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From Vision to Venture: Investigating Small Business Entrepreneurship

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From Vision to Venture: Investigating Small Business Entrepreneurship

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HNRS 4990: Final Honors Project

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Abstract

This research explores the challenges and opportunities faced by small business startups, focusing on the critical factors contributing to their success or failure. More than two-thirds of small business startups fail to deliver a positive return to investors, often discouraging aspiring entrepreneurs. Through an in-depth analysis of existing literature, interviews with successful entrepreneurs, and case studies, this research identifies common patterns and underlying reasons for these failures. Key insights from Tom Eisenmann’s book "Why Start-ups Fail" and Eric Ries’ book "The Lean Startup" highlight the importance of validated learning, strategic stakeholder management, and the need for startups to pivot or persevere based on customer feedback. Additionally, the rise of social media and e-commerce has transformed business operations, offering new avenues for growth but also presenting significant challenges. Entrepreneurs must embrace continuous learning, leverage technology, and build strong customer relationships to succeed. The practical applications of these findings are illustrated through the experiences of successful entrepreneurs like Susan Brown of Consign Home Couture, Emily Roggenburk who runs her own clothing line under her name, and Ross LaPinta of Makin’ Music. Their stories underscore the importance of resilience, adaptability, and strategic decision-making in the face of challenges. The lessons learned from these small businesses can be applied to Cle Threads, a small business specializing in custom clothing. Currently operated by a single individual, Cle Threads can benefit from lessons learned from entrepreneurs, existing research, and case studies by business analysts. Understanding the reasons behind startup failures and applying best practices from successful entrepreneurs can equip aspiring business owners with the knowledge needed to navigate the complex landscape of small business ownership. By implementing these strategies, startups can increase their chances of long-term success and growth.
Introduction

As a passionate and driven student at Bowling Green State University, I have always been eager to learn about the complexities of entrepreneurship and how creative individuals can stay resilient in the face of life-altering challenges. My father has been my greatest inspiration when it comes to entrepreneurship. For the past 30 years, he has successfully run his own small business, demonstrating remarkable resilience and hard work. Starting without a college degree, he showcased what it takes to build and sustain a business from the ground up. His journey has profoundly influenced my desire to own and operate a small business, instilling in me the values of perseverance, creativity, and adaptability.

This inspiration and my passion for art led me to start my own small online art business five years ago. What began as a favor for a friend; painting a jean jacket in December 2019, quickly evolved into a full-fledged venture. Over the years, I have expanded my offerings to include customized clothing, commissioned paintings, and hand-embroidered materials. I operate completely by myself and have an online presence on Instagram and TikTok, which is where I sell my art. Managing this small business has been an incredible learning experience, teaching me not only the practical aspects of entrepreneurship but also the importance of innovation and flexibility in overcoming challenges.

Throughout my journey, I have gained valuable insights into managing a small online business. I have learned the significance of customer satisfaction, effective marketing strategies, and am working on financial management. Each challenge I faced required me to adapt and innovate, strengthening my critical thinking skills. These experiences have solidified my passion for entrepreneurship and my determination to succeed in this dynamic field. However, I aim to deepen my understanding of the challenges faced by small businesses and discover solutions to
overcome them. The combination of my academic studies at BGSU in the Honors College and personal experience has prepared me to tackle the challenges of entrepreneurship with confidence and resilience.

My honors project will delve into the complexities of small business ownership, focusing on two critical phases: the start-up phase and the established and growing phase. By acknowledging the various hurdles encountered in each stage, I aim to learn how small businesses sustain success and remain profitable. My project will shed light on the impact of emerging technologies and the inevitable challenges they pose to small enterprises in a digitized marketplace. Through exploration, research, and analysis, my honors project aims to illuminate the pathways to small business success amidst adversity. To enhance my understanding, I will interview three of my favorite small businesses, gaining firsthand knowledge of their strategies, challenges, and invaluable pieces of advice.

Problem Statement

More than two-thirds of small business startups never achieve profitability, a staggering statistic that exemplifies the significant challenges faced by entrepreneurs (Bottoroff, 2023). This high failure rate not only represents a large economic loss but also discourages potential entrepreneurs from pursuing their business ideas and dreams. Understanding why such a large proportion of startups fail to make a profit is crucial for developing strategies that can increase the likelihood of success for new ventures, like mine.

This problem is particularly relevant and important given the critical role small businesses play in driving innovation, creating jobs, and contributing to economic growth (Bottoroff, 2023).
Without a clear understanding of the factors leading to startup failures, aspiring entrepreneurs are left navigating a highly uncertain and risky landscape, feeling lost and overwhelmed, which often results in financial loss and unfulfilled potential.

