

‘My Brain Thrives on Variety’: His Side Hustle Inspired By ‘The 4-Hour Workweek’ Led to \$600,000 in 16 Months

This Side Hustle Spotlight Q&A features Mark Hellweg, 42, of Austin, Texas. Hellweg is the founder of two coffee-related businesses: espresso machine maker Clive Coffee and drip-coffee machine maker Ratio, which he started and built on the side while running Clive. Responses have been edited for length and clarity.



What was your day job or primary occupation when you started your side hustle?

I've started two side businesses: The first was Clive Coffee, which I started in 2008 with a focus on Italian-made espresso machines for U.S. customers looking for beautiful, well-made products. In 2012, I started Ratio as a side business out of Clive, offering the first truly luxurious drip coffee machine made out of metal, wood and glass.

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When did you start your side hustle, and where did you find the inspiration for it?

Like a lot of entrepreneurs, Tim Ferris's *The 4-Hour Workweek* influenced me. I wanted to use emerging technologies to create an effective business with a fraction of the capital. This included rapid 3D printing of prototypes, global sourcing of custom parts, emerging ecommerce tools like Shopify and very bootstrapped PR and paid media campaigns. While actually working four hours a week isn't really possible or even desirable in my opinion (it's a great title to sell a lot of books!), the techniques I learned in that book helped launch Clive and later Ratio.



Image Credit: Courtesy of Ratio

What were some of the first steps you took to get your side hustle off the ground?

Study the market, talk to other players in the industry, clarify your unique point of view and figure out the fastest way to get a good enough proof of concept (often called minimum viable product). Take people to coffee or lunch (pay for it!) and ask for input. Connect with your bleeding-edge fans who want to be the first customers and find out if your idea resonates. Then, figure out if you could make this thing (or start a service) profitably if you hit the right volume. It's a messy process but can pay off if your idea solves a problem people have (maybe one they didn't know they had).

Perhaps most importantly, seek input from a range of people who have more experience than you do. Humbly ask for their insight and use that invaluable information to hone your idea. Don't just talk to business coaches or people who have "investment" on their LinkedIn profile. What does your grandma

think? Your dad's friend who retired from real estate two decades ago? Think creatively about forming your personal board of advisors, and never take people or their time for granted.

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What were some of the biggest challenges you faced while building your side hustle, and how did you navigate them?

The opportunities provided by open markets and rapidly changing technology also bring along the challenge of staying ahead of constant change. What worked great last year (or month) to prospect for customers on social media becomes irrelevant this year. There are also so many potential distractions that might have some value but aren't critical to that one key aspect of your project that makes it stand out. Whether you're leaning into faster, cheaper or better, your idea has to be simple, clear and focused.



Image Credit: Courtesy of Ratio

How long did it take you to see consistent monthly revenue?

How much did the side hustle earn?

I was massively blessed with the timing of starting Clive because we saw 10X revenue from the starting month of September 2008 to October 2008 based on a positive review of a coffee maker that we sold at the time. We were one of just a few websites offering the product, and we had leaned into great photography and copywriting. We hit over \$1 million in revenue in our second full year of business and used that momentum to launch our own brand of espresso machines called LUCCA and then Ratio coffee machines. We announced Ratio in August 2013, and we ended up pre-selling over \$600,000 worth of coffee makers over the following 16 months.

What does growth and revenue look like now?

Both Clive and Ratio have enjoyed consistent revenue growth since founding, though we have to constantly adjust to changes in consumer preferences, supply chain factors (hello, tariffs!) and how we find new customers profitably.

What do you enjoy most about running these businesses?

My brain thrives on variety in relationships, projects, settings, challenges...absolute depression looks like doing the same thing for 8-10 hours at a desk. I love being able to take a dip in the spring-fed pool Deep Eddy on a random Thursday afternoon. The flip side of that is I have often thought up my best product ideas on a Sunday walk. The flexibility provided by small business has been a tremendous gift that has also enabled my wife and I to support four children.

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What's your advice for others hoping to start successful side hustles or full-time businesses of their own?

If you currently have a job, keep it as long as possible while you work on your idea. I'm not saying to use company time to

build your business, but rather to take the stability of the paycheck and find spare time over lunch, evenings or weekends to get your business idea clarified and stress-tested. Once you get some initial cash flow, see if you can taper your job back to part-time, and eventually, you can hop on full-time. Always be honest and have integrity with your compensation, but there's nothing wrong with getting a side business going while you have a job. You never know – your boss might even help you in some way. Good luck to my fellow entrepreneurs out there.

<https://www.entrepreneur.com/starting-a-business/4-hour-workweek-led-to-a-600000-side-hustle-in-16-months/486717>