

BERNADETTE SCHWERDT

SECRETS

OF THE NEW

ONLINE

ENTREPRENEURS

**HOW AUSTRALIA'S TOP DISRUPTORS
SCALE UP, SELL FAST
AND STAND OUT
AND HOW YOU CAN TOO**

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To my parents

Rosemary and David Schwerdt

To my family

Phil, Darcy, Cameron and Maddi

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Books written by Bernadette Schwerdt

Secrets of Online Entrepreneurs

How to Build an Online Business

Books ghostwritten or co-authored by Bernadette Schwerdt

How to Build a Billion Dollar Business by Radek Sali

Catch of the Decade by Gabby and Hezi Leibovich

How to Build a Business Others Want to Buy by Kobi Simmat

How to Manifest Success by Hilton Misso

The Boy with the Suitcase (Holocaust memoir) by Steven Krulis

Misa's Story (Holocaust memoir) by Misa Solar

Books edited or coached by Bernadette Schwerdt

Find. Build. Sell by Stephen Hunt

Earning Power by Roxanne Calder

Empowered by Aviv Palti

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bernadette Schwerdt is an award-winning Australian entrepreneur, author and speaker. She is the founder of the Australian School of Copywriting, the head copywriting tutor at the Australian Writers' Centre and is the country's leading copywriting and book writing coach.

She was a former senior account director and copywriter for global advertising agency Wunderman Cato Johnson and created award-winning campaigns for clients such as Apple, American Express, Optus and Colgate.

She has a Bachelor of Business in Marketing, is an accredited MBTI and NLP practitioner and has lectured in marketing and consumer psychology at RMIT, Swinburne and Victoria Universities.

She is the host of the popular podcast, *So You Want to Be a Copywriter*, a judge for the Australian Business Book Awards and a TEDx speaker. She is the author of two bestselling books about online entrepreneurship (*How to Build an Online Business* and *Secrets of Online Entrepreneurs*).

Bernadette was the ghost-writer of the award-winning *Catch of the Decade*, the business biography of the brothers behind Catch of the Day and Menulog, top business coach Kobi Simmat's *How to Build a Business Others Want to Buy*, and leading lawyer and philanthropist Hilton Misso's *How to Manifest Success* and the book editor for Stephen Hunt's *Find. Build. Sell*. She was the co-author of *How to Build a Billion Dollar Business* for Radek Sali, the former CEO of Swisse Wellness,

which won the *Australian Business Book Award* for Entrepreneurship. She also wrote the Holocaust memoirs for Steven Krulis and Misa Solar.

Prior to her business career, Bernadette studied acting at the Victorian College of the Arts and appeared in some of Australia's most iconic shows including *Neighbours*, *The Games*, *Round the Twist*, *Winners and Losers* and *Jack Irish*.

She is a trained yoga teacher and was the inaugural in-house mindfulness coach for the Carlton Football Club. She was named in the Top 50 Small Business Leaders in Australia. Her mother still doesn't know exactly what she does for a living.

INTRODUCTION

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I've interviewed dozens of founders for three books about online entrepreneurship and ghostwritten five more for entrepreneurs who have built multi-million-dollar companies. I've coached many others to write their books and spent two decades training more than 25 000 people in copywriting and online business through the Australian School of Copywriting and the Australian Writers' Centre. I've also worked as a public-speaking coach for senior executives across dozens of organisations including the Department of Premier and Cabinet, KPMG, NAB and Goldman Sachs.

Alongside that work, I've served as a judge for a range of online business awards and sat on the master judging panel for the Australian Business Book Awards. Earlier in my career, I worked in advertising and marketing, watching how commercial decisions were made when reputations and millions of dollars were on the line.

That breadth of experience has given me a bird's-eye view of how businesses are really built. I've seen the public success and the private struggle, what happens on camera and behind closed doors, and how entrepreneurship has evolved over the last thirty years.

I've distilled what these entrepreneurs shared with me, combined it with my own experience and insights, and translated it into practical tools you can use. Inside you'll find stories, frameworks, templates, scripts, business models, step-by-step guides and Q&As, alongside bite-sized nuggets of wisdom at the end of each chapter to help you put the ideas into action.

