

Teen Fashion Designers Turn to Instagram to Test Their Entrepreneurial Skills

By: Caroline Bodan

For most fifteen year olds, the hours after school are usually filled with extra curriculums, homework and studying. Some might be beginning to think about their futures and what they might entail. For Olivia Hazan, a fifteen year old from Westchester, NY, days look a little different. Hazan, who has already attracted support from top designers like Stacey Bendet, spends her after school hours building her brand.

Having parents in the industry opened her eyes to the world of fashion, but the initiative to start her own business is all her own. Already running a successful blog, the teen's next step in conquering the fashion world was releasing her own designs. She turned to Instagram last month to launch Olivia Hazan Collections, an Instagram only jewelry line. The teen designer has found a niche in trendy accessories, from stacked gold bracelets to lighting bolt earrings and necklaces, all handcrafted. All business is conducted on this app, and Hazan has been able to attract a following through her physical followers on the platform.

Instagram has been on the rise since its debut in 2010. According to *Top Ten Reviews*, the platform is the 4th most used social media app in 2020. The platform is widely used in the fashion industry due to its focus on photos, and designers, publications and even bloggers have utilized this source to share various visual elements. However, while most online sites have an Instagram page to promote products, the business is done through e-commerce on a linked website. Young designers have found a loophole for having to generate a website, which takes time and resources that they do not often have when starting out. Designers like Hazan have been using Instagram to conduct all business matters without having to waste resources on a website, all while engaging with a generation that is glued to their social media to capitalize on business.

When Hazan was starting her line, Instagram seemed like an obvious choice. She says, "It's how I get all of my orders. I don't sell through a site yet, because I'm only really doing jewelry. But by making an Instagram page, I can connect with people who are interested in my jewelry, and talk with them. It's a good experience to be able to connect with clients, and get to know my followers." It is also a familiar platform for her, having run her own account on the platform for years, and she loves the ability to, "get intimate with followers."

The process for sales is pretty simple. Followers can scroll through Hazan's feed where all of her ready-to-wear jewelry is featured, and direct message her with their order. Payment happens over a platform like Venmo, and from there, Hazan ships the order.

Olivia Ricci has used Instagram in a similar way as she put her lifelong love of fashion to work through the platform. She acquired her love of fashion at age seven from her grandmother, who taught her how to sew and make her own clothing. As she grew older, Ricci put fashion on the backburner to pursue sports throughout high school, but last year when a brain surgery took her out of her normal extracurriculars, she turned to fashion to fill her time. In October of 2019, she launched Lush Apparel, her own Instagram collection with help from her mother's initial investment for supplies. Her specialty is custom college attire, which has become a trend on Instagram in its own right as tailgates have become trendy events, and she says these types of orders are always in high demand. She also sells crewnecks, graphic tees and other original clothing designs. Ricci tries to stay on top of the trends, noting that, "Tie dye is really in, so I had the idea to customize any tie dye top to fit your college and style!"

Ricci considered Etsy when brainstorming ideas about where to grow her business, but acknowledges that, "the benefits weren't as good as Instagram. Instagram has created a beneficial environment for my brand. Most of my customers find Lush Apparel through other people. Reposting and sharing posts really help my brand succeed." Hazan also notes that the nature of Instagram is really helpful for promoting the product. She says, "I'm always reaching out to some of my favorite influencers to send jewelry in trade for promotion on their page. Instagram is such a help, because everything can be shared, reposted, or hashtagged"

Julia Mendelson is another teenage creator who has combined her artistic skills and eye for design to create custom pieces out of ordinary clothing items. The Potomac, MD senior has created an Instagram business, Kickinitwithjuj, where clients send in their sneakers, denim shorts, and other typical pieces of clothing, and she gives them a unique twist with her custom paint designs. She got the idea in her studio art class last year, where she painted her own pair of sneakers for her final, and from there, realized that she could do this for others as well. When her summer jobs fell through and she needed money, she turned to Instagram. Mendelson says, "I posted on the account, and immediately shared it to my personal Instagram story. I had a few friends immediately reach out, and then share about my business on their story, which really helped to attract people to my page." Her following has been growing since. The process is collaborative, and her clients usually come to her with specific ideas, she notes. Together, they work to craft a piece, and then the client mails her the piece that they

would like customized. This collaboration takes place over Instagram direct messaging, and payment happens through Venmo. She is starting to see a rise in this sales tactic, with her explore page on Instagram being filled with other custom shoe design posts, and predicts that this trend will only continue to rise. She likes seeing them, and uses them to find inspiration for her own designs.

Though these three designers have found a new platform for launching their designs, the idea of a teenage designer is hardly new. However, in the past, a good deal of luck was essential to success. *Harper's Bazaar* reports that Jack McCulloh and Lazaro Hernandez rose to success at age 20, but it was through extensive networking and industry connections (McCulloh with Marc Jacobs and Hernandez with Anna Wintour) that allowed them the leverage to produce their first independent label together upon graduation from Parsons School of Design. Grace Rikert, a junior fashion student at Cornell University notes that it was a unique situation, a position to compete on *Project Runway: Threads*, that spread the word about her designs at a young age. With the rise of the Internet, and especially with the rise of free platforms like Instagram, it is easier than ever before for teenagers to launch their collections. That is, if they have the insight and the skills to run it successfully.

Hazan says that running a successful business, “takes time and dedication. The first step is to find your focus. So for my collection I currently do ready to wear, affordable jewelry. Then you need to get creative and stand out from other companies that may be similar to yours. Being unique is really important to me, but can be hard. So try to set yourself apart from the crowd. The most important piece is definitely networking! I can’t even stress how important it is to network. It’s just the best way to break your way into the industry and grow your brand.”

Ricci emphasizes the importance of curating your feed. She says, “Creating a brand and a plan is definitely a must. You also need a theme for your page, something that lures people in. Fun and colorful posts are important for a brand. No one wants to see boring pictures and captions when shopping. Catching a customer’s eye, helps provide a good word for your brand and more sales.”

For Mendelson, the brand name was the hardest, but most important part. She says, “Creating a name was definitely the hardest part of it because it’s so difficult to come up with something catchy and memorable and not boring. I wanted something that people would hear and remember. I came up with Kicking it with Juj, as a spinoff of “kicks” as sneakers. After that, things took off.”

These young women have already accomplished a great deal, running a lucrative fashion business before any of them have even graduated high school. For the future, Hazan hopes to expand Oliva Hazan Collections into a full fledged clothing line. Ricci's goal is to have local boutiques selling Lush Apparel this year. Mendelson plans to start collaborating with other Instagram businesses so that they can mutually grow, through giveaways and other fun Instagram attention draws to gain followers. Though each designer has goals in mind, they have clearly already struck on previously untouched areas for commerce, and their success in cultivating a following proves that Instagram stores may be more than just a fast trend. Regardless of which way the trends turn, these designers have made it clear that they know how to identify the next big thing for their business.