

Publication: Mothership Online

Date: 11 July 2021

Headline: I started a business at 19 & failed epicly. So I tried again.

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By Mandy Chan

Fresh out of school at the age of 18, I knew next to nothing about creating products.

Deciding to take a gap year

While my peers were enjoying their 8-month break before university started, I was knee-deep in creating marketing materials and making sales to people who were at least twice my age in the three different start-ups that I had interned at.

As my break before university was nearing its end, I had to confirm my attendance at Singapore Management University in the coming academic year.

To everyone else, it might be a no-brainer: Go to university, get a corporate job and have a family before 30. It is a tried and tested path that our parents (and many others before us) have walked. But something told me that I needed to reconsider this path.

With the final thought of “What’s the worst thing that can happen?” I decided to hold off school for a whole year and pursue entrepreneurship full-time.

Lessons from getting cut off financially

I thought the gap year was my boldest move yet, but that was just the start.

During this time, my parents also cut me off financially as 1) they thought I should be responsible for my own choices and 2) they really wanted me to go to university ASAP.

(I remember once I was left with less than S\$20 in my bank account and couldn’t withdraw money from the ATM.)

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I initially felt quite upset and alone because it didn't seem like my family was supportive. But looking back, I'm grateful that they did what they did as it was through their tough love that I managed to work in different jobs, such as being a copywriter for a marketing agency, and that helped me pick up skills that I could eventually apply to my own startup as well.



The experience also taught me how precious each dollar was – so it made me super cautious when spending it on personal entertainment (things that I previously would never even give a second thought to) and on the business.

Prototyping, heading out to the streets & travelling to China alone

The initial idea for the bag came after realising that I was always leaving my toiletry bags in the shower whenever I went to the gym (I was carrying multiple bags around). I couldn't find any products in the market to meet this need, so I decided to create my own bag.

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But as I would learn, being young and inexperienced would prove to be a challenge at times.

The first 11 months of the year were spent in the prototyping lab without seeing any real results. I headed down to the streets and public bus stops alone, seeking validation from strangers about my obscure ideas. Once, I even stood on top of a pavement and shared about my product to people waiting for the shuttle bus.

I remember my hands trembling as I distributed the survey forms—which came back negative (talk about double heartbreak!).

Upon reflection and with the benefit of hindsight, I should have conducted focus group sessions with my target audience (instead of asking random strangers on the street). This method would also allow me to better understand their needs, rather than assume what their needs were.

Apart from gathering feedback, I also had to travel to China alone in search of factories, going on 14-hour train rides stuck in a cabin with five strangers. It was my first time travelling alone and the fear of not returning home kept me wide awake for 14 hours.

Once, the boss of the factory asked me “So, where’s your boss? and I had to awkwardly tell him that it was me.

Coping with failure

Despite my efforts, my first product of a bag on wheels turned out to be an epic failure.

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After countless attempts at making it work, the moulding cost still came up to a hefty S\$20,000. And from my street surveys, it seemed like people didn't want such a product either.

Having poured almost my entire life savings and my part-time earnings into it, I decided to let that idea go. It was so painful that I cooped myself up in my room and cried for several days.

I was, unfortunately, back to square one.

There were so many times like these that I wanted to throw in the towel and be just like everyone else—go to university, get a degree and get a job. But I didn't because of the promise to give my all for the gap year. And of course, to prove all the naysayers wrong. I wiped my tears off and got more driven than before. I must make it. I had to.

And then, finally—a breakthrough

I finally had a breakthrough in the last month of my gap year. After months of brainstorming and going back and forth with the manufacturer, I had something tangible in hand.

BOW was incorporated in 2016 and the sweat bag was launched that year.

It was surreal for me to actually hold my first product, to see it take form from the sketches and prototypes. I would always remember that feeling of accomplishment—which was far greater than any As that I scored in tests and exams.

My mentor challenged me to hit 1,000 bags in sales within 2 months.

To hit the first 1,000 bag sales, my co-founder and I went on to set up booths at various exhibitions and events like triathlon meets, basketball competitions, and even dragon boat events, to increase exposure for the product. Through these events, we could gather direct feedback from our target audience and eventually, improve on our product.

I had never felt so worn out (and unfit—but that's another story). Though it was tiring, it was a happy kind of exhaustion. It was also through these on-the-ground interactions that we gathered feedback for what was to come.

Eventually, the big break came when we met someone who really believed in BOW. Andrea Bell, master franchise of Anytime Fitness Singapore, took a chance on us.

Despite our shaky start with the product demos, and even incomplete prototypes to show for, Andrea believed in our vision as strongly as we did. Even till now, we are grateful to have her both as a partner and a friend.

After three months, I went back to the drawing board following the feedback I'd gathered about Sweat Bag — more trips to factories, more tears, but this time round, more laughter as well.

It was no longer about proving other people wrong. It was more about doing it because I really liked it.

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A long, bold journey ahead

Fast forward to 2021, we have sold over 50,000 products so far, with our product range expanding beyond just bags. Our crowdfunding on Kickstarter with our latest backpack, Pytho is currently 261 per cent funded in just five days.

Bow has also since rebranded to The Bold Company.

(We realised the wordplay for “bow” can be read as “bow down to me” or “bow and arrow”, which can be confusing. Also, you know something's up when you spend more time correcting someone about your brand name than your products.)

Today, we are not a bag company. We never aspired to be. We always wanted to be a platform that empowers people to take the leap of faith and be bold — very much like how we started this company.

And my journey continues. I’m not sure how things would turn out but one thing is for sure — that being bold was how I started my journey and being bold will be how I continue this venture.

Top photo courtesy of Mandy Chan.