

Self-care, working smart, and picking your battles - key tips for startup success

The unrelenting dedication of entrepreneurs and founders is often glorified, not to mention coveted. Burning the midnight oil, living for their passion, letting nothing stand in their way - it's a dream that calls out to millions of people every year. War Paint For Men founder Danny Gray shares his personal experiences to help founders on their journey.

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The reality however, can be harsh and unforgiving. It's all too easy for founders to burn themselves out at the beginning of their startup journey, especially if they're risking everything to fulfil their ambitions.

Danny Gray, founder of pioneering men's makeup brand War Paint for Men, faced his own share of challenges and obstacles along his own startup journey. Today, his brand is disrupting perceptions and challenging established industry players across the world, and he shares some of his key learnings and tips for budding startups and entrepreneurs below.

The birth of a brand

One of the most vital steps on your path to success is the belief you have in your own brand or product.

When Danny quit his job and dedicated his savings to found his company, he was driven by his desire to break the stigma surrounding the use of makeup by men. “I’ve only ever sold things that I believe in”, he says.

“If I don’t want to buy a product myself, I can’t sell it”.

Confidence in a product isn’t, however, a guarantee for success. Most founders are passionate, but conveying this passion to investors and customers is important. “If you’re going into today’s market as a founder, you need to 100% believe in what you’re doing - and there needs to be a story behind your brand. You need to have that brand identity”, Danny says.

Picking your battles

Hungry for funding, founders often try to raise investment too early. Having remortgaged his house and sold all of his possessions, Danny created a minimum viable product before even approaching investors. For example, many early-stage startups he’s spoken to spend thousands on custom websites when cheaper template solutions make more sense. Improvements can take place after growth, when securing investors.

Founders also need to realise their limits, and bring in others for help. In Danny’s case, he was initially running the entire business and stocktaking and packing orders himself.

“When you start scaling, you need to think about your supply chain. I brought in someone experienced in operations, who manages it all. You

can't be good at everything, so it's important to get the right people into the right roles. Investors love founders, but they also need to see them surrounded by the right team to support them too”.

Natural amplification

The importance of social media is unarguable, with 90% of people buying from brands they follow on social networks. In addition, 75% of people increase their spending with brands that they follow.

Many founders use influencers to help grow their brands, but it's not always the best strategy - research has shown that Influencer engagement rates have fallen by around 10% over the past year.

“We're apprehensive with influencer marketing and haven't ever paid someone to post our product, because I think it dilutes your brand to have someone share a generic product picture that is obviously transactional”, Danny explains.

“If we did ever pay someone, it would be because we had built a relationship with them first and we trusted them as an advocate”.

Be kind to yourself

Tenacity, late nights, early starts and unwavering attitudes are just some of the attributes that make up the DNA of world famous founders. Despite this, it's important to approach goals in a realistic manner. A study by

University of San Francisco researcher Michael A. Freeman shows that 49% of entrepreneurs face at least one form of mental health condition during their lifetimes. These include ADHD, anxiety and depression, as well as the all-too familiar Imposter Syndrome - the latter of which is something that Danny himself has experienced:

“I get Imposter Syndrome every day, and I’m not ashamed to say it. I’ve always needed reassurance for everything I’ve done, and I don’t think that feeling is ever going to go - but I think self doubt can sometimes be quite healthy, because it makes you appreciate the things you have. Just make sure you’re not setting huge goals from the very beginning, because you're likely to end up not achieving them and beating yourself up about it”.

With regards to burning the candle at both ends however, the detrimental effects are very much real. Last year, the World Health Organization even included burnout in its 11th Revision of International Classification of diseases, as an occupational phenomenon.

Danny himself is all too familiar with the burnout:

“Perfection is never going to happen. When I started the brand, I had a full-time job and a newborn child. I was working day and night. I couldn’t sleep. The key is to work hard, and smart. I feel so much better now that I’m not working 24/7”.

These experiences highlight the importance of self-care, and how a healthy mind is crucial to success. If founders can strike the right balance,

they'll have a healthier path towards their goals, while giving them the best chance of achieving them in the process. Everything else after that, is just a wonderful bonus.

Danny's top tips for founders

1. Never sell something you don't truly believe in.
2. Build a strong brand identity that people can relate to. Don't be afraid to share your own story.
3. Influencers can be useful, but they shouldn't always be your default social strategy.
4. Pick your battles. Nail the basics and show your concept works before approaching investors.
5. Know your limits, and bring in other people to ensure all angles are covered.
6. Set yourself realistic goals so you don't get disheartened.
7. Avoid burnout. Work smarter not harder, and set aside time to switch off and spend with other people.

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