

Small Businesses' Secret Weapon for Going Global

First, an entrepreneur envisioned a B2B platform to connect brands with the right retail buyers. Then he founded Hubba.

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The formula to entrepreneurial success is no secret: Identify an unfilled niche and fill it. In 2011, while Ben Zifkin, CEO of Hubba, was searching for a birthday present for his wife, he identified an issue and recognized it as a niche waiting to be filled.

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Zifkin envisioned a B2B platform to connect brands with the right retail buyers. The point was to empower a new wave of emerging brands and help them grow in today's transforming world of commerce. This is how Zifkin came to design Hubba around his original concept and take the site live in 2012. To date, the site has connected with more than 60,000 brands and retailers.

For independent or craft brands, Hubba is like a secret weapon. Where platforms like Shopify and marketplaces like Amazon, Etsy and eBay help brands get in front of consumers, there is another side of the business: the need for those brands to connect with retail buyers and grow wholesale businesses. Hubba is the perfect solution for such companies interested in scaling up and getting their products sold in more locations.

How times have changed

If you were a brand five or 10 years ago, you had two ways of getting started. First, you could create a product in your kitchen, sell it to friends, then try getting orders from local retailers. Or, If you were lucky, you might be discovered by a big retailer at a trade show, which would give you the revenue to quit your job. But, traditionally, for most small brands, it wasn't easy to scale up.

At the same time, retailers also faced challenges. They needed to stand out with new products and offer more than the same goods sold by every other retailer in the same niche.

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Many of them then had to begin to compete with Amazon, as well. Overall, sellers are looking to build something new, offer new selections. They know that the different retailers they're pursuing have new ways to gain access to interesting brands and products that meet the changing interests of each new generation of customers.

In this regard, Hubba is a key disruptor for small businesses and is shaking up both sides of the equation, offering opportunities for independent brands and buyers alike to connect and find the right partners.

Unique craft brands breaking free of local markets are now entering the mainstream because customers want to identify with a brand's story. Similarly, shop owners and ecommerce sites can discover many more unique products that meet customer demand for a more personalized shopping experience.

The AI difference

The beauty of the network is in its execution. Brands enjoy increased distribution; and buyers find the right products for their stores. The result is that all parties can grow their businesses.

At the same time, much of the traditional guesswork is being eliminated with data analysis. Buyers use data to track trends and discover new products.

How the concept works for buyers

Discovering new products for an increasingly demanding consumer base is quite a challenge. Recently, the trends in consumerism have changed. Bolstered by the convenience of online shopping, and influenced by what millennials want, consumers overall are looking for brands that have a story and qualities they can identify with.

In a recent blog post, Shakzod Khabibov, of ecommerce health food retailer Natura Foods, explained how he followed trends in the past: He made trips to California to see what Whole Foods was selling, then checked customer reviews and Google Trends online. These actions were both expensive and inefficient, he wrote, and he was always behind the curve.

But Hubba changed how he discovered new trends and how he beat Whole Foods to the punch with the ketogenic food trend, Khabibov explained to me. "I didn't know about ketogenics," Khabibov said. "I was solely focused on Whole30 and paleo-friendly foods until Hubba showed me this as a new trend. . . . It's just not trending in brick-and-mortar stores right now – like Whole Foods – because it's very niche."

Bottom line:

For budding entrepreneurs in the past, success used to mean selling at craft fairs or corner markets. Now they can connect with buyers across the globe. And, for buyers, the opportunity to offer a virtually unlimited array of products is just as appealing.

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Think of the advantages for digital marketplaces like Zulily and Overstock, which sell limited-run merchandise. Those companies' trend-obsessed consumer base seems to have a decreasing interest in brand loyalty. But at the same time, those consumers seem to have boundless love for a great brand story. Distribution networks are key for companies to be able to expand their network; and that's exactly what Hubba did.

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