4 SUCCESSFUL ENTREPRENEUR STORIES

1. Adi Dassler of Adidas

Some of today’s biggest brands started with humble beginnings, and no one embodies this better than Adidas founder Adolf “Adi” Dassler.

Dassler’s shoemaking career began in his mother’s washroom in a small town in Bavaria, Germany. It was there that Dassler began designing and cobbling shoes and decided he wanted to make the best possible sports shoe for athletes.

While there were plenty of shoemakers at the time, Dassler was committed to standing out in the market by gathering feedback from athletes about what they looked for in a shoe, what pain points could be improved on, and how they felt about his early models.

This feedback allowed Dassler to craft an athletic shoe that was highly valued by his customers and gave him legitimacy when he registered “Adi Dassler Adidas Sportschuhfabrik” in 1949 at 49 years old. It was that same year the first shoe with the soon-to-become-signature Adidas three stripes was registered.

Dassler’s vision to create the best shoe for athletes proved itself in 1954 when the German national football team won the World Cup final against the Hungarians—while wearing the new model of Adidas cleats.

“Their unbelievable victory would be heard around the world for decades to come,” Adidas states on its website, “and it made Adidas and its founder a household name on football pitches everywhere.”

Since then, Adidas has grown into an international brand known for high-quality athleticwear. Dassler’s story sheds light on the importance of listening to target customers about their dreams, needs, and pain points.

“Adi Dassler’s secret to success had an additional personal ingredient: He met with athletes, listened carefully to what they said, and constantly observed what can be improved or even invented to support their needs,” reads Adidas’s website. “The best of the best trusted Adidas and its founder from the beginning.”

2. Whitney Wolfe Herd of Bumble

After leaving dating app company Tinder and an abusive relationship in 2014, Whitney Wolfe Herd was inspired to create an empowering dating experience for women.

“For all the advances women had been making in workplaces and corridors of power, the gender dynamics of dating and romance still seemed so outdated,” Wolfe Herd writes on Bumble’s website. “I thought, ‘What if I could flip that on its head? What if women made the first move and sent the first message?’”

Wolfe Herd, along with dating app Badoo co-founder Andrey Andreev and former Tinder employees Chris Gulzcynski and Sarah Mick, designed a dating app that requires women to make the first move in heterosexual matches.

The brand took off—largely on college campuses—and the app reached 100,000 downloads in its first month.

As its user base grows, Wolfe Herd remains a strong advocate for gender equality and sexual harassment prevention, building in-app features that block hate speech and blur inappropriate images. Wolfe Herd and her team also lobbied the state of Texas—where the company is headquartered—to pass a law prohibiting the sending of unsolicited lewd photos, which passed in 2019.

“I’m more dedicated than ever to helping advance gender equality—and putting an end to the misogyny that still plagues society,” Wolfe Herd writes in a letter to Bumble users. She later adds, “I want nothing more than for your connections to be both meaningful and healthy.”

Wolfe Herd’s story serves as a reminder to use your own life for business inspiration and use a cause you care about to differentiate your product and brand in a saturated market.

3. Melanie Perkins of Canva

In 2007, Melanie Perkins was working a part-time job while studying in Perth, Australia, teaching students how to use desktop design software. The software was expensive, complex, and required a semester’s worth of instruction to learn how to use, prompting Perkins to ask, “Is there a way this could be simpler and less expensive?”

Perkins’s goal to create an affordable, simple, online design tool was originally turned down by over 100 investors—it wasn’t until three years into her pitching process that Canva received its first investment.

Perkins credits this investment to a shift in her pitching strategy: She began leading with the relatable problem Canva aims to solve.

“A lot of people can relate to going into something like Photoshop and being completely overwhelmed," Perkins said in an interview for Inc. "It's important to tell the story, because if your audience doesn't understand the problem, they won't understand the solution."

Today, 60 million customers use Canva to create designs across 190 countries.

Perkins’s story reflects the importance of effectively communicating the value of a business idea, as well as the tenacity and resilience required for entrepreneurial success.

4. Neil Blumenthal, Dave Gilboa, Andy Hunt, and Jeff Raider of Warby Parker

One example mentioned in Entrepreneurship Essentials is that of innovative online eyewear company Warby Parker. In 2008, Wharton MBA student Blumenthal lost his prescription eyeglasses. He was reluctant to purchase a new pair because they were so expensive. He also didn’t want to visit an eyeglass store.

The idea came to him in the middle of the night, and he emailed three friends—Gilboa, Hunt, and Raider—immediately: Why not start an online company to sell prescription glasses at an affordable price?

They set to work, and Warby Parker was poised to launch just after the four founders graduated with their MBA degrees in the spring of 2010—that is, until GQ reached out to Blumenthal about writing an article to be published on February 15 of that year. The founders sped up their process and launched Warby Parker’s website the same day the article was printed.

The article called Warby Parker “the Netflix of eyewear,” driving interested customers to the new site in droves. The founders’ one mistake was forgetting to add a “sold out” functionality to the website. The waitlist for Warby Parker eyewear grew to 20,000 people, and the company hit its first-year sales target in three weeks.

"It was this moment of panic but also a great opportunity for us to provide awesome customer service and write personalized emails to apologize and explain," Blumenthal says in an interview for Inc. "That really set the tone for how we would run customer service."

A few things set Warby Parker apart from the eyewear market at the time:

Its online model: A new way of delivering the product helped it break into a stagnant industry

Its affordable prices: A pair of Warby Parker frames with prescription lenses cost $95—much less expensive than other brands at the time

Its home try-on program: This enabled customers to try on five pairs of glasses and send back the pairs they didn’t want to purchase.

Its commitment to giving back: For every pair of glasses purchased, Warby Parker donated a pair to someone in need

Warby Parker donated its millionth pair of glasses in 2019 and continues to be an example of innovation in an existing market.