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Starting Four Businesses My Last Semester of College

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Introduction:

Ecommerce has been the latest buzz in the entrepreneur's world. Now it is easier than ever to

start your own business and resources are free at our disposal. Entire companies can be run from

your laptop or even your smartphone. That being said, in this narrative, I describe my journey

creating four online businesses while taking 18 credits in college and working full-time as a staff

accountant. I'll take you through all the steps from start to finish and go through my own trial

and errors.

Ecommerce:

To begin, let's start with describing ecommerce. Shopping, entertainment, work, and education

are all being done on the internet. Just like credit cards replace the need for cash, e-commerce is

replacing the need for malls and shopping centers. Ecommerce has many different formats. You

can become a, sell various services, sell your own products, sell other people's products, and

more. In this essay, I talk about two types of ecommerce: print of demand and drop shipping.

These concepts are essentially the same and I will talk about them more in-depth later in the

essay, just know the coolest part of these methods are that they require zero inventory.

My Background:

My journey with drop shipping started 2 years ago. Around this time, drop shipping started to become a huge trend and therefore, exploded in popularity. I began learning about the drop shipping process using vague instructions from unconnected YouTube videos. A short while later, I jumped in and decided to create my first ecommerce store.

My store was based off my two interests at the time; sleep masks and vanity glasses. These products were odd but I loved these two because, in my opinion, they're useful, customizable, and I'd use them myself. The various, unconnected videos also recommended that I sell something lightweight, so shipping was cheaper. These niches were also less competitive in my opinion, but not backed by any extensive research. Ultimately, I liked these products because they were fun to me, and I thought I could sell them. After a few months of tinkering, and netting zero sales, I closed the store. My conclusion was a couple of things: that I did not know how to market my products, my margins were too low, the quality of my products was low, and my store looked unprofessional. Despite all this, I had a blast creating the store. I made it a semester long project and learned a ton in the process. In my sincere optimism, I viewed this store as a success and still do today.

Renewal:

After I closed my sleep mask and vanity glasses store, I put ecommerce aside. I didn't make any sales and paying $30.00 a month to keep my store open was becoming too costly for myself as a college kid. My attention switched to poker. Poker was my new get rich quick scheme. It was fun and I was good at it. The first two months of me turning 21 were spent going to the casino as often as I could. My first few sessions were profitable, but then I started to lose. Poker also

wasn't sustainable as I didn't have the funds to play at a high level. Not only that, the closest casino was six hours away. Through all this, I realized that the twelve hours of driving and time countless hours spent playing poker had an opportunity cost. Rather than being 6 hours away from home, I could be hanging out with friends, relaxing, and working on other things, like homework.

Then I was reminded why I got into ecommerce in the first place. That is; to make passive income. I wanted to set up a store and let the sales come in while I'm in class or getting my eight hours of sleep. This led to me creating the first store that brought me back to ecommerce; a poker apparel store. Like the sleep mask and vanity glasses store, I chose to go a route I was interested in. What made this store different is that I was selling hats and t-shirts which I thought were easier to sell, and I knew more about the niche I was working in since I was in love with poker. With this store, I dove in heads first.

Website:

I want to pause for a minute and talk about how I made the whole thing happen. I want to make this process as least foreign as possible and give the chance for my readers to replicate the journey if they want. I got started on Shopify, a subscription-based web hosting service that lets you create an online store with ease. The benefit of using Shopify is the compatibility it has with other ecommerce apps and their easy to use user interface that lets you create professional looking stores with zero knowledge of computer programming. Alternatives include WordPress and Wix, other websites making software that have templates to choose from. They are less intuitive than Shopify in terms of ecommerce and have less resources. The only downside is that it costs $30 a month to host your website with Shopify. Shopify is the best site for beginners because it gives you a good-looking website through minimal effort.

