

For Grace Eleyae, an on-the-side sewing project became a thriving headwear line. (See page 104.)



from passion to profit

If you dream of being your own boss, of turning a hobby into a business, learn from five successful women who did just that.

By LISA ARBETTER

TALK ABOUT GIRL POWER: More women are starting businesses than ever before. The number of female-founded companies climbed by 21 percent between 2014 and 2019, according to a report from American Express. That's more than double the growth rate of *all* businesses. Pretty cool, right? Barriers still abound, of course, but the numbers prove we can chip away at them. Let these women, who turned side gigs into full-fledged companies, inspire you to go after your big idea.



trust your gut

ORA ASSAYAG, founder and CEO of Ora's Amazing Herbal

THE BACKSTORY: Everything you need to know about Ora Assayag's entrepreneurial success can be summed up by two phrases she uses to describe herself: "not a doctor person" and "a little bit belligerent."

Ora (pictured opposite) started considering alternatives to traditional medicine as a teenager, after being hospitalized for Crohn's disease. Still feeling awful, even after treatment, she began doing her own research. This led to a deep interest in the healing power of food, and eventually to degrees in biology and nutrition.

THE IDEA: In 2010, she was working on her first start-up, a healthy-cookie company, when the youngest of her four children came down with a severe, scratch-until-she-bled case of eczema. Preferring to try something natural for her 1-year-old's tender skin before going down the prescription medication road, she turned to some of the master herbalists and naturopaths she'd gone to school with. Under their direction, she mixed up an herbal salve of non-GMO grapeseed oil infused with seven anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, and healing organic herbs. "Even I was amazed by how effective it was, truthfully," Ora says.

THE LEAP: She gifted the rest of the batch to friends and family, who used it for everything from dry cuticles to burns. When they started asking for more, she knew she was onto something. In 2012, Ora's Amazing Herbal was born.

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Touchy Skin Salve, as that first product came to be known, is still one of the top sellers in her line, which now includes about 40 items. The entirely self-funded company, with nine employees, is a family-run business. Ora researches and creates the products, then passes her recipes to her husband, Ronen, who produces them. "I really couldn't do it without him," she says, "but it's tough to work with your spouse. Sometimes I just need something done right now, and he's like, 'OK, but who's making dinner?'" Even her two boys, ages 18 and 16, and two girls, ages 14 and 11, help out sometimes.

Throughout the eight years of slow and steady growth, Ora has been motivated by the thank-you notes from people whose persistent rashes, problem skin, or sensitivities to chemicals seemed incurable. "I want to empower people with self-care," she says. "Taking a moment to be more conscious about what we use and how we use it, how it affects our community and our earth, influences how we treat others. It really goes a lot deeper than the product."

THE TAKEAWAY: Don't ignore what Ora calls your "inner knowing." Ora had to recognize that her passion was herbs and natural healing, rather than food and nutrition, which she had a degree in. That acknowledgment gave her the courage to start something new.



Photograph by Sara Naomi Lewkowicz
Illustrations by Ana Zaja Petrak



if you want it, so do others

GRACE ELEYAE, cofounder and
CEO of Grace Eleyae

THE BACKSTORY: Grace Eleyae’s mom warned her: “Protect your hair.” But Grace (pictured on page 100), who was vacationing in Kenya at the time, just wanted to look cute. Wearing a headscarf wasn’t part of the plan.

Neither was a bald spot. But that’s exactly what developed after the dry heat and friction from the car’s headrest conspired to break off her chemically straightened hair. “It was a traumatic experience,” she says. “It made me start thinking that there has to be something to protect your hair that you can also feel cute wearing when you’re on vacation.”

THE IDEA: When she returned home, the then 26-year-old began playing with the possibility of a satin-lined cap, while working at a start-up during the day and taking sewing classes at night. The satin, she knew, would protect the hair and retain moisture, much like a sleeping bonnet. The cotton exterior, made to look like a beanie, was the key to cuteness. What she couldn’t figure out was how to keep the cap from sliding off the head.

The last project in her sewing class provided the answer. “We had to learn how to sew in an invisible elastic band,” she says. “In a moment of divine inspiration, I realized that *that’s* the thing that’ll help it stay on. So I went straight to my sewing machine and sewed the prototype.”