The content is both practical and tactical, inspirational and motivational. It explores the enduring emotional intelligence traits that show up in high-performing founders and reveals the modern tools, systems and techniques today's digital entrepreneurs use to turn attention into income.

Why these entrepreneurs?

In these pages you'll meet a wide array of business builders: billion-dollar founders who went all in, lifestyle entrepreneurs who chose small over scale, creators whose businesses run on content, not capital, and not-for-profits using online tools to change lives.

Some are pure online players; others run bricks-and-mortar businesses amplified by digital channels; some are hybrids. Each represents a different pathway into entrepreneurship.

For every founder who started small, another started big.

For every founder who partnered up, another said, 'Don't'.

For every founder who said 'Make a plan', another said 'Wing it'.

There is no single right way to build a business. The founders in these pages have taken different paths, made different choices and paid different prices. They're sharing what they learned so you can make better decisions sooner, avoid the most common traps, and choose the path that's right for you.

Why Australian entrepreneurs?

This book was written for Australian business owners, about Australian business owners, by an Australian business owner.

We all know the American stories of how those 18-year-old Silicon Valley brainiacs barely out of high school became multibillionaires by building apps that went nuts on the NASDAQ.

What we *don't* know are the stories of our homegrown heroes, the stories that tell us how a regular person like you or me from the Sutherland Shire or the Sunshine Coast or South Dandenong took on the big players and won. Those were the stories I wanted to read, so those are the stories I have chosen to tell.

I've had a deep interest in online business for two decades. I sold my first online copywriting course back in 2004 and still remember the thrill of seeing \$1000 drop into my account overnight from someone I'd never met. That moment changed how I saw business and I've been dedicated to learning more about it ever since.

It's why I wrote my first book, *Secrets of Online Entrepreneurs*, then my second, *How to Build an Online Business*, and now this one.

We are all online, some are more online than others. No matter where you are on your digital journey, you'll find something of value here.

Why now?

There's never been a better time to launch your entrepreneurial career. Now, more than ever, people are turning to entrepreneurship to build lives on their own terms: to choose how they work, when they work and with whom they work.

People say it's risky to start your own business, that it's much safer to stay where you are, in the job you're in. Once upon a time that would have been true, but not anymore.

With the advent of AI, global unrest and unstable economies, when so many are at the mercy of yet another restructure, redeployment or realignment, many are already living on the edge, wondering and waiting to find out if they have a job today, tomorrow, or ever again.

I would argue that being an entrepreneur is actually *safer* than working for any company right now, because when you know how to manifest something from nothing — which is what all great

entrepreneurs know how to do—you will never be at risk. Learning the skills of entrepreneurship is a powerful form of self-protection.

How to use this book

In order to understand *online* entrepreneurship, you first need to understand *entrepreneurship* itself—how founders think, make decisions, deal with failure, handle regret and manage stress.

The opening chapters explore the mindset, behaviours and decision-making patterns that consistently show up in founders who succeed. Once those foundations are in place, we show how to apply those same principles to modern platforms, marketing systems and social media strategies.

I've included examples of how entrepreneurs are using AI to spark ideas and uncover opportunities, but avoided turning this into a how-to guide. AI is moving too fast for static instructions to stay relevant.

The best way to learn AI isn't by reading about it, but by using it. Treat it like the smartest intern you've ever hired: fast and capable, but only as effective as the brief you give it.

The book is divided into five parts, each representing a different phase in the startup journey:

1. Momentum
2. Multipliers
3. Marketing
4. Management
5. Money.

This book offers a comprehensive view of what online entrepreneurship really looks like in Australia right now and how more than 35 of our

top online business owners run their operations. Read on and discover how to:

- start small but think big
- spot new trends, turn them into products and get them to market before others do
- increase your capacity for creativity and help you turn ideas into action
- convert passions into profit, do good and leave the world a better place
- pick the right business partners and test them out before going all in
- build a personal brand
- choose the right influencers to take your product to the world
- turn adversity into advantage, take on the trolls and never fear reading the comments again
- protect yourself from being ripped off, taken down, sued or sidelined
- deliver five-star experiences on a rock-bottom budget
- get paid to create content and publish with confidence
- use data to uncover opportunities, manage teams remotely and back your instinct with fact
- hire well, fire faster and create a workplace people love so much they won't want to leave
- measure the metrics that matter and avoid random acts of marketing
- find investors, prepare your business for sale and leave money on the table for all.