Current research provides valuable insights into various aspects of entrepreneurship and how to better succeed, such as the impact of social media, the rise of emerging technologies, and the principles of lean startup methodology. Many studies focus on individual elements, but there is a need for a holistic analysis to provide a clearer picture of the common challenges faced by new businesses. Ultimately, the goal of my research is to not only enhance the success rates of small business startups but also to provide a framework that can help other entrepreneurs (including myself) achieve profitability and sustainability in their ventures.

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<th>Years in business</th>
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Statistic by Forbes Media Company

**Background**

Understanding the changing landscape of entrepreneurship requires an exploration of a variety of factors influencing small business startups. This section provides a comprehensive overview of the critical elements that shape the success and resilience of small businesses today, as well as the reasons many of them fail. By identifying common missteps of entrepreneurs in their
business models, and then examining the impact of social media, the rise of emerging technologies, the unique characteristics of startups, the principles of the lean startup methodology, and the challenges and opportunities presented by the technological era, this background sets the stage for a deeper analysis of the pathways to entrepreneurial success. Drawing on insights from multiple research studies, this section aims to equip aspiring entrepreneurs with the knowledge and tools necessary to navigate and thrive in a competitive business environment.

Analyzing Startup Failures

As mentioned before, more than two-thirds of small business startups never deliver a positive return to investors (Bottorff, 2023). This discouraging statistic often crushes the dreams of many passionate entrepreneurs. However, understanding the underlying reasons for these failures can provide valuable insights for future ventures. Based on multiple studies and extensive research, I have identified common patterns and similarities among small business startup failures. By analyzing these factors, we can better prepare aspiring entrepreneurs, and myself, with the knowledge needed to navigate the complex landscape of small business ownership.

Foremost, in his book "Why Start-ups Fail," Harvard Professor, Tom Eisenmann, interviewed hundreds of founders and investors, learning about entrepreneurial failures. Contrary to common belief that failures are often due to the inadequacies of founders, Eisenmann identified patterns of failure that involve a variety of people and key stakeholders involved in the business. He highlighted that attributing failure solely to founders' shortcomings is an oversimplification, failing to consider the broader context and other critical factors, which means never really identifying the core reason of unprofitability.
Additionally, startups, while often brimming with innovative ideas and ambitious visions, frequently fail because they never truly embrace the necessity of continuous learning. The belief that enterprises must learn and improve every day to stay competitive is widely held among leaders (Gino, 2015). However, even companies renowned for their dedication to continuous learning struggle to always practice what they preach. So why do companies, particularly startups, find it challenging to become or remain “learning organizations”? Research across various industries suggests that deeply ingrained human biases hinder learning (Gino, 2015). These biases cause leaders to overly focus on success, act too hastily, conform excessively, and overly depend on experts.

Similarly, in the book "The Lean Startup," Eric Ries explores a business concept that offers data-driven steps for startups to prosper, and when these steps are not taken, businesses fail. The core ideas of the lean startup concept include:

- Entrepreneurs are everywhere, and entrepreneurship is management. You must be able to manage a company before you start a business.

- Continuous learning is critical to the startup process. You must have a passion for continuous growth and education in the business world.

- Startups exist to learn new things, not just to make money. Do not get carried away with numbers. You must truly know what you are doing before getting started.

- Success requires building, measuring, and learning from customer responses. Knowing your customer is the most important aspect of entrepreneurship.
Innovation accounting: a process that helps organizations measure and define innovation is essential for measuring progress, holding innovators accountable, and setting milestones to prioritize work. Ultimately, a business needs to make money, and you must know people who can help you do that.

Ries emphasizes that startups must know when to pivot or persevere based on feedback from their products, which is critical to sustained success. These principles resonate with Eisenmann's ideas, particularly the emphasis on continuous learning and the importance of understanding.

Additionally, Eisenmann outlines two prevalent and avoidable missteps in his studies. The first is the issue of "Good Idea, Bad Bedfellows," where even promising ventures fail due to problems with key stakeholders such as employees, strategic partners, and investors. The second pattern is "False Starts," where start-ups prematurely launch products without adequately researching customer needs. This rush to market, influenced by the lean start-up philosophy's emphasis on early and iterative launches, often leads to products that miss the mark, wasting valuable time and resources. Eisenmann emphasizes that a structured approach involving rigorous customer discovery and competitive analysis is crucial to avoid these false starts.

