



T-shirt eBook- before you start

by Kalilah Wright

**What you
should know
before
starting a
t-shirt
company.**

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T-SHIRT eGUIDE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS



02 UNDERSTANDING
YOUR WHY

03 MISTAKES AND
MISHAPS

05 LESS IS MORE

05 KNOW YOU

05 COMPETITION IS
HEALTHY

07 DON'T GET LOST

07 MARKETING IS KEY

09 WHAT YOU NEED TO
START A T-SHIRT
COMPANY

11 ESSENTIAL TIPS TO
KNOW BEFORE
STARTING

Your WHY?

So here's the thing, I am not here to deter you in any way from starting your own t-shirt company, but I am here to help you navigate the waters in hopes that you can be a success. I mean who wants to waste money or time, I know I don't. I am truly happy you are here and I embarked on this journey a couple years ago and I had NO IDEA what to expect. I truly didn't know what I was creating, and I think that was the beauty in my journey. I would caution you to not set too high of an expectation when venturing into this apparel world. Not because it isn't lucrative or you can't be successful, I just want you to set a realistic expectation. Entrepreneurship is a rollercoaster in which you need to decide when to get on and off the ride. When times get rough, your why will help get back to basics.

Not always when creating your t-shirt company will it have a purpose. It is great if you have one from the beginning but sometimes your purpose comes after you begin your business. Don't let this deter you from your start. Also, you are probably going to be plagued with figuring out the company's name, what you will sell, how much products will cost, and even where you are hosting your website.

Your why can be embedded in things around you, family, frustration, failures, wanting a change, or being ready to do something different. I want to stress that starting a business is not always a life saving strategy. Building a business can be difficult and not to add extremely stressful. But again, I am not here in any shape or form to deter you from the greatness ahead. I just want to prepare you without any fluff. I want you to know when the going gets tough, you will have to keep on going. You will have to dig deep, find your why and hold on to it to survive another day, week, month or year.



Mistakes and mishaps

There's so many things I have made a big MESS with when starting a t-shirt company. I have made little mistakes, and really big mistakes that have cost me thousands of dollars, I know, OUCH! And yes, it definitely hurt. But one thing I want to share and need you to remember is you can't mitigate the MESS. Meaning, no matter how hard you try, things will go wrong on this journey. You have to be prepared to fix the issue and move forward and eat the cost. What you need to mitigate is how much this mistake will cost you. For example, if you print something incorrectly, what do you now do with this defected product? Can you create a design from what you messed up and make it into something you can still sell? Can you mark down the product but still sell it and at least make the money back in which you invested to produce the item? Or, will you have to donate the damaged products, but able to use it as a tax write off for your company? You have to be creative about the mistakes and mishaps you make and figure out how you can fix it with minimal harm to your company.

Starting out, you can make a mistake by selecting the wrong business name. You don't want to start a company and select a name either infringing on someone else's company's name, or selecting a name with a difficult spelling that your consumers will easily forget. So, from the start, you can make decisions that can be extremely costly. For example if you select a company's name, invest in a logo, launching a website, branding materials etc. to then discover the name is now infringing on another businesses IP, is a disaster. Not only will you have to change your company's name and rebrand, you can in the early stages, open yourself up to a potential lawsuit. Similarly if you launch a t-shirt design infringing on someone's likeness of their image or brand, this can also tarnish your business. Before jumping into this t-shirt game, I want you to understand how to limit the mistakes that might cost you a lot.

Other mistakes you can make can include not doing things "official" starting out. Most of us, are in a rush when starting our businesses and we want to skip over reading the fine print and details. I commend you if you have even gotten to this page in the e-book and actually are reading it. These days, people only want the answers and not the instructions on the back of the box. For example, you can launch a business without registering it with the state you live in, or without an official bank account or even an EIN (employer Identification Number) from the IRS. There is nothing stopping you from doing this and honestly there are a lot of people who operate like this within their business but I go back to what I said before, how much will it cost you? You will eventually have to file taxes, or may need paperwork to establish funding for your business, and the longer you run not legally operating your business, the more difficult it will be to get things together to make it legit after the fact. I recommend registering your business with the IRS once you have established a business name, decided it was something you are 100% ready to do, and something you are wholeheartedly committed to. If you are still on the fence about starting a business, get your feet wet, sell a couple of t-shirts and then make a decision. BUT, I caution you to not operate like this for long. The longer you take to establish proper documentation deeming your business as a business, it will be difficult to reconcile in the future.