This is not a fluffy 'manifest your way to millions' book, where you get to 'dream, believe and breathe' your way to success. These

entrepreneurs worked and worried, toiled and troubled, all the way to the top. They got trolled, sued, copied, cancelled, blindsided, burnt out, blown off, caught up and caught out — and yet they *just kept going*.

Writing this book made one thing clear: while the tools and platforms change, the personal qualities that lead to success don't. Every entrepreneur here shared the same defining trait — persistence. They kept going when it would have been easier to quit. So, on that note, why don't we do the same and *just get going*? Happy reading and enjoy the ride.

ENTREPRENEURS AND EXPERTS FEATURED IN THE BOOK

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Janine Allis	Boost Juice
Shaun Wilson	Bondi Sands
Radek Sali	Swisse Wellness, Wanderlust, Light Warrior
Matt Rockman	Seek
Adam Schwab	Luxury Escapes
Scott Neeson	20th Century Fox Films, Cambodian Children's Fund
Ronni Kahn AO	OzHarvest
George Calombaris	<i>MasterChef</i> , Culinary Wonderland
Kirsten Tibballs	<i>MasterChef</i> , Savour Chocolate & Patisserie School
Gabby Leibovich	Catch.com.au, Menulog, Fingertip
Tim Fung	Airtasker
Carla Oates	The Beauty Chef
Meahan Callaghan	Seek, Afterpay, Mecca, Foxtel
Kobi Simmat	Best Practice.biz
Elise McCann & Lucy Durack	Actors; Hey Lemonade app
Kate Halfpenny	<i>The Age</i> columnist and author
Glen James	Financial influencer

SECRETS OF THE NEW ONLINE ENTREPRENEURS

Kevin Allocca	YouTube
Austin & Lachlan Macfarlane	YouTube influencers
Vince Lebon	Rollie Nation
Nat Kringoudis	Women's health influencer
Adele Samus	Actor and influencer
Nicky Sparshott	Unilever, T2, Procter & Gamble
Valerie Khoo	Australian Writers' Centre
Martin Hosking	Redbubble, LookSmart, McKinsey
Stephen Hunt	Hunt Hospitality
Hilton Misso	Lawyer, philanthropist
Dylan Schwerdt	Pokémon card trader
Kat Moses	MGMT
Pru Corrigan	One Daydream
Melissa Blight	Aster & Oak
Ben Fewtrell	DigiTLC, MaxMyProfit
Michael Potas	Boost Design
Jay Gardam	Wynroy Hot Yoga
Michael Flanderka	Data Interactive

PART 1

MOMENTUM

Starting a business is hard. Knowing what you want from it is even harder.

Do you want a scalable business you can list on the stock exchange for millions or billions, or do you want a lifestyle business that gives you time with the family, a fixed schedule and the freedom to work when and where you want?

Anything is possible. It just comes down to what you want, why you want it and how hard you're willing to work for it. Most successful entrepreneurs didn't have their future mapped out from day one. They started, pivoted and worked it out as they went. Action creates traction, and traction leaves clues. As momentum builds, you will see what works and what doesn't; what energises you and what drains you. The secret of success is to follow your instinct, stay curious and move forward even if you don't know exactly where you're going, and let the results of those actions inform your next move.

1

KNOW YOURSELF

Many entrepreneurs stumbled their way into a business because they were good at something, or an opportunity appeared and they ran with it.

Five or 10 years later, they 'wake up' and realise the life they've built isn't the one they wanted. Their finances, identity and obligations are now tethered to a business they never consciously designed.

Before you set out on your entrepreneurial journey, take a moment to answer these two questions:

What kind of life do you want to live?

What are you prepared to trade to get it?

Everything has a cost, so it's wise to understand the price before you're forced to pay it.