Her mom, her sisters, and a couple of cousins raved when she showed them her rough sample. Buoyed by their encouragement and armed with their feedback, she went through about five iterations before landing on what would become her original satin-lined cap, or Slap.

THE LEAP: She started selling the hand-sewn creations on Etsy and continued doing so as a side project while attending journalism grad school at Northwestern. Even after her brother loaned her \$10,000 for an initial manufacturing run, she resisted focusing on the business full-time. Then, in 2015, two years after that fateful trip to Kenya, things took off. A year earlier, she and her sister had written to about 100 YouTubers with large followings to try to get some coverage. Three answered, and only one posted, but that one post provided momentum. “We grew 10 times year over year for the first three years,” Grace says.

Today, celebrities such as Viola Davis, as well as many men, are customers. The line has expanded to include scrunchies, turbans, hats, headbands, and other satin- or silk-lined headwear. “I made the Slap for myself, thinking I was solving a problem for my own life,” Grace says. “It is such a nice surprise knowing that so many people wanted this, that I actually filled a gap in the market.”

THE TAKEAWAY: Put yourself in the mind of your customer. Grace created something new, and she understood that people would need to be educated about what it was. That’s why, in the early days of online influencers, she turned to YouTubers and produced her own videos—so customers could see the product’s benefits for themselves.

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know when to ask for help

EMILY McDOWELL,
founder and
creative director of
Em & Friends



THE BACKSTORY: Emily McDowell (pictured right) was freelancing as an ad agency creative director when she stumbled upon a self-help article promising to answer the very question she was struggling with: “What should I do with my life?” It suggested that happiness could be found by revisiting what you loved doing as a child. “For me, it was writing and drawing,” she says. “I had always loved lettering, and hand-lettering wasn’t the giant trend it is now.” She started drawing in her free time and eventually opened an Etsy shop, in 2011. She earned about \$40,000 her first year by selling prints of her artwork.

THE IDEA: Creating greeting cards that accurately reflected her relationships and the messiness of life had been in the back of Emily’s mind since she was diagnosed with cancer at 24. “Get well” just seemed like the wrong sentiment to express to someone who might not recover. “One of my huge motivations is to help people convey things they wouldn’t be able to find the words for on their own,” she says. (Exhibit A: Her popular card that reads, “No card can make this better. But I’m giving you one anyway.”)

THE LEAP: Her first card dealt with a profoundly awkward situation many of us are familiar with: what to say or do on Valentine’s Day when you’ve just started dating someone. She found a local printer and had 50 cards made; she ended up selling 1,700 in one week. That was all the proof she needed that there was a market for these cards. So she took three months off, lived on savings, and created a collection of 40 cards, which she launched at the National Stationery Show in May 2013. Over the next four years, the company grew to employ 14 people. As CEO, Emily was still doing all the writing and artwork by herself. She was a success, but...

“I was miserable,” she says. “Massive burnout. There was no joy. It felt like all hardship.” So she merged with another female-founded gift company, called Knock Knock. Jen Bilik, Knock Knock’s founder, is CEO of the merged company, while Emily

focuses on creative direction and strategy. She is particularly proud of the collaboration they’ve done with the writer Elizabeth Gilbert.

While merging the two companies resulted in some unexpected growing pains, they made it through. Even with the coronavirus interruption, Emily says the company is in a good place. They’ve shifted their priority from growth to stability. “We’re focused on making a life that works, that feels sustainable,” she says. “We don’t need to take over the world.”

THE TAKEAWAY: Be willing to give up some control. Emily always thought she’d love managing a big staff, but when the pressure started building, she had to admit that it wasn’t how she wanted to spend her time. Merging her company with Knock Knock put her life back into balance and let her focus on what she loves: writing and design.



PHOTOGRAPH BY JERRAD MATTHEW



PHOTOGRAPH BY KRISTIN FRANCIS



network like crazy

NICOLE GIBBONS, founder and CEO of Clare

THE BACKSTORY: Nicole Gibbons (pictured opposite) overachieves at overachieving. While working her way up from assistant to global director of public relations and events at Victoria's Secret, she spent five years meticulously building her blog and interior design business on the side, promoting herself by doing videos for brands. After she left Victoria's Secret, she was cast on *Home Made Simple*, a design show on the Oprah Winfrey Network, and stayed for three seasons. Throughout it all, Nicole, who has ambitions of becoming a Martha Stewart-type lifestyle brand, dreamed of launching a line of products. "I just didn't know what made sense," she says.