Hiring Freelancers:

Hiring freelancers is extremely easy. Hiring freelancers are important if you want to outsource processes. For myself, that is almost everything since I am not very creative, and I am willing to pay other people to do quality work. There are several websites that cultivate tons of great talent in one place but the one I recommend is called fiverr. Fiverr is the one stop shop for freelancing for all internet services. There are virtual assistants, web designers, graphic artists, and much more. Prices and quality range from minimal to very expensive. The choices are endless, and the process is very streamlined. I've used freelancers to make my website, design my logo, advise me on marketing,

Choosing a product:

Honestly, the biggest step for getting into ecommerce is choosing a product. I definitely learned this lesson the hard way. I love sleep masks and vanity glasses, but I got zero sales. I spent tons of time on the website and on marketing and my efforts were fruitless. My opinion had no effect on results. It wasn't until recently that I realized people buy things they need. No one wants junk. Even though I don't think vanity glasses or sleep masks are junk, they aren't things people need. It definitely hurts to look at some of the products that sell and question why my products don't sell. Nonetheless, choosing a product that solves a problem, ultimately, solving a need, is your best bet.

Choosing a product can be fun, challenging, and quite the experience. It is recommended that you choose a product in an industry that you are interested in. Fitness, dogs, nature, and cars are just a few examples of fun industries but the world is your oyster. To find inspiration on what

industries to go into, scroll amazon, social media, your house, or different forums. The best option would be to use one of your hobbies.

There are many methods of finding a product. One is by inventing it yourself, but the easiest way is to find a product already being drop shipped. You can do this by scrolling social media and seeing what other businesses are repeatedly advertising. If there are a lot of ads for a product then it is most likely generating a ton of sales. The best social media to look through are Instagram and Facebook. Most ecommerce sales are done on Instagram, seconded by Facebook.

Another way to find products is by scrolling through amazon and other retail websites. A useful tip is to write down a few items you are interested in and after searching for them in the search bar. Then select a product and scroll to the bottom and see what people are buying who bought that product. These are products that are being upselled to the buyer. Upselling is a marketing technique where websites will put other products related to the product you are buying to entice you to make multiple purchases. This increases the average dollar amount per order and makes marketing a more efficient cost.

Thirdly, the quickest way to find a product is to subscribe is a trending products website. You probably never heard of such a thing, but it is a business model that takes the leg work out of finding a product. It's amazing how there is a business for everything. They usually work off of a subscription basis and I personally pay a subscription to a website called Dropship-Spy. On this website, every other day "winning products" get posted that people can potentially sell. I've seen humorous apparel, fishing pole backpacks, and posture correctors. What is nice about Dropship-Spy is that they have free advertisements you can use for each product. They also post examples of other businesses advertising the product and ideas of who to target market. For example, if we are looking at a kitchen item, it will recommend a marketing campaign for people who also like a

certain cooking magazine. This option is like the fast food version of finding a product but comes with downsides. One problem is that the product is usually extremely saturated. Usually products that catch the attention of these sites have already been selling for weeks. This means that anyone potentially willing to buy the product has already bought the product or the most profitable marketing strategies are tapped out. Other marketing strategies are most likely too costly or have low return on investment. Secondly, a problem is that the products don't have much longevity. Hundreds if not thousands of people monitor these sites daily. There is high competition and if the product isn't saturated yet, it will be in a short matter of time. Some of the products are also short trend products which don't have longevity. Thirdly, the quality of these products is not guaranteed to be high. Plenty of businessmen and women don't care about what they sell to the consumer. If the product is sourced from overseas, the quality could be bad depending on the manufacturer.

Drop shipping:

We all know that a typical retailer buys inventory and sells it. Ecommerce can be different. More specifically, if you use the drop shipping method. Drop shipping is amazing because you can sell products with zero inventory. The way it works is the customer buys one of your products and once you receive the money, you use that money to buy the product from wherever you are sourcing your product from, either a manufacturer or another store. This is great because inventory costs are a huge barrier to entry for new entrepreneurs. Aside from inventory costs, online stores are much more affordable to start than brick and mortar businesses. Print-on-demand is another business model that follows the same strategy, but a clothing manufacturer will print your design on a shirt only when you make an order.

Four Businesses:

As mentioned in the beginning, I was able to start four businesses while working and going to school full time. These experiences helped me learn more about ecommerce, business, and spoiler alert; got me my first sale.

