of jewelry is made and supporting brands which observe and respect proper practices and ethical standards” (Tilley, 2019, p. 2). There is a growing awareness in the area of sustainability which means a shift in customer buying habits. It is imperative for not only the environment but the survival of your business as well. According to Tilly (2019):

According to research even back in 2014 by Ipsos Mori, over 80% of consumers said that a retailer’s ethical standards mattered to them and more than a third said they would be willing to pay more for products with higher ethical standards (p. 2).

For a business to become sustainable, “This means that designers and manufacturers, need to be sourcing materials and making production in a manner that has the minimum possible damaging impact on our environment and the communities involved in its production” (Tilley, 2019, p. 2). At the very least a business should have an ethics/sustainability policy, practice recycling and repurposing, and be aware of where their materials originate from (Tilley, 2019).

Some innovative ways to become more sustainable within your business are to minimize your packaging and making sure your packaging is either biodegradable or recyclable. Whilst making your products from eco-friendly materials is great, another route is to use recycled materials. Sustainability is at the core of Eileen Fisher’s brand where the “goal is to create a totally circular design system whereby all Eileen Fisher mainline garments will be made from the company’s old clothes” (Donnovan, n.d., para. 5).

Creating a small handmade business goes far beyond the product itself. While it is making a product for people to buy it is also creating an experience that stands for something, “Not only are you selling a product, you’re selling a brand, a feeling, an experience” (Engelmajer, 2019, p. 1). Being an online business makes it more difficult to organically create that experience. Part of creating that experience in this aspect comes through in the packaging. “Your product's packaging is meant to communicate a purpose: what your brand stands for and what it means for your customer. Don't miss this opportunity to create a lasting impression on the shelf and in the minds of your customers” (Coran, 2014, p. 2). Physical presence provides something that virtual shopping cannot provide, “Not only is your packaging the only part of your brand that reaches 100% of its customers, but it’s also the first time that your customers are physically in contact with your brand” (Forbes, 2020, p. 1). Packaging is your moment to stand out and create a repeat customer, further explained by Church (2018):

In a competitive marketplace, packaging is so much more than just placing your product in a box — it’s an opportunity to ‘wow’ your customer! Make opening your package an experience. Showing your customers that you went the extra mile will make a great impression (p. 3).

In short packaging is part of your business’s voice and should be used as a way to communicate to your customer.

The other voice you have as an online handmade business is through social media, more specifically Instagram. Instagram is a visual lifestyle app where, “People come to the app to be entertained, inspired and motivated, not to shop” (Engelmajer, 2020, p. 4). It is important that your photographs are not just product shots, “Instagram isn’t a shopping app – so don’t make

your profile look like a catalog where all I can see are your products on white background.” (Engelmajer, 2020, p. 3). Although it’s not a shopping app it’s a trail to your next sale, further explained by Engelmajer (2020):

Instead of selling people your product, sell them the lifestyle AROUND your products. Selling on Instagram comes from making real connections with users on the platform, making them feel connected to your brand, so you need to make your feed look less like a catalog and more like a magazine (p. 4)

Instagram ties in completely with your branding, by glancing at your Instagram feed people have an idea of not only what you sell, but also what your business is about and what type of person it is for.

What we are seeing here is that a handmade business is not just simply a product. A handmade business is something that has an ability to speak and to create a feeling within each person that it touches. It is something unique and should be treated in such a way. The most important aspect that needs to be established before anything else is the core identity. This concept is further explained by Ritchie (2018):

Every brand is built upon a core foundation: a reason the brand was created, a larger mission. Understanding your core identity is crucial if you want to successfully communicate who you are, what you do, and what you believe in—and, trust me, you do want to communicate these things (p. 2).

Everything stems from the core identity or the foundation so it must be solidified and firm or the rest will come crumbling down.

## Research Methodology

The research conducted for this project was done so through content analysis. The foundation upon which this business is laid is within incorporating sustainable practices. In order to do so, research was conducted throughout the sustainable community and within sustainable brands to fully understand what the problem is at large within the fashion industry and how to tackle part of it as a handcrafted business. Sustainability reaches across a span of issues and as a single person it can be quite difficult to grip. The further you dig into this trending topic of sustainability the more likely you are to become overwhelmed and very quickly I might add. Founder of Mate, Kayti O'Connell Carr spoke wise words in saying that it's best to start your focus in just one area that interests you. Further explain in an article with O'Boyle (2020):

Pick an area that interests you most and do that well, whether it's reducing your single use plastic consumption or shopping second-hand, it's not as overwhelming to just start somewhere. Don't think that you have to do it all at once (p. 2).

Waste is a major contributor to unsustainable fashion and also reaches far beyond clothing stretching into food, single use plastic, and the list goes on.