In conclusion, the daunting statistic that over-two-thirds of small business startups fail to deliver a positive return can discourage many passionate entrepreneurs. However, by understanding the common patterns of missteps and focusing on success strategies, we can equip aspiring business owners with valuable insights to navigate the complex landscape of small business ownership.

**Positive Impact of Social Media on Small Business Startups**

Moving onto what sustains small business success, social media is at the forefront of the conversation. Social media has become an invaluable platform for advertising, business
promotion, brand awareness, and customer education. According to Forbes, the number of social media users worldwide has increased to a record 4.9 billion people globally, 77% of small businesses use social media to connect with their customers, and 41% of small businesses also depend on social media as a revenue driver (2023). Similarly, social media continues to offer new opportunities for businesses daily. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram are pivotal for customer acquisition techniques, opening new doors for entrepreneurs seeking growth; for example, my business is maintained on social media (Basri, 2017). The five major social media platforms widely utilized by startups and small businesses are Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, and Pinterest, which businesses need to be aware of.

A huge benefit to businesses is that social media is particularly beneficial for startups with limited budgets. However, despite its accessibility, startups often fail to maximize its potential. Ensuring long-term growth involves building an online community of brand ambassadors and a target audience, which provides additional exposure and promotes brand awareness.

**Rise of Emerging Technologies on Small Businesses**

Further research delves into the rise of technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), big data, and artificial intelligence (AI). Today, these technologies dominate various fields, including healthcare, finance, education, sports, agriculture, and management. Current research highlights the opportunities AI offers to businesses, such as assisting in decision-making, analyzing large sums of data with minimal human error, unveiling data patterns, visualizing analytics, and providing insights into markets and competitors (Basri, 2017). To survive, businesses need to adopt emerging technologies to stay on trend with the marketplace. Doing this can result in increased revenues for businesses of all sizes.
The Technological Era and Startups

Continuing the discussion on technology, the rapid advancement in media technology and the unprecedented growth in user numbers offer substantial opportunities and significant challenges for small business startups. The emergence of e-commerce has been a key development in this technological evolution, profoundly transforming business operations and consumer behavior. For small business startups, investing in e-commerce has become essential for financial viability.

E-commerce provides startups with a broader market reach that traditional brick-and-mortar stores cannot match. By operating online, small businesses can overcome geographic limitations and tap into global markets, significantly boosting their sales and growth potential. Additionally, the operational costs associated with e-commerce are generally lower compared to maintaining a physical storefront. Startups can save on expenses related to rent, utilities, and in-store staff, and benefit from streamlined inventory management and order processing.

Additionally, one of the major advantages of e-commerce is its 24/7 availability. Unlike physical stores with restricted operating hours, an online store can be accessible to customers around the clock, increasing opportunities for sales and allowing customers to shop at their convenience. This constant availability can lead to higher overall sales and enhanced customer satisfaction (Basri, 2017).

Entrepreneur Interviews

As an aspiring small business owner and entrepreneur, my honors project aims to fuel my passion for creativity and strengthen my professional development. To achieve this, I identified
independently owned regional businesses that have inspired my dream of owning a small business and interviewed their owners. The selection criteria for these businesses included their size, advocacy of female empowerment, drive for success, and impact on their communities. By focusing on these criteria, I hope to gain valuable insights into the unique ways small business startups succeed.

Once the businesses were identified, I conducted a thorough review of their online presence, including websites, social media profiles, and any available press coverage. Understanding the background and operational strategies of these businesses provided a solid foundation for the subsequent interviews.

Following the preliminary research, I conducted face-to-face interviews with the owners of the three selected businesses. The interviews were structured to gain a deeper understanding of their entrepreneurial journeys, challenges, strategies, and successes. These conversations offered firsthand insights into the practical aspects of running a small business and the unique approaches each owner has taken to achieve success. The interview questions focused on the process of the small business startup, the idea behind the business, the challenges they have endured and how they overcame them, their digital presence, how they maintain success, and any advice they can offer to aspiring entrepreneurs. The list of interview questions can be found in the Appendix.

**Selected Businesses**

1. **Emily Roggenburk (Westlake, Ohio)**

   1. **Business overview:** Emily Roggenburk is an eponymous female-owned clothing and apparel business rooted in the Midwest. Founded in 2016, the brand began
with Emily leaving her corporate role to pursue her passion for apparel merchandising and fashion design. Her brand, which started with prints and frames of her scenic aerial photography, has since expanded to include apparel that celebrates identity, heritage, and aspirations.