When embarking on this business ownership journey, there are going to be a lot of websites and people who prey on beginner business owners and will promise they can help you along the way. Before diving into starting a business, I want you to truly do your research. For example, you do not have to pay for certain things like applying for an EIN. But you can be falsely duped into thinking this is something you must do and if you are too eager, it can be a costly mistakes.

Also, I caution you to be selective with who you are taking business advice from. Check the credibility of the source, ensure they know what they are taking about and look at their success rate. What have they accomplished, who have they helped, and why should you trust them with your business. Your business is your baby and you want to be selective with who you expose your business to from the start. Again, I am not here to deter you in anyway, but there are a lot of piranhas in the business tank and they are ready for some fresh new meat to feast on.

A costly mistake I see a lot of people make is not obtaining the right support staff for their business from the beginning. Trust me, I know it is not easy launching a business and financially you may not have it to hire and accountant or CPA or a CFO for your business. But, I strongly recommend utilizing software that will help you keep track of taxes you will have to pay your state and federal throughout the year. The last thing you want is for these things to accumulate and then you are scrambling to pay the government a large lump some.

As I mentioned before, you are going to make mistakes a long the way. There's no way to hide from them. But you need to figure out how costly this mistake will be to you and your business. Business owners can make what they would deem as a "simple" mistake and it cost them their whole entire business.

I can go on and on about mistakes and mishaps I have made in my business when starting out, but I assure you, if I can do this, you can do.

Lastly, be sure to understand what business insurances you may need for your business as you expand and grow. A business of one can not operate the same as a business of 3 or 4 when you begin to hire people. There is a liability to having people on your team and you want to ensure your business is covered. Coverage doesn't just include workers compensation and physically getting hurt on the job, there are a slew of other insurances and coverages you will need in the future to protect you and your business.



Less is More.

Creativity isn't needed to start a t-shirt company. Hard work and dedication is. Repeat after me, you don't have to be creative to start a t-shirt company. Not all good ideas are creative and not all creative things are good ideas. I've seen many amazing companies with the simplest designs, blossom into large, profitable, brands. You too, can do the same. Don't get caught up thinking you have to have the best designed items to make your brand explode.

"Less is More." -Mies van der Rohe

Most of all, you must be a dreamer. Have an idea that works, make sure your designs are clear, concise and that they make sense. You've got to give your audience a reason to stop scrolling. What is it about your brand that will differentiate yourself from others in your industry? The answers to these questions are not about creativity and the best designs, it's about creating something aesthetically appealing that will talk to your target market and something that they would love and directly identify and connect with. Assess if you want to outsource your designs by hiring a graphic designer or if you'd like to tackle this yourself. It's not as simple as "putting words on a shirt". There is a math and science behind this; the font, colors and position of the graphic matter. I recommend using a professional to design your tees if you are not a designer. Nothing is harder to sell than a bad designed t-shirt.

Know you!

Are you really built for this? Don't let this be ANOTHER thing you start to then ultimately put down in a corner. "No one puts Baby in a corner." I know too many that have purchased equipment,

invested their hard earned money and when it's time to launch, they freeze and ultimately, QUIT. Be sure to think about the different ways you can generate income that is true to you as an individual. If you do not want to do the legwork, maybe you stick to drop shipping and outsourcing your tees. When starting a t-shirt company, if you are anything like me, you are starting with almost no startup capital. So for the first two years, I was the marketing team, creator, designer, shipper, customer service rep, production team and the direct supervisor, I wore all the hats. Know yourself before embarking on this journey. Be sure you create a t-shirt company that you can sustain and grow and not one you'll put in a corner after 5-minutes.