Poker Store:

The first store that got me back into ecommerce was this poker store. I started the store in the summer and it was largely incomplete. I put it on the back burner until around the time I created the other three stores in October 2019. I had the idea to create this store, when I realized I love poker. The closest casino is six hours away and playing poker could be quite expensive and a bit of a gamble. I thought a good way to commoditize my new passion was by creating poker themed apparel. For me this was a fun, safe, and a more efficient way to stay in the poker industry. I also thought that poker themed apparel was hard to come by and the niche has potential. This store would be ran using the print-on-demand business model.

I started the store by creating a store on shopify. It was extremely quick for me to get started since I had experience from my previous store. In 24 hours, I made a make-shift store that tangibly accomplished what I needed to do, but didn't look great. I thought about how my last store took me months to make and how expensive paying the monthly subscription fee was, and so, I decided that I would create another store using WordPress. Aside from being free to start, I wanted to see what WordPress was like. I thought I'd hire a web designer to create me a nice WordPress site and I'd have the site forever.

I decided to use Fiverr to find a web designer I like. In a few minutes of browsing I found someone with good reviews and ratings. I went with her services and with some communication on what I was looking for, she was off to the races making my website. While this was

happening, I was also contacting other people to create T-Shirt designs since I had no means of creating the designs myself. I found a couple designers I liked, contacted them all, and decided to go with a few cheap options. The biggest purchase I made was buying 100 T-shirt designs for $100. Within a week I had a rough draft of my website and T-shirt designs were coming in. I was also having someone create a logo for me but he was giving me mediocre results.

Ultimately, I received a final product for my logo, my website, and I had a total of 120 T-Shirt designs. I was excited because I had everything I needed and it looked good, better then I could imagine. Unfortunately, my imagination isn't that great because I had some problems. First of all, I think I accepted my website too early. It looked nice at first but the next day it looked worse. The website was certainly not optimized to look good on mobile which is a problem because most people will view my store on their phone. I also realized some functionalities did not work properly. I had an account creation feature on my website that did not work, and a live chat function that was buggy. I also realized that the website had a decent amount of work that had to be done from the back end because she did not add any content or import any of my products. All in all, part of the creative aspect of my website that I wanted to outsource wasn't included and I accepted too early because all these problems could have been fixed while my order was active. After this, I was less motivated and out $275 of my scarce money. I also realized that WordPress was the opposite of free. Yes, it is free to have a website using WordPress but if you want to have secure transactions, you have to pay a large security fee so you have protection from hackers. The entire project now cost me close to 800 bucks. I was not expecting this transition from shopify to be so much. I ended up quickly assembling some makeshift content and imported a few designs. I ran Facebook ads and with a $20 budget and gave up when I had zero sales a few days later. This store

In October, I was reinspired to pursue my store. Black Friday was coming up and I was getting back into the whole drop shipping shebang. While I was exploring drop shipping videos, I came across a youtuber who made tons of money using Instagram theme pages. These theme pages would post content relating to the niche 1-6 times a day and would accrue tons of followers. He would use these pages to advertise his products and later decided a better idea was to vertically integrate by cultivating his own theme pages. As he was going through the logistics, I was inspired to try it myself. Long story short, I created a theme page and let it become inactive after inspiration left. A short while later, a different theme page contacted me with a partnership interest! I'm like "Holy cow, this is crazy". His proposal was that he would advertise my store for me and take commission for every sale he got me. I told him I was interested but my store needed some work. We decided to postpone our partnership and that is where I am at with the store currently. I hired a web designer to remodel my store due to my old store becoming really slow for some unknown reason. He is fixing all the previous problems listed as well. That is where my poker store currently stands and despite have zero sales, I view this store as a success. I now have a partnership interest and more opportunities to look forward to in the future.