2. **Personal connection:** Emily’s journey inspired me to start designing and customizing clothing. Her story continues to inspire me as I finish my undergraduate degree, reflecting the potential of turning a personal passion into a successful business.

2. **Consign Home Couture (Westlake, Ohio)**

   1. **Business overview:** Founded by Susan Brown, Consign Home Couture is a female-owned business offering high-end consignment furniture and upscale home goods. The business emphasizes the principles of reduce, reuse, recycle, and repurpose, providing high-quality, name-brand pieces at significant savings.

   2. **Personal connection:** I have frequented Consign Home Couture with my mother since childhood, witnessing its growth into a reputable small business in the Greater Cleveland area. The business's commitment to sustainability and quality has been a long-standing inspiration.

3. **Makin’ Music (Parma, Ohio)**

   1. **Business overview:** Established in 1995, Makin’ Music in Parma, Ohio, is a beloved small business for music enthusiasts, known for its wide range of services and high-quality musical instruments. The store was founded by Ross LaPinta with a lifelong passion for music and a business partner who shared this vision. Makin’ Music specializes in consigning, buying, trading, and selling used musical
instruments and accessories. It also offers music lessons for all skill levels, ensuring that the local community has access to both high-quality instruments and expert instruction.

2. **Personal connection:** Makin’ Music is more than just a business; it is a deeply personal part of my life. As my father's small business, it embodies his passion for music and dedication to our family. Growing up, I witnessed his unwavering commitment to the store and the joy it brought to both him and our community. His ability to be a great father, while continually improving his business offerings and delivering exceptional quality has always inspired me. This personal connection has given me a profound appreciation for the impact Makin’ Music has on our lives and the local community.

**Interview Findings**

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed to identify common themes, strategies, and challenges faced by small business owners. This analysis helped develop a comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to small business success and resilience.

The insights gained from this research are directly applicable to my own small online business. By learning from the experiences of seasoned small business owners, I aim to grow my business post-graduation, incorporating the strategies and practices that have proven effective for others.

**Emily Roggenburk**

Emily Roggenburk's journey into entrepreneurship is a testament to her passion, creativity, and strategic thinking. Emily studied fashion merchandising during her undergraduate years, which provided her with a solid foundation in the fashion industry. After graduation, she spent five
years working at American Greetings to gain corporate experience. Although she enjoyed her job and learned valuable lessons about company management, she had an itching passion for photography.

Emily began selling her photography prints on Instagram, where she quickly built a solid customer base. This success reignited her passion for fashion, leading her to experiment with pop-up artisan markets in the Cleveland area, where she sold clothing, she had designed at home. She found significant success in this approach and decided to focus solely on pop-ups to remain cost-effective, using her home as a fashion design studio. As she made more customer relationships and began to further impact the community, Emily began to think about creating a career out of her new company. To support her growing business, she took out a loan to purchase a screen printer, making monthly payments funded by her savings from her time at American Greetings.

Her business rapidly gained popularity, prompting her to consider a more permanent location. Emily purchased a storefront in Crocker Park, a shopping center in Westlake, Ohio, where she would sell her designs on clothing. She made the strategic decision to only open her store on weekends to save money and increase demand and foot traffic since there was a sense of urgency. After a great year of success, she had the funds to open another store on the west side of Cleveland. Despite her expansion, Emily maintained a strong focus on her online presence, running a well-designed website managed by an external company. Her husband, who has a financial background, handled and continues to handle the bookkeeping on QuickBooks, a software used by many small businesses to make accounting and finance more efficient.
Emily's advice to aspiring entrepreneurs is to be cost-effective while maintaining high quality. She alluded to the fact that most small businesses do not make a profit within their first three years of business, which is completely normal. During the COVID-19 pandemic, her business faced significant challenges. The surge in online shopping during the lockdown gave her a false sense of security, leading her to become less proactive in seizing new opportunities. For example, she decreased the number of designs she was displaying on her website, since previous products were selling so well. After the pandemic, sales slowed down, forcing her to close the store on the west side of Cleveland. Her biggest piece of advice is to not be afraid to pivot—this means making significant changes in direction to adapt to new circumstances or challenges. Emily had to pivot when she made the difficult decision to close one of her stores, which she had worked so hard to open, to maintain the overall health and sustainability of her business.

To stay competitive, Emily offers unique and trendy clothing with a geographical focus, catering to both the local Cleveland market as well as the Midwest as a whole. Instead of creating prototypes of all her designs, she uses software to create digital proofs and only produces the items once they are sold. This approach keeps production costs low and provides valuable consumer insights. Emily emphasizes the importance of having a pristine website, especially in the digital age. She also mentioned her invaluable experience at American Greeting in corporate America and how it was a great steppingstone to managing and owning her own company. Emily works with one other designer but largely runs the company with her husband.

