

How Success Happened For Ben Francis, Founder and CEO of Gymshark

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I had the pleasure of interviewing Ben Francis, founder and CEO of Gymshark – the first-of-its-kind, British fitness community and apparel brand for my recent episode of *How Success Happens*.

Building a brand requires tireless hard work, yet what I found most notable about Francis throughout our conversation was his graciousness and easy-going demeanor. Despite Gymshark's rapid growth, Francis has remained true to his founding ethos: building the brand as a community while staying humble. It's no surprise that he largely attributes his success to the hardworking mindset instilled in him by his parents and grandparents.

Led by his love for fitness, his ambition was simply to be involved in the industry that changed his life, in any capacity, and Francis further credits the gym for helping develop the discipline that became the foundation of Gymshark. Finding his passion at the intersection of business, IT and fitness, he founded Gymshark in 2011 when he was only 19 years old. Juggling university while working as a pizza delivery driver for Pizza Hut, Francis bootstrapped the brand from his bedroom.

The early days of the company started with drop shipping supplements and the pivot to apparel was born out of Francis's personal necessity. Unable to find fitness apparel that fit

him properly, he set out to create a line that struck a balance between American bodybuilding style and tapered European design. He then spent the following two years hand-making products with a sewing machine and a screen printer – a true testament to his steadfast work ethic.

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Francis describes the most pivotal moment for Gymshark as a result of following his gut and relying on his roots as a social native. The brand had slowly been developing a following on YouTube and after scraping together the entry fee, Ben was able to bring Gymshark to its first in-person event – a fitness expo in the UK.

Following the event, Gymshark went from generating \$300-400 in revenue a day to \$50,000 in revenue in 30 minutes, completely selling out the website. It was after this that he chose to drop out of university and quit his job at Pizza Hut. Through this fearless approach, Francis has been able to propel Gymshark to the success it has today.

The incredible culture Francis has built within the company, now with 900 plus staff, and the Gymshark community is no doubt the result of his unique and selfless approach to leadership. Six years ago, after identifying his strengths and weaknesses and knowing the need to put the right people in the right positions to continue to grow the company, he stepped down from CEO.

Leaning into his strengths, Ben transitioned to the role of chief brand officer. During this time, he collaborated and learned from his team to hone his leadership skills, ahead of returning to the helm as CEO earlier this year.

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Most notably, while the Covid-19 crisis ravaged industries Gymshark rose to unicorn status in 2020, becoming one of only two UK brands to do so with no external funding. By listening to the needs of international customers, Gymshark is now on track to becoming a global powerhouse. With North America accounting for 50% of Gymshark's revenue, Francis and the team were able to open their Denver office despite the worldwide impact of the pandemic.

Beyond expanding infrastructure, Gymshark has also begun to expand outside of apparel, with the launch of the Gymshark Conditioning App, along with plans to continue to explore the development of additional interactive products. Throughout the interview, Francis continuously ascribes the success of Gymshark to the stars aligning and luck, but it is evident it lies in his adaptive leadership and motto of working hard and staying humble.

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