

The Rise of

THE SWIMWEAR START-UP

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, I'VE NOTICED A BIG RISE IN THE NUMBER OF PEOPLE WHO WANT TO START THEIR OWN SWIMWEAR BRAND AND SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF COVID-19, THE NUMBER HAS INCREASED EVEN FURTHER. I CHOSE THE WORD 'PEOPLE' CAREFULLY. FOR THE MOST PART, THE RISE I'VE SEEN IS AMONGST INDIVIDUALS, RATHER THAN ESTABLISHED BUSINESSES LOOKING TO BRANCH OUT OR EXPAND.

The trend I've noticed is amongst everyday people, looking to move out of their 9-5 and into a new industry – in many cases, completely new. The majority of the people I encounter are new to both swimwear and clothing manufacture in general. Speaking to other professionals and service providers in the swimwear industry, they've seen the upswing too. Sample studios and pattern makers are booked weeks, often months, in advance and getting an increasing number of enquiries from small brands who want to trial a few styles with low units and see how things progress. One manufacturer even told me they had seen requests for small orders increase by as much as 300% in the past year and new customers are waitlisted 3 months in advance.

The good news is, this area of the market – small swimwear brands – offers a wealth of opportunity in my opinion. Even during the pandemic, when so many suppliers sadly lost their work, the small brands I support were advertising for pattern makers and sewing machinists regularly and at times it was hard to keep on top of the demand for these services. Therefore, if you're a factory or supplier who typically only offers high minimum order quantities, it's worth considering the amount of orders this is costing you and whether a lower MOQ would be more profitable in today's economy. The argument for smaller orders becomes even stronger when you couple the needs of small brands with increasing sustainability values. Simply put, sustainable brands want to minimise their waste, so stock levels are extremely efficiently monitored. For this rapidly growing segment of the market, 1000+ unit MOQs aren't going to be a viable option and I believe we will see more suppliers shifting towards lower MOQs to meet demand. If you're one of those suppliers with a four-figure minimum, now is the time to be doing the maths on what it'll cost to reduce that and establish if a high minimum is still serving your business.

If you're a supplier wanting to make the transition and appeal to smaller brands, there's a few things you need to consider. First and foremost, fabric and trim sourcing can be tricky because of minimums issues. A workaround is by offering a core selection of fabrics that have broad appeal, therefore you can split one fabric order across several brands. In order to do this successfully, suppliers must take on a new role and be trend aware, keeping up to date with the fabric, print and colour trends in their area of the industry. The second consideration is customer service. As a lot of the people entering this market are new to the industry, they tend to come into it with the same service expectations that you would get at a retail

store. This isn't the type of service factories and suppliers typically offer. In fact, many small brands I speak to are shocked by the communication they have with suppliers and have told me this is taken into consideration when choosing a supplier to proceed with. The fashion industry is fast moving and time is always against us, however I believe that if suppliers are willing to put a little more time into nurturing prospective customers, it can be rewarding. Being helpful and forthcoming with information can help to build trust with the customer, which is a key factor in many people's decision making process. For countless small brands, the founder is putting all of their personal savings on the line and they'll want to be confident the money is going into safe hands.

Another key development to note is that often small start-up brands want to work locally and support their communities. In honesty, due to pricing they're not always able to do that and some do move their sampling and production to Asia, but I've noticed a big increase in interest for locally made products, both on the brand and consumer side. This is on a global scale - I work with many international brands and there seems to be an increased interest in locally made – wherever local is to you. The global pandemic appears to have brought communities closer together and we've seen a revival in the mindset of supporting the people and economy around us. It's fascinating that in this digital age, when we can communicate with anyone, anywhere, within seconds, we're choosing to connect with those around us more and more. It'll be interesting to see if it's simply a case of 'Zoom fatigue' caused by lockdown, or more of a long term shift. If you're not already a part of a local entrepreneurship group or taking part in networking events, now is a great time to start. If you're unsure how to find such events, you'll find many local councils and governing bodies are keen to develop local businesses and offer free and/or low cost networking and training events, both in person and online.

For the swimwear start-ups themselves, opportunity is there for them too. In the previous issue of the Swimwear Yearbook I interviewed two start-ups who launched during the pandemic. Both have gone from strength to strength, in arguably one of the toughest years for business. The good news is, this is something I've seen happen for many brands over the past year, so for those willing to put in the time, success as a small swimwear brand is possible. If you're reading this while setting up your swimwear brand, there's three things that I believe make a big impact on success as a beachwear start-up.



First is that you have to offer a unique angle. You don't need to reinvent the wheel, but offering something for a specific target customer, a collection that's well thought through and tailored to their needs, can go a long way. The rise of the conscious consumer is something that's talked about often and a lot of brands want to work sustainably, which in my opinion is the right thing to do, but don't rely on that as your unique selling point. I get emails almost daily from people who want to start a sustainable swimwear brand, so it's no longer a concept that will set you apart. Sure, you can be a sustainable swimwear brand, but be prepared to put your own spin on it.

Secondly, if you've never created a swimwear collection, it's important to know that the manufacturing journey won't be one of overnight success. A lot of the new brands I work with are surprised by how long the sample development process takes, so make sure that you're being realistic about when you want to launch. The sampling does take time, but it's not something that should be skipped. Although reducing samples might save you some time and money short term, in the long run the sample process is worth it. Putting an untested product into market is risky and can lead to having a warehouse of stock that you can't sell. Taking the time to perfect the fit and design is time well spent.

The final tip I can give you as a swimwear start-up is about marketing. Too many brands leave this until the last minute. They focus all of their attention on developing the product and don't spend time and money on creating the brand itself and building a following of people who are excited to buy at the launch. In my opinion, it's a case of the sooner the better when it comes to marketing. Getting your brand out there takes time, so the earlier you can start engaging with potential customers the better. Take them on the entrepreneurial journey with you, show them they can trust you to deliver great product and encourage them to support you and your business.

Whether you're a new brand or an established one, it's important to stay on top of the current climate and develop as a company. My biggest takeaway from 2020-21 is that anything can happen, and as business owners we need to be ready for change and find the new prospects. Thankfully, people have been wearing and buying clothes for centuries and I don't see that changing any time soon. Therefore, I believe opportunity will always be there for those able to find it.

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