Emily Roggenburk's entrepreneurial journey highlights the impact of passion, creativity, and strategic decision-making in building a successful business. She had some missteps along the way, but navigated these challenges effectively and remains one of the most talked about fashion businesses in the Greater Cleveland Area.
Consignment Home Couture

Susan Brown, founder of Consign Home Couture, offered valuable insights during our conversation. Susan's journey began after a 30-year career in healthcare, using her severance package to start her own business. Consignment shopping was a passion she shared with her mother before she passed away, instilling in her a deep love for the business. She started her storefront in Bay Village with a small space and worked tirelessly to attract customers, often going out to meet them in person and spread the word about her new business.

A significant breakthrough came when a local news reporter visited her store, purchased two chairs, and featured them on air, giving Consign Home Couture a boost in visibility and credibility. After eight successful years in Bay Village, Susan’s business had grown so much that she needed more space. She moved to a larger store in Westlake, Ohio, which included a warehouse in the back of the store she planned on using for storage. Although she initially feared she wouldn’t fill the larger space, she quickly needed to renovate the warehouse to accommodate the influx of items. As her business grew, people started contacting her to sell their furniture instead of her seeking out pieces. She became regionally recognized and implemented a unique 24-hour return policy, rare in the consignment furniture industry, which helped differentiate her business. Susan also only hires those passionate about consignment, ensuring her team shares her dedication.

However, when it seemed like smooth sailing, the COVID-19 pandemic presented many challenges to Susan and her business. Susan struggled at first and found herself losing revenue. Yet, she adapted by investing in a solid website platform and launching it, while starting curbside orders, leading to a boom in her e-commerce business. While she continues to improve her social media presence today, her website is one of the aspects of her business she is most proud of; it
took her business from a locally known name to a regionally known name. Susan remains committed to following her dreams and advises aspiring entrepreneurs to pursue their passions, even if they feel unsure. She reflects that she wishes she had started her business earlier.

One of her best pieces of advice was something I will never forget as I start my entrepreneurial journey. She emphasized the importance of what she calls the "3 L's" when starting a business: landlord, location, and loyalty.

- **Landlord:** Susan stressed that your landlord can significantly impact your business. It's crucial to find one who respects your time, goals, and overall business operations. A supportive landlord can make a huge difference, providing stability and allowing you to focus on growth.

- **Location:** Where you set up your business matters immensely. Susan's first store was in Bay Village, Ohio, a small, high-traffic plaza. The right location can drive foot traffic, increase visibility, and attract the right customers. It's important to consider accessibility, nearby businesses, and the overall appeal of the area when choosing your business location.

- **Loyalty:** Building a strong customer base from the start is essential. Susan emphasized the value of face-to-face interactions and word-of-mouth marketing. She personally went out to meet potential customers and relied on them to spread the word about her business. This grassroots approach helped her create a loyal customer base that supported her growth.
Susan Brown’s story is a testament to the power of perseverance, adaptability, and building strong relationships. Her experience provides valuable lessons for anyone looking to start their own business, emphasizing the importance of the "3 L's" and the ability to pivot and grow in the face of challenges.

**Makin’ Music:**

Established in 1995, Makin’ Music in Parma, Ohio, has grown into a vibrant community cornerstone for music enthusiasts, renowned for its wide range of services and quality musical instruments. The store was founded by my father, Ross LaPinta, and his business partner, both driven by a lifelong passion for music. My father played in a band for nine years and moved to California to pursue a music career. Ultimately, he chose to prioritize family life and returned to Cleveland, Ohio. Determined to keep music as a central part of his life, he conceived the idea of opening a music store.

Makin’ Music specializes in consigning, buying, trading, and selling used musical instruments and accessories. It also offers music lessons for all skill levels, ensuring that the local community has access to both high-quality instruments and expert instruction. Before opening the store, my father spent a whole year accumulating consigned instruments from the community. When he began renting his first store in Parma, Ohio, he took out a loan for funding and went in 50% on assets with his business partner. At this time, there was no internet, so he relied heavily on word-of-mouth marketing and advertising, which helped him overcome his biggest challenge—gaining a loyal customer base. He chose Parma, Ohio, as the location of Makin’ Music because, in the 90s, it was a music store hub, and he believed location is critical when starting a small business. After a few years of success, he parted ways with his business partner and opened a second store in Medina, Ohio, thus owning two stores. He maintained both stores
for ten years but eventually made the tough decision to close the Medina store due to declining performance. This was a difficult decision that impacted our family, but my father knew he had to pivot in business.