Halloween Store:

The next store was my first return to dropshipping. After watching an 18 year old self-made millionaire on youtube, he inspired me to rethink my strategy and think out of the box that I was limiting myself to. I ended up buying one of his courses for a little less then $300. In his course he gave step by step instructions to set up a shopify store and make it look professional enough to get some sales. He also recommended the entire store be a one product store so the first step was to choose a product. This is where I used dropship-spy. He is the one that introduced me to product finding websites. Anyway, I found a cool inflatable alien costume that had really good

margins. This product was great because it capitalized on a trend at the time. There were lots of jokes about people storming Area 51. Since Area 51 is famously rumored to house aliens, I thought an alien theme was perfect. I spent the next few days creating the store and it was complete in a short while. I contacted some Instagram theme pages and also had to create an ad for my product. The free advertisement on Drop-ship Spy was lousy so I spent a day or two trying to video edit my own commercial. To no avail, my accounting brain had zero creativity. By the time this all came together, it was October 15th and I was concerned I was too late. I was selling a costume after all and my window for being able to sell my product was limited to the time before Halloween. With that in mind, I decided to scrap the product and switch to a different product. I did not want my future efforts to become obsolete and I didn't want to rush. Although this store was a bust, I learned a lot and it helped me create my next two stores.

Marketing:

My marketing strategy was to contact Instagram theme pages to post content advertising my products. Instagram theme pages post content every day in a niche they are in. There are nature pages, animal pages, pet pages, fitness, and more. They generate tons of followers that like their content and that attract businesses to buy posts to advertise their products.

Kitchen Appliance Store:

Since I did not want to create another store that was going to have a short shelf-life, I thought the best thing to do was to create a theme store that could sell products related to each other. This would save me time and money on creating the website and paying expenses like the domain. I liked the idea of single product stores, but I thought having a product line would be efficient too. After scrolling through Dropship-Spy, I thought a good niche to jump into was kitchen products.

I thought it could be less saturated and I thought some of the products were useful. I did the same thing with my last store, created it using the guidelines described in the course, made my own logo, and everything else. For my product, I decided to go with a type of scissor gadget. Essentially it was a scissor with a sharp blade on top and cutting board as a bottom blade that made it easy to chop vegetables and other things. My plan was to use the free advertisement on Dropship-Spy, and I was ready to go. Everything was good except… I could not find influencers to shout-out my product. I searched for a while and was getting timed out on Instagram for "spamming" because I was contacting so many influencers. No one was interested. Most theme pages relating to food only did shout outs for restaurants. The closest influencer I found to giving me a shoutout specialized in french-fry content. He offered to do a 24-hour shoutout for $100 if the product made French fries or $300 for a shoutout that was not related to French fries. That was too expensive for me and so I put this store on hold and chose a different theme.

Pet Theme Store:

This brings me to how I got to my last store! At this point, I felt like an expert, but I also felt the redundancy in what I was doing. I was eager for a sale, but I also didn't expect anything too rewarding since I've been working for months with fruitless results. Still optimistic, I put in tons of time into this store, making it the best I could with my limited skills. My goal again was to create a theme store with a small product line except this time in the pet industry. I was excited because the niche was great. I have a dog, I love animals, and people love to spend money on their pets. Once everything was made, I got on instagram, and became relieved that there are tons of animal related theme pages. Even better, dog theme pages. I realized these theme pages are in the shout out business; in their bio, they were looking for people like me. This time, my plan was to see a leash that triples as a flashlight, water bowl, and a waste bag holder. This is something I

never seen before and something I would buy for my own house. I got this product from Dropship-Spy so I knew it was selling. The product had been listed for a couple weeks and so I was worried it might be too late to hop on the bandwagon. Nonetheless, I chose this product and went all in.

As mentioned, finding influencers was super easy so I quickly direct messaged the first couple pages I saw and was delighted that they were interested in working with me. These pages had thousands of followers. I went with three pages I found that had a total of a little less than 100k followers for $25 a day per shoutout. The leash cost me a little less than $10 and I was selling it for a little less than $25. This meant I had to make 2 sales per page to be profitable. They walk me through how the process works and now we have everything up and running. Now, I feel like I'm in a situation that is going somewhere, and it is surreal I am on the verge of getting some results.

