



COURTESY: NEWTON'S ARCHIVE



A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO MERCHANDISE BUSINESS

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"Because why not? The idea of merchandise business has always been something with potential, but only if you can provide quality product," says Maleena Dhrity Gomez from the other end of the phone call when I asked her why choose this particular line of entrepreneurship. She is the owner and content designer of Bad Girl Nation, a lifestyle brand that sells merchandise and stationery products.

Coming your way is a guide for everything you need to know before and after starting the business that sells daily life essentials. So brace yourselves, there's a lot to take in.

YOU HAVE TO BE GOOD

There is no other way to put it. Selling merchandise involves a lot of brainstorming and coming up with out-of-the-box ideas that you can put on your catalogue. It can be a fun animation design or even a simple text. You need to have the ability to come up with new ideas to go with your impressum as well as the technical resources to create the product. For Maleena it was about the knack for designing. "I always wanted to have my own line of products that featured my own designs. So I took a major step towards it. But then I realised there's an opportunity to expand the business and turn it into something more meaningful, not just for me but for an entire community."

To sum it up, the "It" factor needs to be there, in you or any of the team members. In the line of creative expression, your potential talent will play a major role in deciding how far down the line you can go.

MONEY MONEY MONEY

You will need money – that's the only way to put it bluntly. But it doesn't have to be a huge chunk of capital. A lot depends on what type of product you are willing to sell and how big of a deal you want your brand to be in future. Investing in a business is always a tricky business because you can never be sure of the outcome. So, it's always better to start off with a moderate investment; you can always add up to that if the future looks bright.

STANDING OUT FROM THE REST

"Your approach for differentiation should start by doing a market research on what products are available in the market, to find out if you have a possible substitute and then make decisions accordingly. For our candles, there aren't many local brands available that can offer the same products at a competitive price. We differentiated further by working on themes with our scents," said Aurni Tasnim, co-founder of Newton's Archive.

The game, however, changes when one is planning to launch a product that already has a strong presence in the market. Adiba Pervez Samantha of Numinous puts it this way, "Although most products are similar to the ones offered by competitors in the market, what sets winners apart are the variations in design, product extensions, and most importantly the ability to respond to what the customer wants and what they are likely to be interested in the future. Understanding customer demand is key and being able to customise or tweak designs/products to their liking guarantees their admiration and support."

HOW MANY PRODUCTS AT A TIME?

"Starting with one or two products is a safe bet. You don't want to bite off more than you can chew and ruin the entire thing before the business even takes off," insists Maleena. Initially, it's better to lock it down to a couple of options and get them into production. This way, you can spend more time focusing

on the development of a few hand-picked products instead of a handful. And in a start-up business, the first one is always a much more feasible scenario. Narrowing down the types of merchandise doesn't necessarily mean you are narrowing down your target group. It can have a niche or mass marketing, depending on the content/design you came up with for the product.

A TYPICAL DAY AT WORK

If you have ownership of a merchandise vendor, your day at work is sure to be different than a 9 to 5 job. How exactly does the day start and proceed as time goes on?

"A typical day entails classes for us because all of us are students. But in days where we dedicatedly work for Newton's Archive mostly starts with planning. Then we move on to making the candles. We call that our

'candling day'. Our activities are mostly spread through a range of time periods," shares Aurni.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CUSTOMER

Consider this scenario from the customer's point of view: They come back home from a long and hectic day at work, and want to put some caffeine in their veins. They take out a mug that's got a fun illustration of a car wheel and text that says "I am tired". Nothing fancy, but something to give them a good laugh.

Tiny details like this can make a big impact. As a vendor providing daily life essentials, you have to improvise and go the extra mile to make your presence felt in the customer's life. Try to come up with work that speak to the customer – something they can relate to. Don't impose your own sets of perspectives on to the customer, rather think about what the customer wants for a product.



COURTESY: NUMINOUS



COURTESY: BAD GIRL NATION

GETTING THE WORD OUT

"I gave away my entire first batch of products. All of them, for free. I presented them to my friends and family. This way I got some really honest feedback on my work and if they liked it, they referred it to other people," shares Maleena.

This is the perfect example of the age-old, simple-yet-effective recommendation strategy. You let your customers do the marketing for your product, and that too willingly.

Here, your first line of customers is helping you to get closer to more potential customers. For merchandise vendors, the initial period of struggle is mostly about getting the word out. Your product quality will determine the nature of response you receive. But first, you need a strategy on how to generate a buzz in the market.

Adiba talks about having a proper strategy in hand. She says, "Offers and discounts during relevant special days and occasions generally work but to ensure engagement, posts, and polls that get them to share their opinions show we care about them and that goes a long way. Irrelevant memes usually does the opposite and although you may get a few likes and laughs, you lose out on winning actual customers."

DEALING WITH CONFLICTS

Conflicts come with the job profile. This is something that one should always keep in mind. More importantly, one should know how to deal with such situations so that things don't go out of hand and partnerships don't go sour.

"I think it's always important to point out the bigger picture clearly right at the start and ensure they don't lose that vision even when things go south. If their values align, if they love what they do then even after disagreements take place, they will be sorted out just as quickly because they all want what's best for the business," says Adiba.

Aurni shares the same view on the matter of conflicts, "Conflicts are very common. At this point in life and business, we are quite mature about it and know how to make compromises to put the objectives of our business first before our own. We try to show each other our own side of logic. We go with whatever the majority is okay with. In an instance where it's a 50:50 scenario, we ask for third-party opinions. If it's still not effective enough, one party has to compromise or we completely ditch the idea."

FUTURE OF MERCH BUSINESS

"We've got an entire generation who are looking to do something on their own, develop their own sets of technical skills. This is a rather untapped area of human resource that hasn't exactly reached its full potential yet. Imagine employing them on a national scale project. Or on a more personal note, you can gift your friend with a self-made product on their birthday. To me, however, merchandise business can really help us generate interest from foreigners. We often buy products which are a reflection of their culture while we are travelling. I think it's about time things happened the other way around," says a rather optimistic Maleena.

With today's technology and resources at our disposal, think about how we can redefine the entire process of merchandising and entrepreneurship. And once you are done with the thinking, it's safe to say that you are ready to get to work.

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