THE IDEA: As Nicole was helping a friend through the painful process of picking interior paint colors, it hit her. Someone needed to simplify choosing, sampling, and buying paint.

In 2018, she launched Clare, an online paint company that offers a curated selection of 61 colors (versus the thousands sold by other brands). The paint and all the tools are delivered to your door. "I thought if I could bring in designer-led expertise, that would help people choose a color and make the process more delightful," she says.

But founding a manufacturing company is not the same as founding a design business. You need serious start-up funding, which for Nicole meant wading into the male-dominated world of venture capital.

The portion of venture capital going to women-founded businesses is laughable (2.7 percent, per the financial data company PitchBook), and it's even worse for Black women. According to the 2020 ProjectDiane report, Black and Latinx women founders have received just 0.64 percent of venture capital since 2018. "If you looked at it on paper, you would assume someone like me would never get funding," Nicole says. "But I have this ridiculous 'I can do anything' mentality. I don't care what I read on paper. I'm going to do it anyway."

THE LEAP: She took 2017 to prepare the living heck out of her pitch. "I spent a ton of time trying to understand manufacturing and figure out who all the suppliers were. Tons of phone calls, tons of meetings, tons of travel. And I did all this off savings," she says. Nicole eventually raised \$2 million and launched Clare seven months later.

THE TAKEAWAY: Reach out to everyone you know—and those you don't. Nicole credits the birth of Clare to two meetings: one with a paint chemist she found through Google, and the second with a venture capitalist who was offering 20-minute informational sessions to anyone who signed up. Both women gave actionable advice and encouragement that helped Nicole move forward.

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embrace your mistakes

NICOLE POMIJE,
creator and owner of
the Cookie Cups

THE BACKSTORY: The head of a marketing and PR firm in Minneapolis, Nicole Pomije (pictured below) was baking her stress away when a bit of kitchen improv produced her next business idea.



THE IDEA: She was making chocolate chip cookies but couldn't find a cookie sheet, so she grabbed a mini cupcake pan instead. She loved the resulting dense, moist "cookie cups" so much that she started experimenting with flavors and bringing them to family gatherings. "It kind of became my thing," she says.

Farmers markets were next. Over the course of two summers, she built up a loyal following, selling out every market day and catering for customers on the side. She made about \$15,000 per season—it was more a creative outlet than a real business. "I was just having a good time and enjoying what was going on," she says. "Opening a bakery—I never really saw that as an end goal."

THE LEAP: That changed after she and her family moved to a new house in Wayzata, about 12 miles from Minneapolis. "Every day, we would drive past this empty space. And one day I said to my husband, 'Do you think that would maybe make a good spot for a bakery?'"

The rundown, 700-square-foot store was on a well-traveled road, and Nicole couldn't shake the feeling that it was perfect. She signed a lease and got to work fixing it up. "It was a nine-month renovation, and I paid for it through selling cookie cups at farmers markets and using funds from my marketing firm—anything I could spare," she says. All in, it cost her about \$50,000.

As she was figuring out how to get licenses, trademarks, and updated plumbing, Nicole—who,

I wish someone had told me how fulfilling it is to run a local bakery and serve your community, because it's priceless.

oh yeah, was also pregnant with her now 3-year-old daughter—was planning a menu. She wanted to include nondessert options, but paninis and soups didn't make sense to her. So she returned to her beloved cupcake pan and created savory selections, such as mac and cheese, tacos, pizza, and meatloaf with mashed potato "frosting."

Finally, on April 7, 2018, about six months later than she'd hoped, the Cookie Cups bakery opened for business. The line was out the door. "It was the best day ever," Nicole says. She has since opened a second, larger location and added cooking classes to her offerings, all while running her marketing firm from an office she built herself in the second bakery.

THE TAKEAWAY: Seek out positive reinforcement. "Before I started, every single person told me this would be hard and asked if I was sure I wanted to do this," she says. "But I wish someone had told me how fulfilling it is to run a local bakery and serve your community, because it's priceless. When people come in and they're happy, it's just like, 'Wow, I really built something here.'" ■