

Why You Shouldn't Be Afraid to Start a Business in Your Twenties

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If you are a college student or recently graduated, you might wonder, *Do I have what it takes to become an entrepreneur?* Zack Leitz, the 24-year-old co-founder and chief operating officer of Modl Outdoors, says you do. He started his first business as a sophomore in high school and launched a nonprofit called the Backpack Project as a college freshman. He started a nonprofit think tank called Wethink before starting his fourth business, Modl, during his senior year.

Leitz says he has always been drawn toward being an entrepreneur and never subscribed to the notion that he was a “kid” and businesses were for adults. “I believe in the tremendous power of young people to dream and innovate, and I think many young people underestimate their ability to start and scale a business at any age.”

Leitz spoke with Jessica Abo to share advice for anyone in their twenties exploring entrepreneurship.

Jessica Abo: Zack, tell us about your company.

Zack Leitz: Modl Outdoors is a flexible design company. We take essential items that you probably carry with you every day that are often in the outdoors space, and single function, and we turn them into flexible, multifunctional products that adapt to you and your everyday life rather than having you

adapt your products. In a perfect world, what this lets you do is have a smaller amount of gear that will get you through a larger amount of situations in life. Hopefully, it's also cutting down on the amount of waste, the amount of gear that we have to purchase and recycle and really just creating a more streamlined process for you to go have experiences outdoors.

What made you want to start this company? How did your friends and you even get a business like this off the ground?

Leitz: I started the company with two friends of mine from college and all three of us knew that we wanted to be entrepreneurs. We knew we wanted to head into that space, and we also had a shared passion for adventuring in the outdoors. When we were on a camping trip, our senior year of college was when we had the idea to start this company. For us, it was basically an opportunity to not only kind of continue the adventure that we had had for the last couple of years in college, but we saw it as a way to help a lot of other people connect with nature and the outdoors in the way that we had.

Walk us through the actual ideation to being a successful company.

Leitz: The very first product that we ever set our sights on is a multifunctional hydration system that we call the Modl System. It's basically a flexible, double-ended bottle that you can take on your adventures with you, and easily turns into a hydration pack, a water filter, an outdoor shower, and serves lots of other functions. We had never started a hardware business and never designed a product before. We were really working from scratch. To kind of get past all that, we did a couple of things.

First, we tried to connect ourselves and surround ourselves with some folks who had a much better idea than we did about how to move forward and make progress in this space. But we

also just sort of utilized the fact that we didn't know much about this and got scrappy on the Internet. We used a platform called Upwork to connect with people who could help us turn sketches and drawings of the product into 3D designs. We jumped on Alibaba and used that platform to help us connect with manufacturers.

We had this concept for the product, but we weren't sure if there was a need for it in the market. What we did was we took a rendering of the product that we had at the time, just a rendering of a 3D model, and we created a website and we made it look like the product was for sale today. Even though we had no physical versions, not even prototypes or samples, just this 3D model. We took a few hundred dollars that we had in our back pockets and we spent it on ads and we drove people to the site just to see how they would interact with the product.

We got to see exactly how many people would try to add the product to their cart and attempt to check out. We said, "Hey, it's not ready today, but we're launching a Kickstarter campaign soon. If you want to keep up on the updates, drop your email in here and we'll let you know." What this really did for us is it gave us sort of a very early glimpse into what our business model and our unit economics might look like well before we ever had a physical product at all. We were able to use that information to build some rough projections and financial models. Simplistic as it was, it was enough combined with the concept for the product to take it and pitch it to an investor.

Before we met with our investors and before we even started the company, I had the opportunity to participate in a great program called Birthright Israel Excel. They basically pair you with a business internship and a business mentor in Tel Aviv and you have a summer to work with them and learn all that you can learn. It was extremely useful as we moved forward and actually started the company to have had that business experience, have had that mentorship and just get a

little bit of a sense of what it's like to work in a company.

What advice do you have for young people out there?

Leitz: I think that there is some sort of pressure to spend our twenties chasing expensive job titles, chasing pay raises. But spend that time learning as much as you can about the world, as much as you can about yourself and the role that you want to play in the world. Because at the end of the day, we have one very short life. It's up to us to make a conscious decision about what we want to do with it, how we want to spend it, and how we want to frame our lives around that. Because at the end of the day, the core thing that we can get out of our twenties is understanding our why. Why we exist. What we want to accomplish. And then from our late twenties onwards for the rest of our lives, that is our time to be accomplishing that.

If you are considering starting a business, I would basically say, especially if you are a young person, this can be in high school, in college, a young professional, there's nothing wrong with going into the business world and getting experience in an established company and then wanting to start your business. But I would say to reframe the idea of what it means to be risky starting a business right out of college or as a young professional. I think it's one of the more sensible times to start your business. You can only imagine that as life goes on, we have families one day. We have dependents. We have bigger and bigger financial obligations where it gets harder and harder to put everything on the line and take a big risk like that.

What do you want to say to the people who are currently in business, but might be facing challenges?

Leitz: If you are an entrepreneur and you're of that entrepreneurial mindset, I've got no doubt that you probably are having business ideas by the day or by the week. I found

that it's really easy to just have a cool idea, let it take the hook and you sort of fall into it. But there is sort of an unintentionality about it. I think that it's important as you're having all these ideas, and you're trying to figure out *What direction should I go in? What's the idea that I should actually pursue?* Try to be intentional about choosing your path, and make sure that it's not just, *I had this cool idea and I'm jumping on it.* To the greatest extent possible, try to make sure that it aligns with your why. So that at the end of the day, your business is in some form or fashion contributing to what you want your overall purpose to be.

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