If you want the waterfront mansion, the first-class flights and the boat on Sydney Harbour, you'll need to build a business that can scale. That may mean years of intense output, uncomfortable risks and a level of stress and debt most people can't endure.

If you want a laid-back life, control over your diary and time with the kids, you can build a smaller business and still live well. You may never get the superyacht or the private island, but if those things weren't important to you in the first place, nothing has been lost.

There will still be stress, but it will be proportionate, and you (might) sleep better at night.

There are pros and cons to going big or going small. Both paths are valid, but the price tags for each are very different.

What really matters is *knowing yourself*. What does success mean to you? Can you back yourself when things get hard? What does ‘enough’ mean to you?

Knowing who you are and what pressure you can cope with is an important indicator of the size and scale of business you might want to build.

Going big has an upside — and a downside

Matt Rockman, one of the three co-founders of the online juggernaut Seek, saw up close what it took to launch and list a multi-billion-dollar business. As the sales and marketing director, he was tasked with finding the clients and generating revenue.

‘I worked around 80 to 100 hours a week for years. My wife called herself the Seek widow because I was always away and she had to go to all our social occasions on her own. She understood, but I don’t think she loved it.’

The travel was relentless. ‘When we listed, we had over 10000 clients across Australia and Europe. The diaries were in control of me. That’s what the job demanded.’

Once he’d hit his goal of listing and the business was flying, it was time to take stock.

‘At the end, I felt it was a choice between Seek or my family. I was tired. My lifestyle wasn’t healthy and neither was I. Listing gave me the financial freedom to make a choice. I could have stayed on in a pretty burnt-out way, or choose my family and reset. I chose the latter.’

Janine Allis, founder of Boost Juice and Retail Zoo, faced a similar challenge. She remembers that period vividly.

‘When Boost Juice began, the business took over every corner of my life. We were surrounded by work 24 hours a day, seven days a week,’ she said. ‘If you’re not passionate about what you do, that level of commitment gets tiring very quickly.’

The pressure was relentless. ‘For the first 12 months, I was forever on a plane to visit our store in Adelaide,’ she said. At home, she was raising three little kids, ‘the youngest being not even one year old’, and juggling the demands of a startup that was growing faster than expected. ‘It felt like we were living and breathing Boost every minute,’ she said.

Things ramped up when the business expanded overseas.

‘I was obsessed with getting the international side of the business up and running, but this kept me away from my family for over three months a year. My work-life balance pendulum was angling all the way to the work side. I had developed into a strong, confident businessperson with significant knowledge on how to start a business, but I was losing touch with my husband and family.’

Be careful what you wish for

The daily grind of going big can wear you down. Here’s what a typical day in the life of online retailer Catch.com founder Gabby Leibovich looked like.

‘I’d wake up, check my emails, drive to the office, and be at my desk by 8 am. I’d solve the problems from the night before, attend a supplier meeting at 9 am, juggle a thousand different balls throughout the morning and eat a hurried lunch at my desk. I’d have more meetings with suppliers in the afternoon, head home at 8 pm, have a quick

dinner, kiss the kids goodnight, say hello to my wife, hit the desk for another few hours, answer more emails, get to bed around midnight, read an industry journal for a few minutes, fall asleep, and then get up and do it all again the next day.'

It intensified when he and his brother, Hezi, his co-founder, prepared to list on the stock exchange.

'An international roadshow to woo the investment community sounds like fun. It wasn't. We travelled to Melbourne, Sydney, Auckland and Hong Kong and attended 70 meetings in three countries over seven days — that's 10 meetings a day — saying pretty much the same thing, hour after hour. It was one of the hardest weeks of my life.'

Gabby was so hyped at the start of the roadshow that he even went shopping and bought a fancy suit and tie for the week ahead. 'I wore my nice new outfit on day one and day two, but by day three I'd had enough and just went to the meetings unshaven and dressed in jeans and my black T-shirt with a big Catch logo. I was over it.'

The listing didn't go ahead because the market was too choppy. In retrospect, Gabby was glad.

'We were disappointed because we'd spent hundreds of hours preparing for it and were excited to see how far we could take it, but we were secretly pleased the decision to not list had been taken out of our hands.'