He then focused entirely on the Parma store, rehiring passionate young employees who shared his interest in music, launching social media accounts, and began the process of creating an international website. He also has business accounts with musical accessory manufacturers and emphasizes the importance of having good relationships with your suppliers. My father manages the store with the help of a business accountant for finances, as he does not have a college degree and struggles with some business aspects typically covered in formal education. He is accustomed to running the business with pen and paper and recognizes the need to spend time learning social media and website analytics or hiring someone who can help him reach a broader audience via e-commerce.

My father’s biggest piece of advice is that if you can buy the building that houses your storefront, instead of renting, you should do it. It may be a risk, but he regrets not doing it 30 years ago when he was offered the space. Additionally, he emphasizes the importance of truly knowing your industry before going into business. He believes people often jump into the market prematurely without a deep understanding of their goods or services, which can hinder their success.
What I've Learned

Reflecting on the insights and lessons gained from the research, several key takeaways stand out that contribute to the existing body of entrepreneurial knowledge and offer valuable perspectives for future ventures.

Lessons from Emily Roggenburk

Emily’s success highlights the importance of social media and a strong online presence in building a customer base and promoting a business. This matches previous research, showing that a solid digital footprint is crucial for modern startups. It reinforces that entrepreneurs need to invest in and effectively manage their digital marketing strategies.

Emily’s lean startup approach, using pop-up markets and her home as a fashion studio, shows the practical application of Eric Ries' principles. By creating digital proofs and minimizing waste, she effectively applied validated learning. This confirms that innovative, cost-effective strategies are vital for startups, especially those with limited budgets.

Emily’s ability to adapt during the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of resilience and flexibility in entrepreneurship. Using emerging technologies is key for analyzing market trends and making smart decisions. This emphasizes that continuous innovation and adaptability are essential for handling unexpected challenges.

Using technology effectively, like external website management and digital design software, aligns with the benefits outlined by research regarding sustained business success. This shows how important technological tools are for enhancing efficiency and decision-making. The lesson here is that using the right technologies can give a significant competitive edge.
Emily’s focus on creating a unique brand with a geographical focus highlights the importance of community and brand loyalty. By building a community of brand ambassadors, Emily ensures long-term growth and customer support. This finding underscores the importance of trust and strong customer relationships.

This research adds to the existing knowledge of entrepreneurship by highlighting the importance of a digital presence, cost-effective innovation, adaptability, and technological leverage. It also shows the significance of community building and brand loyalty. The unique aspects of Emily’s success suggest that personal dedication and a clear market vision can offset the need for frequent pivots and obstacles.

**Lessons from Consign Home Couture**

In reviewing Susan Brown’s entrepreneurial journey with Consign Home Couture, several key lessons emerge that align with the broader research on small business startups and their challenges. Her story reinforces important findings about startup failures and successes.

First, Susan’s experience underscores the research findings from Tom Eisenmann, which suggest that startup failures often result from broad factors rather than solely from the founders’ inadequacies. Susan’s story highlights how her initial struggles with a small storefront and her efforts to expand despite fears of filling a larger space reflect the role of external factors, such as location and market conditions, in shaping business outcomes. Eisenmann’s research emphasizes the need to consider these broader dynamics when evaluating startup success or failure.
Additionally, Susan’s approach to continuous learning and adaptation, especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, aligns with the emphasis on validated learning and the necessity of evolving based on feedback (Gino, 2015). Susan’s pivot to enhance her e-commerce presence and adapt to changing market conditions mirrors the principles outlined in "The Lean Startup." Her use of technology to transform her business during the pandemic illustrates the importance of ongoing responsiveness to market demands, which are crucial for long-term success as highlighted in the research.

Moreover, Susan’s focus on foundational elements—landlord, location, and loyalty—provides evidence of the importance of stakeholder management and avoiding common missteps when it comes to creating your team (Eisenmann, 2023). Her experience reflects the need for a supportive landlord, a well-chosen location, and a strong customer base, all of which are critical for navigating the startup landscape effectively.

Finally, Susan’s success with e-commerce, especially during a challenging period, exemplifies the research on technological advancements and their impact on small businesses. Her strategic investment in a robust online presence aligns with the broader trend of utilizing digital tools and platforms to overcome traditional business constraints, as discussed in research on the rise of emerging technologies.

