



WHAT'S WITH THE DOGS?

The two-headed dog symbolizes the complexity and internal conflict of the modern man who wants to feel confident and dress well, but feels frustrated and defeated by the lack of easy and feasible clothing options. It represents the core customer's dilemma, solved by Frank & Oak's simple and curated shopping platform

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ONCE UPON A TIME, YOU COULD DRESS TERRIBLY and no one would mind. Sure, there were well-dressed people out there, but for the last few decades, awful clothes were the norm, and even CEOs could get away with windbreakers or baggy suit pants or Donald Trump hair. But things have changed. As a gender, men have stepped their collective fashion game up to the point where an actual effort must be made. And most men are clueless – which is a shame, because the internet has countless people doing all the work for you. Take, for example, Frank & Oak, a Montreal-based clothing company founded by first generation Canadian entrepreneurs Ethan Song (CEO and Creative Director) and Hicham Ratnani (CIO), who have been running a monthly master class in looking good since 2010.

Neither are strangers to business management. The two ran their own web design firm in high school, and have worked on various other projects – including a lighting company – ever since. Their paths diverged briefly when Ethan went to study theatre, followed by software engineering, while Ratnani majored in engineering and eventually found a place at a big consultancy. But like a suit and tie, they couldn't be kept apart very long, and reunited in 2009 to form Modasuite, their first online fashion venture.

Modasuite catered to a specific niche of menswear, selling custom suits to time-strapped execs and guys who simply wanted a dapper custom look. While it had its success, Song and Ratnani felt they weren't reaching a large enough target. They wanted to bring a curated look to the masses, and so the time came for a business makeover.

They didn't want to cater just to executives– they wanted the whole corporate ladder, and everyone else besides. So, they dreamt up a new business

model that could reach guys in all walks of life, applying for grants and funding to help their venture reach the next level. With a bit of luck, and a lot of effort, they were able to secure seed financing from Real Ventures, a venture capital organization that specializes in funding digital media projects. In 2011, Modasuite was shut down and Frank & Oak arose in its place, named after Vancouver intersection Franklin and Oak.

Ironically, Song and Ratnani have never really thought of themselves as designers. They see themselves as technology specialists: "We're very much a mix of Montrealers – in that Montreal is a million different things," says Ratnani. "But at the heart of the company, we're web developers, not fashion designers. We're a unique mix. Frank and Oak is about fashion design, technology and retail."

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"We try our damn best," exalts Song. "Through technology, internal stylists and designers, we try to figure out what you personally like. That's a big part of our success. Guys resonate with that. They don't want to do the work. They want to be shown. They want to look good but don't want to spend time finding what they want. They'd rather be going out having a good time with their friends." Song and Ratnani feel that their clients would rather spend

a hundred dollars here and there on choice items rather than dropping \$2,000 all at once on a new wardrobe. And there's also their Hunt Club, a monthly

subscription that sends you a selection of curated must-have items right to your home.

Song calls the Frank and Oak look "Casual Chic" – not overly done, but with flashes of distinction that draw on the flair of 1940s Mad Men and early 1920s Brooklyn work wear aesthetic. For inspiration, he looks to French brands for their minimalism, Italian brands for their tailoring, and Japanese made garments for their technical aspects. "It's a mix and match, and I think that's what guys are looking for nowadays."

Their first run had classic pieces done 'their way' like oxfords, chambray shirts and tweed jackets. But as the brand has grown and their customer base expanded, they've added more depth in terms of styling and details. "Our most important realization," says Song, "was that men like the basics but are still always in search for that perfect piece – a piece that will enhance their personality. So now we focus on surprising and creating unexpected pieces."

So what's the secret to their success? In one phrase: social media. The founders feel that having a direct connection to designers, brands and the client without stores or wholesalers getting in the way allows them to build a close relationship with and cater directly to their customers. This intimacy with the customer is a hallmark of vertically integrated retail like fast fashion giants H&M and Zara, and has advantages galore – when you own the entire production line from factory to distribution point, you can stop on a dime and crank out new items to your heart's, and the consumer's content.

"A lot of people think that we're an overnight success, but we've had tons of failures along the way," says Song, "and we're still figuring things out now. My advice to entrepreneurs is: you need to understand why you're doing it. Time is precious, and if you're going to invest fully in something, you want to make sure that you're doing something you love."

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Have you noticed a behaviour that you could capitalize on? Map it out and see if you could simplify it to make it better. Everybody appreciates convenience.

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