Meet three Gen-Z entrepreneurs who turned college side hustles into full-fledged businesses

Oct 4, 2024 | 5 min

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The mix of wanting to make money and the entrepreneurial bug has inspired many Generation-Z (Gen-Z) college students to pick up a side hustle during school. By doing this, some have seen their side hustles bloom into full-time, high-growth companies.

Let's meet three Gen-Z entrepreneurs who've turned their college side hustles into thriving businesses.

"Laundry was the bane of my existence," so this college student launched a business.

In 2020, 20-year-old Camden Olivero, a junior at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Oswego, dreaded doing his laundry. Between the hustle and bustle of college life and classes, Olivero would often pile his clothes on his dorm room bed. He just didn't have free time to speak of, and he found that the laundry machines – in the basement – were *far* from convenient.

One day, Olivero had his light bulb moment and wondered if his laundry could be delegated — for a price. He pitched the idea to his friend Dan Feliciano, a serial entrepreneur. Feliciano, who was married with kids, also knew the struggle of fitting laundry into a busy schedule, but with a slightly different perspective.

Following conversations and many brainstorms, the duo decided to launch the business ClothesLyne©. Olivero initially began running the business part-time in the fall semester of 2020, targeting college students as his customers while balancing school himself.

When winter break came around, Olivero decided to transition to being a part-time student so he could dedicate more time to building the business.

"I was living in Oswego [New York] and coming home every other weekend to work with Dan in the office," Olivero said. "He told me something that I think changed my life: 'Do you want to be a 21-year-old entrepreneur or a 21 or 22-year-old college kid?'"

As of 2024, ClothesLyne services eight states, including Massachusetts, Alaska, Rhode Island, Connecticut, North Carolina, New Jersey, New York, and Nevada. Customers place orders via ClothesLyne's app, and ClothesLyners, who are independent contractors, pick up customers' laundry, do their laundry, and then drop it off. In many ways, the experience mimics what's been built by ridesharing and online food-delivery services.

While Olivero first expected to build a roster of independent contractors who were college students, it turned out moms were the most interested in the side gig.

"Most of our ClothesLyners are moms, and so this fits into their schedule," said Olivero, who's now finishing completing his degree alongside running the business. "They usually pick up or drop [off] orders on the way home from school or work."

As for Olivero's message to other aspiring Gen-Z entrepreneurs and side hustlers, he cautions them not to get swept away by how entrepreneurship is portrayed on social media.

"Building a company can have glamour, but people have a hard time seeing what it takes to build a successful company," Olivero said. "It can be lonely, and you [have] to fight through hard times."

But for Olivero, his side hustle paid off. On average, he says ClothesLyne is growing 15% month-over-month, and the team aspires to expand its footprint nationally.

"School in the morning and using my free time after school to shoot content and email brands" turned into five-figure deals for this content creator.

In Bayonne, New Jersey, 21-year-old brand agency founder Pamela Valdez shares a similar entrepreneurial spirit to Olivero. As Valdez started her college journey at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City a couple of years ago, something inspired her to keep a visual diary of her life and outfits.

She taught herself search engine optimization (SEO) and launched a blog in 2020. The joy of blogging led her to start creating content on social media with the help of her sister. After classes, they'd go outdoors and shoot outfit videos and photos.

It wasn't long after that that she caught the eye of a brand, which reached out to her. "I landed my first paid $20 brand deal from a wellness company," Valdez said. "I soon realized how far this could go."

After several other paid partnerships, Valdez mastered the rhythm of balancing school and her side hustle as a content creator.

"I tried to remain as consistent as possible with a routine by doing school in the morning and using my free time after school to shoot content and email brands," Valdez said.

By 2021, Valdez decided to launch her own marketing agency — the Valdez Agency — to help brands work with content creators like herself. "No dream is too big if you have a goal in mind," said Valdez, who says she now makes four to five figures per brand deal. "I want to inspire the Latina and Hispanic communities but also give everyone, no matter what background or follower size, a chance."

The Valdez Agency has partnered with well-known companies in industries ranging from athletic apparel to global designer lifestyle brands. Valdez aims for the marketing agency to be a one-stop shop for Gen-Z, college students, post-grads, content creators, and everyone in between to become paid ambassadors and work with top brands across industries.

A neighbor suggested they help people install their Christmas lights. Now they make six figures.

When 15-year-old Riley Verhoff was hanging Christmas lights at his house in Arcadia, Arizona, a neighbor pitched the idea that Verhoff could install and take down Christmas lights as a business.

It wasn't long after that Verhoff teamed up with his friend Nic Cordovana to take the neighbor's suggestion to start the business Everything Lights. They started locally and helped their neighbors hang up their Christmas lights, but soon, word of mouth spread, and they expanded to helping businesses.

"It was a struggle to manage [the business] in high school and college," Verhoff said. "When we were in college, it was growing and significantly [and it became] hard to manage with college, so I made the decision to do the business [full-time]."

Just how much has the business grown? In the partners' first holiday season, Verhoff says both he and his partner made $15,000, and their earnings reached six figures in the past few holiday seasons.

The business' revenue primarily comes during the holidays, but weddings, parties, and other gigs also end up in their queue. The entrepreneurs have plans to continue growing the business, and aim to expand their workforce soon to meet the needs of the busy holiday season.

Verhoff says that it's his customers' reactions more than anything that helps him feel like he's making an impact.

"It's nice to see families all happy seeing their house lit up for the holidays," Verhoff said. "It's a nice joy."

As far as Verhoff's advice for budding entrepreneurs? "Stay focused and find something you enjoy and stick with it," said Verhoff. "You can't do something for a month, and if it's not working, give up...you have to stay consistent."

Lastly, don't feel you have to know everything before starting a business. Per Verhoff: "You'll learn as you go. We didn't know anything going into it."

Final thoughts

Verhoff, Cordovana, Valdez, and Olivero are all part of an era shaped by social media and digital tools that have ushered in a wave of new Gen-Z entrepreneurs. Today, college students may be able to set up a business with just a smartphone and a Wi-Fi connection.

However, as all these Gen-Z business owners expressed, a side hustle or business may not be for everyone or generate immediate cash flow. If you're considering starting a side hustle, consider evaluating the time and monetary risks. You'll also want to evaluate if it makes sense with your educational goals, like attending college.

"I'd have a good time doing due diligence when it comes to your idea before sinking time into it," Olivero advises.

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