Overall, Susan Brown’s journey not only illustrates the practical application of research findings but also provides valuable lessons for aspiring entrepreneurs. Her ability to adapt, leverage technology, and focus on fundamental business principles highlights key strategies for navigating the complex and often challenging landscape of small business ownership.
Lessons from Makin’ Music

The journey of Makin’ Music offers valuable lessons that all entrepreneurs can learn from. My father’s experience provides insights into critical factors for success and obstacles that can lead to failure. One significant lesson is the importance of knowing your industry. My father emphasized the necessity of understanding the music industry before diving into business, which is supported by Eisenmann and Ries' research highlighting the need for deep industry knowledge. Entrepreneurs must thoroughly understand their market, products, and customer needs. My father's success in accumulating consigned instruments and understanding the music market in Parma was largely due to his experience playing in a band for ten years. Entrepreneurs who jump into the market prematurely, without a solid grasp of their industry, risk making costly mistakes and missing opportunities.

As both Susan Brown and Emily Roggenburk mentioned, another key lesson is that location matters. My father chose Parma, Ohio, because it was a hub for music stores in the 90s, demonstrating the critical role of location in a business's success. Eisenmann’s research also points out that a good location can drive sales by ultimately increasing foot traffic, increasing visibility, and attracting the right customers. A strategic location is especially vital for small businesses, as it can significantly influence their ability to build a loyal customer base.

As previously mentioned, adaptation and continuous learning are also crucial. Like Emily Roggenburk, my father had to pivot his business strategy multiple times. When he had to close the Medina store, he refocused on the Parma location, hired passionate employees, and expanded his business online. This adaptability aligns with Gino’s and Ries' emphasis on the necessity of continuous learning and the ability to pivot. Startups must be willing to learn from their experiences and adjust their strategies based on customer feedback and market changes.
Additionally, marketing and customer base development played a vital role in Makin Music's success. Building a loyal customer base through word-of-mouth was crucial, especially before the internet era. Eisenmann’s findings on the importance of understanding and building relationships with key stakeholders are evident here. My father's grassroots approach to marketing reflects the need for strong customer relationships and effective communication strategies, which are essential for sustaining a business.

Finally, passion and commitment are driving forces behind Makin Music’s success. My father's lifelong passion for music and dedication to keeping it a central part of his life resonates with Ries' principle that startups exist to learn and innovate, not just to make money.Entrepreneurs who are genuinely passionate about their business are more likely to persevere through challenges and achieve long-term success.

Moving Forward

Based on the research findings and practical insights from entrepreneurs like Susan Brown, several key strategies and actions can be applied to ensure the success and growth of my small business, Cle Threads. The following practical applications and considerations will guide my next steps:

Practical Applications from Research Findings

- Embrace Continuous Learning and Adaptation:

  The concept of validated learning from "The Lean Startup" and the necessity of evolving based on feedback are crucial. To implement this, I will regularly seek customer feedback
and be open to adjusting my products and business strategies. This will involve conducting surveys after purchases, engaging with customers on social media, and analyzing sales data to identify trends and areas for improvement.

- Strategic Stakeholder Management

As highlighted by Tom Eisenmann, the success of a startup often hinges on the broader context and key stakeholders. I will prioritize building strong relationships with suppliers, local businesses, and potential partners who can support Cle Threads’ growth. Networking can help in establishing these connections.

- Leveraging Technology and E-commerce

The rise of e-commerce has proven to be a game-changer for small businesses. While I currently do not have a website, establishing an online presence is a critical next step. Creating a user-friendly website with an e-commerce platform will allow Cle Threads to reach a broader audience and provide customers with the convenience of online shopping. Additionally, utilizing social media for marketing and customer engagement will enhance brand visibility and drive sales.

- Financial Planning and Funding

Given that Cle Threads is funded by my own money, it is essential to manage finances carefully. I will develop a detailed budget and financial plan to ensure sustainable growth. Exploring funding options such as small business loans, grants, or crowdfunding can provide additional capital to invest in technology and marketing efforts.
· Passion And Knowing Your Business

One of the most valuable lessons I’ve learned is the critical importance of passion and deep industry knowledge in entrepreneurship. Being genuinely passionate about your business fuels perseverance through challenges and drives long-term success. Coupled with this passion, having a thorough understanding of your industry—its market dynamics, customer needs, and potential pitfalls—this will allow me to make informed decisions and avoid costly mistakes.

Potential Strategies and Actions

● Website Development

Investing in a professional website will be a priority. The website will feature an online store, showcasing my products with high-quality images and detailed descriptions. Potentially implementing SEO strategies will help attract organic traffic, and integrating an easy-to-use payment system will enhance the customer experience.