On Patagonia's website there is an article on Magpie's and Peacocks a non-profit dedicated to upcycling fabric to help eliminate textile waste. "Since launching in 2011, they've

diverted more than 145 tons of textile waste, upcycled more than 7,000 items and shown their repurposed creations at London Fashion Week” (Archana, 2018, p. 3). That’s a massive amount of waste saved and a pretty great achievement as a brand. The only issue that needs to be addressed is on the use and upcycling of polypropylene which is essentially plastic.

Sustainability is good for the planet but should also be good for us. What this brand has done with this polypropylene is create loads of masks for their consumer to buy. Most brands are using recycled fabrics made from plastic, which is something that I believe needs to be reconsidered. The intention is there, but the problem is that our skin is our largest organ. Our bodies just may not be the best place to put these recycled synthetics. It is very important that plastics go to use, but is there a better place for them other than on our skin and where we breath? Jordan Nodarse, founder of boyish hits on this in an interview with harper’s bazaar Davis (2020):

Polyester is made from oil and crazy chemicals and you put them on your largest organ - your skin, said Nodarse. It’s clearly bad for the environment. It’s so bad for the people that work there [in the factories]. After 20 years of working in one of these factories, you’re going to die. How many years do we have to wait to figure that out (p. 1).

Hoping back over to the founder of Mate, Kayti O’Connell Carr started her dress clean initiative that takes into consideration not only what’s good for the planet but also good for the



people living on it. Not many people realize that fabrics like polyester, spandex, and nylon are derived from petroleum, and are essentially plastics. “At MATE, we believe that what you put on your skin matters, and we want to connect the dots for consumers that our skin is our largest organ” (O’Boyle, 2020, p. 2). This is most certainly what is best for the concern around our clothing and what we put on our bodies, and that needs to be a top priority, at the least with clothing that makes direct contact with the most sensitive parts of our body. This extends to under garments, swimwear, active wear and those alike. Though Jordan Nodarse makes a great point about using fabrics from recycled plastic in an article with Davis (2019):

Companies that make recycled clothing from plastic bottles may seem the right choice, but they give off so many harmful plastic particles, he says, before explaining where these end up. Not just inside our fresh water, but inside our stomachs. For adults, it’s not that worrying because we’ve adapted to put alcohol into our bodies. Our bodies will reject it; it’s very resilient (Davis, 2019).

So, we can know for a fact that recycled plastic fabric do cause harm at some point at the very least from the loose fibers they shed that end up in our fresh water. The biggest thing to determine here is, how can we as a fashion industry step away from these plastic synthetic fibers all together and still find use for them so that they don’t end up in our waste?

Circular economy is another term that is repeated throughout the sustainable fashion community. A circular economy aims to reduce waste and a way of incorporating this is not just important within the construction process but also once the garment leaves the warehouse and falls into the customer's hands. To do this we need to bring value back to clothing. Fast fashion is cheap, and it has dominated the industry for far too long. It has created a mentality of underappreciation and overconsumption for clothing. "Fast fashion swept away a certain kind of commonsense know-how and respect surrounding our clothing, from how to sew on a button and mend a hole in favorite pair of jeans" (Cline, 2019, p. 1). Higher quality sustainable clothing at a costly price not only encourages consumers to buy less but it also places value on what is purchased which in turn creates less waste. The highest priced quality clothing in a closet is what stays there over time, it is taken care of and kept because it is valued. An article from *Good on You* supports this claim, *How to Make a Sustainable Wardrobe According to Our Grandparents*. "Clothes used to be viewed as a lifelong investment, so our grandparents would buy the highest quality they could afford, and only ever what they needed" (Ryan, 2020, p. 2). Buying quality investment pieces is a win-win in every situation; it's better for the buyer, the brand, and the environment. Majority of the time, when you buy cheap clothing there's a list of reasons why you don't like it, but it's "good enough" so you buy it anyway only to be disappointed and it ends up being removed from your closet because you realize you never really

liked it in the first place, “But when you start buying quality, you will end this eternal struggle of hating your closet. And you will be helping the planet as you do” (Ryan, 2020, p. 3).

### **Production and Analysis**

There are many things to be considered when starting a fashion related business, but it is long overdue that sustainability and responsibility be at the forefront of every decision that is made. This project really took focus on understanding the industry and its place in regard to a more sustainable industry at large. To do so it was important also to understand what an unsustainable industry looks like. Before sustainability came to be more popularized starting a clothing brand was much less difficult and nothing had to be thought of regarding fairly paid garment workers, or the natural qualities of the materials used. Now, every microscopic detail must be examined and responsibly chosen. It is important that fashion leads the way to a more circular economy, that is keeping things out of the landfills and back in rotation. This looks like recycled fabrics, upcycled clothing, buying second hand— whatever it takes to keep the clothing in rotation for as long as possible and biodegradable from that end point forward. This also means making sure that the garment is specially made to be taken apart at end of use to be upcycled into something new at its end of use. Taking steps to becoming a more circular economy is one of many ways to achieve a more sustainable industry. As for this project in particular, the sustainable focus is using natural fibers and non-toxic dyes as far as materials go. When speaking in terms of sustainable production, to begin, all products will be made by hand of the owner until growth occurs whereas production will stay within the U.S. to lower the carbon footprint and ensure fair pay. When and if production were ever to exist overseas all measures will be taken to ensure standards are being met and workers are being paid fairly. Packaging will