The truth was they never wanted to be at the helm of a publicly listed company.

'We don't always do things in the boring, corporate way. We would have hated having to get approval to do anything and put up with the scrutiny that occurs within a public company.'

They knew who they were and what they valued. Getting that close to going public was a blessing because it showed them what leading a listed entity would be like, and how little they would have enjoyed it. Be careful what you wish for ... or what you list for.

The price of admission

Whenever Radek Sali faced a major decision, he'd ask a simple question: 'What's the worst that can happen?' He leaned on it early in his career when he was offered a life-changing opportunity to buy into Swisse Wellness. The price tag? \$14 million. At the time he was their well-paid CEO, but he wasn't in a position to casually borrow an eight-figure sum.

'I could have declined the offer and watched someone else buy in,' he said, 'or I could back myself, purchase the shares and just get cracking on making the company as valuable as I knew it could be.'

Fourteen million dollars was a heavy load at any age, let alone at 34. He went home, discussed it with Helen, his wife and trusted confidant, and asked the only question that mattered: 'What's the worst that can happen?'

'If the business fails,' he said, 'we'll be up for \$14 million and be bankrupt. We'll have to live in a caravan in the carpark at Byron Bay beach.'

Helen was undeterred. 'So long as I'm with you, I don't mind where we are.'

He had his answer. He borrowed the money, bought the shares and 10 years later, after an immense amount of work, sold the business for \$2.1 billion. They're still in the Byron Bay region, but not in a caravan, or the carpark.

'What's the worst that can happen?' remains his decision-making compass. If you can live with the consequence, go for it. If you can't, walk away.

The real question that sits beneath these other bigger questions is:

- Do you back yourself?
- Do you believe you can hold the downside long enough to reach the upside?

- Do you have sufficient will and skill to see the concept through to completion?

Only you can decide that.

The hidden costs of high-level leadership

Few can speak about being a CEO of a big company with as much authority as Nicky Sparshott. She has led at the highest levels: global chief of transformation for Unilever, CEO of Unilever Australia and New Zealand, Asia-Pacific category head, and board member for ASX-listed companies. She's worked across international markets, led billion-dollar portfolios and chaired major advisory groups. Her résumé gives her rare authority to speak about the costs of leadership and the parts of the CEO job most people never see.

'The real weight isn't the decisions themselves but the emotional load behind them: knowing every call affects people's livelihoods, families and futures. Even as a leader who shares openly with her team, you can never fully offload that weight — because the role requires you to project confidence without arrogance, and vulnerability without instability.'

It's a role that demands constant composure, even when, in her words, you are in a 'semi-constant state of fear' or have moments where you need to leave the boardroom for a few moments to collect your thoughts and find space to breathe.

The pressure is relentless and rarely acknowledged. She's not looking for sympathy, she loves what she does — but few people get to see behind the mask, and the invisible weight of making decisions that affect thousands of people.

The aftermath of admission

There aren't many who talk openly about the serious side-effects that running a big business can have on your health.

When Swisse was sold to Biostime, Radek Sali had a serious physical reaction to the accumulated strain.

'After I had achieved a large chunk of what I'd set out to achieve, I had the freedom to do what I wanted, when I wanted and with whom I wanted. But for every action, there is a reaction. When the craziness stopped, I developed a condition called acute stress disorder, a mental health issue that usually occurs months after experiencing a traumatic event, but can also show up many years later. For me, the effects showed up three or four years after I left Swisse. The trauma affected me in unpredictable ways: I'd play out worst-case thoughts, had trouble sleeping, felt dizzy under pressure, and, eventually, had a panic attack so intense I thought it was a heart attack.'

With support from his wife Helen, his meditation teacher Jonni Pollard, and a return to exercise, rest and good food, he slowly recovered. But the reality remains true: living life at a fast pace and under high pressure has consequences.

High flyers

One of the trade-offs to success is that it makes you visible, and visibility invites judgement. In Australia, outsized success often invites resentment too. If you want to build something meaningful, you will need a thick skin to handle both the admiration and contempt that comes with it. You rarely get one without the other. Having great wealth can sometimes bring out the worst in people, especially in Australia where we love to lop our tall poppies down.