Competition is healthy.

Don't be afraid of the competition. Your hands will get dirty and that's OK. Often people complain that the industry is saturated. We get it, t-shirts are everywhere, but that shouldn't stop you from eating, if you want a meal. Focus on building a core audience and organic audience that love your products. Build your brand and give the people what they want. Excitement and anticipation is what will drive your sales. Competition is everywhere and it's inevitable to be thrown into comparing your numbers, figuring out if you're on track and how to make sure you are serving your core audience. You will be competing against companies that sell high-end graphic tees for \$300+ to low-end popular stores that sell t-shirts for a bargain of \$5.99. Where do you fall in this market? How do you stand out? That's how you leverage with competition.



A
BLACK
WOMAN
CREATED
THIS.

Don't get lost.

It's easy for us to blend ideas or for you to gravitate towards what's working for someone else and say HEY, I want to do that! But what works for them may not work for you. Remember what I said about knowing yourself. Go back to that and really stay true to your brand and what you are designing. I'll go back to when I first started on this tee journey. I knew I wanted to create a brand with MESSAGES and it all made sense. I did not write out a formal business plan, but I knew the direction in which I wanted my brand to evolve. About a year in, I was not seeing the sales I anticipated. My following was not growing rapidly, I didn't even have the sauce to get lost in. I was slowly building, but it felt like it wasn't going fast enough. So I took to social media and I saw that graphic tees were popular and I decided to try my hand at it. I created a graphic t-shirt for pop culture and it sold! It sold well actually. My audience started demanding more from me like that but the concept was short lived. Once the icon I was idolizing on my shirts weren't popular anymore for that moment, the design was DEAD. I knew that the instant gratification and sales were short lived. Plus, in this market, I had more competition. I remember the day I sat down in front of my laptop and made conscious decision to stop diverting off track and not get lost in the sauce. Though these graphic tees worked and sold, it did not embody my original messaging and I had to take a moment to STOP and reassess. It's easy to get lost and gravitate toward things that you think will work for your t-shirt company, but remember to stay true to your brand and to not be diverted by short term wins if you're positioning yourself to win the long-term race.

There is nothing wrong with revisiting your t-shirt

designs and even shifting if things are not selling, but, you should have a very clear vision of where you want your brand to go.

Marketing is key.

Most people think starting a t-shirt company is a piece of cake! That you create a mock-up design and put it in your website and then BOOM! SALES! Wronggggg! There's so much you need to know about social media marketing, strategizing, when to launch a product, how to curate your Instagram page, which platform is best for you and your brand. There are so many questions that need answering before starting. This is where research and prelaunch data comes into play. So I hope right after you read this guide, you begin to do your research and start making some decisions before launching. Remember the days when party promoters would put fliers on your car window after a party ends to promote the next party. Things are a little different with social media but a lot of it is the same. You still need a street team telling everyone about your brand (influencers) and you need a good email list to follow up after the purchase is made. So though we aren't doing many cold calls or knocking on doors, social media is the same in which you are cold calling and acquiring customers who probably know nothing about your brand. You want to go beyond friends and family and dig deep into finding your core audience and selling to them. Marketing is key to selling your product. When I first started to push my MESSAGE tees, I would go to conferences, assess the big names, pick 5-8 people I would give promotional items to, hoping they would post and reshare. This

is what happened with writer and producer, Lena Waithe. In 2016 I attended a Blavity Conference in Chicago and Lena Waithe was on stage speaking to the crowd. As the event ended, I positioned myself to be off to the side and gifted her with my products and had a pitch ready to tell her about who I was and what I did and what my brand represented. She loved the item she received and several months later, Waithe wore my t-shirt on the red carpet of the BET AWARDS. I was floored! My t-shirt made it onto the red carpet and large publications voted her as best dressed and the pictures of her wearing my t-shirt was shared over and over and over again. This is marketing and it all started with me waiting and gifting her a shirt. Don't let small opportunities like this pass you by. Position yourself to market in a place that cost you nothing.