Once in action, there wasn't much to do other than to proceed with my everyday life. I did not want to be crazy and check my shopify analytics every two seconds, so I made a rule to check after 24 hrs. All I did was verify that my ad was still posted on Instagram. It was a good thing that I did that because two of the pages had the wrong link to my website. I felt stupid and a little scammed because a couple hundred people have already seen my post. It was also a little frustrating that I missed the window where the post appears at the top of someone's feed. Nonetheless, it was corrected, and I learned my lesson, and I moved on.

Twenty-Four hours pass and I check my store and I get nothing. The fruits of my labor and money got me an astonishing zero sales! I was surprised, disappointed, but not discouraged since I've experienced this before. I thought I finally cracked the code, could call myself a drop shipping entrepreneur, but no, my time has not come. I was confused on how this was possible,

the pages had thousands of followers and I couldn't get one sale? Regardless, I wasn't ready to give up. After running the post, new opportunities had come up. Instagram theme pages are now contacting me! A dozen messages asking, "Would you like us to advertise for you?" "Here's what you get when you choose us." I was shocked that the tables have now turned. Of course, I thought this was a great time to continue. Instagram pages with more followers than previous were offering shout outs at cheaper rates. I ended up continuing with a bundle package for shoutouts on multiple accounts, totaling over a million followers, for $150.

This came across as an excellent deal with each page having at least 100K followers and costing me $15 each. Long story short, I had a decent amount of traffic to my store but no sales again. My hard head was not ready to give up.

I've heard that spending money on marketing was a relative concept, for instance, a company could spend $50k on marketing which seems a lot but that expensive could be making them $100k revenue. In this instance, spending more could be attributed to better results. I gave myself this leniency and decided to continue to spend money without any idea if I would see returns. I analyzed my website to see if there was something, I could do to make it more presentable and that was it. On about the 4th day of running Instagram advertising through shoutouts, I felt like an expert in communicating with these pages and figuring out which pages were more promising than others. I went with a new batch of pages that were a combined total of only around $65. This time to my surprise… I got a sale! I was so happy, I knew this day was coming, and the sale was verification that I did something right. It was validation for me despite being unprofitable.

The coolest thing about my sale is that I sold my leash to someone from Belgium. I would never have guessed my reach would be so far. The hard part was now to fulfill my order. Although the only thing I had to do was order the product and use the customer's shipping address, I could not

read their address. I didn't know where the street part of their address stopped and if the second pronoun was the city, state, or county. My worry was that I wasn't going to get the address right. All in All it seemed to not be an issue and I now have the drop shipping bug. My goal is to replicate my success here and make a profitable store next semester.

Things I learned:

Ecommerce is a great way to start and run a business, but it is definitely not easy. Ecommerce is always evolving, and you have to be quick to succeed. Due diligence is a must and there are tons of online resources at your disposal. I am the type of person that buys courses for everything, so I highly recommend that when you find someone you like. I learned that people buy things that they need that also solve a problem. Prior, I was strictly selling sleep masks, glasses, and T-Shirts. These products do not solve any problems and they evidently were a lot harder to sell since I think I put in double the effort in those stores. Going forward, I am strictly going to look for products that solve a problem. Ecommerce is as expensive as you want to make it, there are free alternatives to everything and the best way to succeed is by learning how to do things yourself like; video editing, web design, logo design, etc. I recommend partnering with someone else who you can share a skillset with. Lastly, I learned that ecommerce is fun. I think everyone should try it and it is a great way to learn about business. Thank you for reading and I hope you enjoyed my article!

, once again using the convenient to use Shopify platform. I felt. Within a week, I created a makeshift store that was somewhat decent. I definitely wasn't happy with the result and I already felt like I exercised every ounce of creatively left in my body. I also didn't like the fact that Shopify was hosting my website and I'd indefinitely have to pay $30 a month for the entire existence of my store. Therefore, I made a choice early on in this business development to switch to making my own website on WordPress. The perks of WordPress is that it is completely free. To solve the problem of having a low-quality website, I decided to hire a web designer.