When Seek co-founder Matt Rockman drove his Ferrari down Chapel Street in Melbourne, someone yelled, 'Wanker!'

When he drove a similar sports car down Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, someone yelled, 'I want to work for you!'

Be prepared to cop the flak that comes with success. As Jean Sibelius once put it, 'Pay no attention to what the critics say. A statue has never been erected in honour of a critic.' Criticism is often the price of visibility, and it's rarely paid by those who play small.

The pros of going big

Despite the drawbacks of going big, there are lots of upsides. Having the capacity to make a big impact and leave a legacy are just a few of them.

When you choose to build something big, you're not just growing revenue, you're growing people. Scale creates jobs, launches careers and gives talented individuals a place to find their footing.

Gabby Leibovich saw this firsthand.

'Pretty much every leader of every marketplace in Australia right now is an ex-Catch person: whether it's Myer or Freedom or Kogan, our people are everywhere. It gives me so much pleasure to see all those entrepreneurs now leading very successful businesses, both locally and all around the world.'

Wealth also lets you have a community impact. You can fund ideas, and support causes that matter to you.

Radek Sali's Light Warrior Impact Fund is doing that now. It's a purpose-driven investment group built on the idea that profits should also progress society. It invests in socially responsible and environmentally conscious ventures, and channels a portion of returns into its not-for-profit arm, Lightfolk Foundation. He's using wealth to support vulnerable communities and give back in a way that respects people and the planet.

Martin Hosking used the wealth he created at LookSmart, one of the earliest Australian tech successes, and later through Aconex and Redbubble, the artists' online marketplace, to fund something far more enduring than another venture. Through the Three Springs Foundation, the family entity he co-founded, Martin directed major philanthropic support to establish centres for contemplative studies and consciousness research at Melbourne and Monash universities. His view is that innovation isn't just technological, it's human; that societies advance when people develop greater self-understanding, emotional capacity and connection to the world around them. By backing academic research and teaching in these fields, he's investing in the kind of long-term human development that outlives any single company.

Going big isn't just about what you build; it's about what you enable in others: the people you empower, the ideas you fund, the change you create and, ultimately, the legacy you leave.

The pros and cons of a lifestyle business

Now that you've seen the upside and the costs of going big, it's worth examining what a small — or 'lifestyle' — business can offer, because for many online founders, big is not necessarily better.

Valerie Khoo, the founder of the Australian Writers' Centre, created a lifestyle business that gave her the best of all worlds.

She was a trained accountant working for the big corporates but took the leap into journalism because she was good with words and loved to tell stories.

'I was a freelance writer, working hard and doing well. I was good at what I did, but I was tired of trading money for hours. I'd been working 50 hours a week writing content for a charity, and I couldn't do everything I wanted to get done. That's when I thought: Why don't I *teach* writing? I'm good at deconstructing words, people need help unlocking their potential and I love helping people be the best they can be.'

She offered her first course in 2005. That did well, so she ran another, and then another. 'I took it online in 2007 because I could see that people wanted to come but they couldn't physically get to the classroom.'

Valerie now runs a lean operation with just 10 staff yet offers 75 online courses a year and trains thousands of students, many of whom have become household names in the literary world. The digital systems she set up enables her to scale up yet still control her business without having to engage a large team. She invests in the tech side of the business with dashboards and real-time data systems, knows at a glance what's selling and what's not, and reads every piece of feedback so she can be responsive to what her students are telling her. 'If something needs fixing, it gets done instantly.'

This systematic approach gives her the time and space to do other things. The trouble was, she didn't know what they were. Her friends said, 'Get a hobby.' She said, 'I don't have one.' They said, 'Find one.'

'So, I went looking. I experimented and did lots of short courses in woodwork, crochet and craft, and found I loved oil painting. I loved it so much that I started to put financial targets on how much I could sell. I reached those targets, but realised that I was doing it for the wrong reason. It took the fun out of it, so I stopped setting goals and just did what I loved.'