Now the excitement has hit you and you're ready to start, let's cover some basics...





What you need to start a t-shirt company?

1. KNOW YOUR NICHE AND TARGET MARKET.

Who have you decided to sell to? Do you have a specific market you would like to target? Write down who they are and create an customer avatar for individuals in this market. Choosing a niche is absolutely vital for success in the over-saturated t-shirt industry.

2. ARE YOU MORE OF A DIY OR WILL YOU OUTSOURCE?

Are you going to DO IT YOURSELF, learn the tricks to the trade or would you rather outsource this work and pay someone. The faster you make this decision the better. Choose wisely.

3. HOW WILL YOU PRINT YOUR SHIRT?

There are several different options to print your t-shirts. Educate yourself and figure out the best printing method for you.

4. HOW WILL YOU MARKET YOUR PRODUCTS?

If you have limited funds to start your t-shirt company, social media is a great free way to market and sell your products, but there's a lot you need to know about branding, marketing and selling online.

5. WHERE WILL YOU SET UP SHOP TO SELL YOUR TEES?

Have you thought about what platform will host your t-shirt company? A creative marketplace, wholesaling your items, or vendor events are great places to test your products before diving into eCommerce.



big guy.
big beard.
bigger...
heart.

Essential tips to know before starting your t-shirt company?

1. HOW TO REGISTER YOUR COMPANY WHEN FIRST STARTING A BUSINESS?

This answer depends specifically on the state you are living in. Different states have different requirements. For the state I live in (Maryland), to register a business, you have to first register the business's name and ensure it is not taken. You check this with the Maryland Department of Assessments & Taxation Department. You must then choose a business structure for your business (Sole Proprietor, Partnership, LLC, S-Corp, C-Corp). Establish an EIN number with the IRS. Lastly, obtain permits and licenses for your business.

2. WHAT START UP CAPITAL WILL I NEED?

You need some kind of money to start a business. Even if its to establish a website. You can definitely launch a business with little to no start up capital, but you will need some financial push to get your business off the ground. How much is up to you. If you will need to hire someone to do things in your business you may not have time, resources or availability to do, it will cost you. You can DIY a lot of things before putting up a large lump sum to get started.

3. WHAT MATERIALS DO I NEED WHEN STARTING?

This depends on how you want to get started. Remember you do not have to buy a ton of equipment and put it in your house to get started. You actually can get started with a good idea and a computer and that's it. You can outsource the design work, printing, marketing, shipping etc. Some people feel like they have to touch the products and be a direct part of the production of the products to be successful. That's not true. It's up to you. You can either buy equipment and DIY or you can outsource your production. This answer is based on your time and availability and the up front capital you might want to spend.

4. WHAT KEY PEOPLE DO YOU NEED ON YOUR TEAM IN THE BEGINNING WHEN LAUNCHING?

I strongly recommend an accountant or CPA. Open a bank account when you first launch and try your best not to commingle funds. This is one of the biggest mistakes entrepreneurs make. Meaning, don't buy equipment with your personal money for the business. You can take money from your personal account and loan it to your business for start up capital, but you want to track all purchases in one central account specifically designated for your business. This will make it easier of an accountant or CPA to help you when it's time for taxes or to reconcile your books.

5. SHOULD YOU START YOUR BUSINESS IN YOUR HOME OR GET A WORK SPACE?

Again, this depends on the start up capital you want to put out when starting. You don't want to lock yourself into a lease and your business is not thriving the way you envisioned. You want to start your business with the lowest overhead possible. This isn't said to deter anyone from getting a space, but if you can afford a month to month lease and think you business with perform better if you had more space, go for it! You just want to take your time with establishing overhead cost as you don't know what other areas of your business might be of higher expense and may need more immediate attention in the beginning.