be kept to its very minimum eliminating the use of business cards or flyers and instead using the sense of smell to create a lasting experience for the customer. Many consumers have undervalued fashion because of low unsustainable price put forward by fast fashion brands, because of this the appreciation for well-made clothing has been lost and replaced by the best deal; it is for that reason that the social media content will be focused on exemplifying the process and behind the scenes to create more awareness of what goes into making a product. This will inform the customer of what goes into their product and in return not only create a better understanding of the industry but more of an appreciation for what they own and purchase in the future. Finally, this project includes a business plan in which sustainability and responsibility are top priority across all boards, this looks like a lean start up and slow and steady growth while sticking to handcrafted roots.

## **Conclusions**

The first limitation I faced was within what product I would be able to sell. My circumstances are very limiting and I needed to come up with a product that I could make in a short amount of time with little to no noise within the making process, while still creating a sophisticated quality end result. I first created many different products in areas I was interested in, as seen in Image 1-3. After much trial and error, I finally landed on a raw silk naturally dyed hand painted bandana, seen in Image 4. My next limitation was within sustainability and materials. After comparing and contrasting many opinions on the issue of sustainability within the fashion industry, the conclusion was that very few if any brands are truly sustainable. To be sustainable a brand mustn't be taking anything away from our environment, which does not reign true to produce a product. Sustainability is very complex and there are many areas of it that need to be considered. For someone starting out it is best to focus on one area of sustainability and

stem from there, as the subject can become quite overwhelming. I replace sustainability with responsibility, because in the end that is really what this is all about; creating responsibly made products. For my product in particular I chose to focus on zero waste. The ultimate goal within the material aspect of the product would be to use upcycled fabrics, unfortunately I was unable to source this material within the minimum order quantity of my budget so to begin I will be using natural fibers until the business has enough orders to fill this minimum order quantity. I had finally found the mill, The New Denim Project, which upcycled industry denim waste into new fabric, but again their MOQ is just not something I'm willing to risk at this time, but my hope to use them for future endeavors. Although I was unable to find recycled fabric in the minimum amount I needed the next best thing to lighten the impact on our environment is using a natural fiber which is easier to find in small amount. I sourced my fabric from Dharma trading a company that wholesales natural fiber fabrics and dyes with no MOQ. Although my product materials aren't upcycled I plan to apply zero waste into my business by using my scraps to create special limited pieces. I also sourced my package from eco envelope which is all recycled and uses a bio algae ink to print. I also plan to omit packaging materials and instead infuse a scent into the fabric and use a QR code that the customer can scan and receive a thank you video from myself, in order to still create a customer experience. As far as my business model I do intend to make it more personal which after the other part of my research I realized that is an important factor when it comes to handcrafted goods. Overall I am very happy with the outcome of my project, creating a product that has lessens the impact on our environment, requires a short amount of time to make, and holds quality and sophistication. In these three areas I have succeeded to the best

of my abilities and plan to continue researching into the use of recycled natural fiber materials for future products.

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## Appendix

Image 1 – Linen Apparel:



Image 2 – Home Decor:

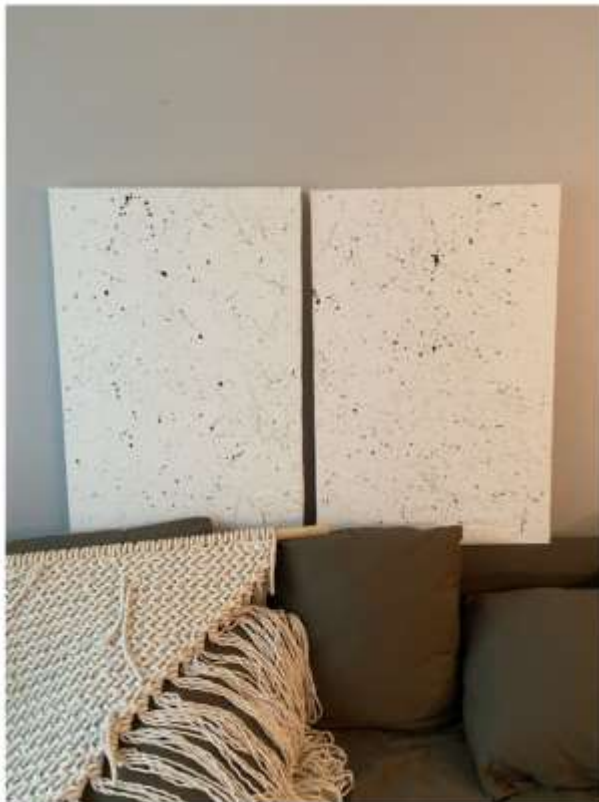


Image 3 – Silver Jewelry



Image 4 – Final Product