● Enhanced Marketing Efforts

Utilizing social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and Pinterest to market Cle Threads in a consistent manner. I am active on social media, but I am not consistently posting engaging content that will intrigue my target audience. For example, regularly posting updates, behind-the-scenes content, and customer testimonials will help build a loyal online community. Additionally, looking into creating a newsletter to keep my target audience informed and engaged with my business.

● Streamlined Production Process
While I currently do all work by hand or with a vinyl printer, exploring ways to streamline the production process can increase efficiency. Investing in additional equipment such as a clothing screen printer, like Emily Roggenburk, or an embroidery machine is something I can investigate.

- Customer Engagement and Loyalty Programs

Building strong customer relationships is essential. Implementing a loyalty program, offering discounts for repeat customers, and creating personalized shopping experiences can foster customer loyalty; for example, 3 purchases can result in a complimentary tote bag. Engaging with customers through email newsletters and social media interactions will keep them informed and connected to Cle Threads.

- Regularly Assess and Adapt

I will set aside time each week to review business performance, customer feedback, and market trends. I will encourage customers for feedback and will investigate creating a survey for after-purchases. This will enable me to make informed decisions and adapt strategies as needed.

- Financial Discipline

Maintaining a detailed record of expenses and revenues will help manage finances effectively. I currently keep an Excel spreadsheet, but my process is neither efficient nor effective, therefore potentially looking into QuickBooks an accounting software mentioned by Emily Roggenburk. I will also explore funding opportunities to support business growth without overextending personal finances.
• **Time Management**

Balancing the various aspects of running Cle Threads, from production to marketing, will require effective time management. After graduation, and my collegiate volleyball season, I will have more time to focus on Cle Threads. I will create a structured schedule to ensure all critical tasks are addressed.

By applying these strategies and maintaining a focus on continuous improvement, Cle Threads can navigate the challenges of small business ownership and achieve sustained success.

**Conclusion**

This research has delved into the variety of challenges and opportunities faced by small business startups, shedding light on the critical factors that determine their success or failure. By analyzing the insights of experts like Tom Eisenmann and Eric Ries and drawing from the experiences of successful entrepreneurs such as Susan Brown, Emily Roggenburk, and Ross LaPinta, we have identified several key themes: the importance of validated learning, strategic stakeholder management, adaptability, and the effective use of technology and social media.

The findings exemplify the significance of continuous learning and strategic decision-making in the entrepreneurial journey. Startups must prioritize understanding customer needs, managing relationships with key stakeholders, and being willing to pivot when necessary, so that they are not a part of the two thirds of startups that never create a profit.
For Cle Threads, a small business currently operating without a website and funded by personal savings, these insights are particularly relevant. Establishing an online presence, leveraging social media for marketing, and adopting efficient production methods can significantly enhance growth prospects. Emphasizing customer satisfaction and carefully managing finances are crucial steps toward long-term success.

In conclusion, understanding the common patterns behind startup failures and learning from the experiences of successful entrepreneurs can equip aspiring business owners with the tools needed to navigate the complex landscape of small business ownership. By implementing these strategies, startups like Cle Threads can not only survive but thrive in a competitive market, ultimately contributing to a vibrant and dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystem.
Appendix

Interview Questions

Lindsey LaPinta Honors Project

Interview Questions

General Questions:

1. Can you tell me about the inspiration behind starting your business? What motivated you to take the leap into entrepreneurship?
2. What were the initial steps you took to turn your business idea into a reality? Can you walk me through the startup process?
3. What were some of the biggest challenges you encountered during the early stages of building your business? How did you overcome these?
4. When did you see the biggest amount of growth happen for your business?
5. Building a business often requires a significant investment of time, money, and resources. How did you manage the financial aspects of starting your business?
6. In the competitive landscape of small business, how did you differentiate your brand and attract customers? What do you attribute your success to?

Social Media Questions:

1. How has social media played a role in the growth and development of your business?
2. Can you describe the specific social media platforms you utilize for your business, and why you chose them?
3. How do you measure the effectiveness of your social media efforts in terms of engagement, reach, and conversion?

Artificial Intelligence Questions:

1. If you use artificial intelligence, how has it influenced your business operations and strategy?
Advice Questions:

1. As an aspiring entrepreneur/small business owner, what is the best piece of advice you could give me?
2. What do you wish you could tell your younger self about owning a small business?
3. What are some ideas that I can implement today to be more successful in my small business endeavors?
Resources