Making one-off artworks was her passion but she also realised that, like training courses, you are limited by the number of hours you can put in, so she licensed her artwork for commercial sale and found another way to generate passive income.

'My designs now appear on fabric, wallpaper, jigsaw puzzles and greeting cards, and I get royalties. It's nice to see them out in the world because it means more people get to experience them.'

Valerie's core online business is profitable, nimble and creatively satisfying and gives her the time and space to pursue her offline passion.

That's not to say a lifestyle business isn't without its issues. It's often portrayed as calm, balanced and wholesome. It can be all that, but it can still be stressful as Melissa Blight discovered when she set up her home-based clothing business.

Small can still be stressful

Melissa Blight from Aster & Oak runs a purpose-led online children's clothing brand. She's got 93 000 Instagram followers, but a tiny team. She should feel more relaxed than she does.

'There's a lot of stress, sometimes ridiculous amounts, where I find myself questioning every day what on earth I'm doing with my life! Running your own business means you are *on* 24/7. The pressure never really stops. There are constant decisions, deadlines and challenges to face, and if someone is sick or if a supplier falls over, or if anything goes wrong, it's all on me.'

The stress is balanced by the upsides.

'I get to be present for my kids in ways a traditional 9 to 5 wouldn't allow, and I can step back when I really need to. Yes, it makes life busier and more consuming, but it also gives me flexibility that I value deeply.'

She is working towards creating a better work-life balance and reminding herself of the bigger picture — that the business exists to support her family and bring joy to her customers, not the other way around.

'When I can step outside, ground myself in nature, or just take a moment with my kids, it helps me zoom out and remember why I started in the first place.'

If you value freedom, autonomy and presence more than scale, small might be the best way to go.

Go super small

Dylan Schwerdt, 32, was on a footy trip in New Orleans when he saw something in the window of a little hobby store that stopped him in his tracks. It was a pack of Pokémon cards, the same vintage cards he'd collected as a kid, selling for nearly half the price he'd seen in Australia.

He didn't think too much of it. He just laughed with a mate about how cheap they were and kept moving.

Six months later he broke his arm playing footy and was stuck at home, bored and unable to play. He started browsing Pokémon card prices online and realised the gap he'd seen in the United States wasn't a one-off situation. US sellers were listing cards for up to 50 per cent less than those in Australia. He'd been playing with these cards for years and still knew what each card was worth — and that price gap ignited an idea: buy in the United States, sell in Australia and pocket the difference. Some call it arbitrage. He called it card-bitrage.

Dylan keeps the whole operation simple. He sources cards from the United States, then sells them through two channels: eBay and Instagram. eBay gives him reach: a steady flow of collectors searching for specific cards, with built-in bidding and buyer protection. Instagram gives him speed: he posts a photo of the card, names a price and regular buyers DM him within minutes.

What began as a way to make an extra hundred dollars a week soon grew into a tidy side-hustle that slotted neatly around his banking job. He makes over \$100 000 a year from the cards and works about 10 hours a week with no staff, no website, no branding, no office and no pressure.

'I mostly do it all while I'm watching TV.' It's just a small, nimble venture that funds itself, and lets him indulge in a little nostalgia for days gone by.

* * *

As you follow the founders' journeys, keep one thought in mind: almost every business, whether it's a lifestyle venture or a global brand, began in the same way: as a small idea, a problem that needed solving, an offhand comment or a moment of frustration; something they saw, heard or felt that they couldn't forget. When in doubt about what to do next, follow the whispers, take action and see where it leads you.

Nuggets of wisdom

- ▶ Identify the worst that could happen; assess whether you can live with that and then make your decision.
- ▶ If you want an international business, be prepared for lots of travel, time away from home, hotel food and jet lag.
- ▶ Money will solve a lot of problems, but it will create problems too. Be careful what you wish for.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO TURN A SIMPLE IDEA INTO A MILLION-DOLLAR ONLINE BUSINESS?

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From kitchen benches and spare bedrooms to billion-dollar valuations, these founders share the origin stories and strategic decisions that transformed small ideas into category-defining enterprises. Structured around a powerful five-part framework, this book delivers practical tips, tools and techniques for building and scaling in today's fast-moving digital economy.

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