Start

Start your business

Build your brand

Create your website

Online store editor

Customize your store

Store themes

Find business apps

Shopify app store

Own your site domain

Domains & hosting

Explore free business tools

Tools to run your business

Sell

Sell your products

Sell online or in person

Check out customers

World-class checkout

Sell online

Grow your business online

Sell across channels

Reach millions of shoppers and boost sales

Sell in person

Point of Sale (POS)

Sell globally

International sales

Sell wholesale & direct

Business-to-business (B2B)

Accept online payments

Set up forms of payment

Market

Market your business

Reach & retain customers

Market across social

Social media integrations

Chat with customers

Shopify Inbox

Nurture customers

Shopify Email

Know your audience

Gain customer insights

Manage

Manage your business

Track sales, orders & analytics

Measure your performance

Analytics and Reporting

Ship orders faster

Shopify Shipping

Manage your stock & orders

Inventory & order management

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The Story of Ugmonk: From Side Project to Lifestyle Product Empire

by Tucker Schreiber • Founder Stories

Apr 28, 2015 • 10 minute read

A love for typography and minimalistic design is all it took for designer Jeff Sheldon to get started on a life-changing path.

A designer by day, and entrepreneur by night—Jeff has been able to build an online t-shirt, and lifestyle product empire over the past few years.

In this customer spotlight, we catch up with Jeff and learn more about the growth and development of Ugmonk.

Can you give us a bit of background about Ugmonk?

Ugmonk is a design brand focused on producing high-quality products with a minimal aesthetic and intense attention to detail.

It started as a small side hustle to design t-shirts that I wanted for myself and now it has grown into a full-blown lifestyle brand.

We've shipped tens of thousands of products **to over 60 countries** around the world and continue to evolve and expand our product range.

It all started with a simple idea – design fresh high-quality unique items.

Just one month after I had graduated college, married my high-school sweetheart, moved to Burlington, VT, and started a full-time design job, I found myself brainstorming about launching my own brand centered around my love for typography and minimal design.

I felt like the design culture at the time was really lacking in this area, and apparently this design sensibility connected with many people all around the world.

What started as an outlet for my passion and entrepreneurial experiment quickly grew into much more than just selling a few shirts.

How did you create, manufacture or source your product? What were some lessons you learned during this process?

Designing a product is one thing but getting it produced is a whole different challenge. In the beginning I was pretty fluent on the design side of things but quickly learned that there was a lot I didn't know about production.

Screenprinted t-shirts sound pretty straightforward but there are so many variables that go into producing a high-quality tee.

One of the biggest things I can recommend is working with **manufacturers who take a true interest in your company and are willing to guide and educate you along the way**. Don't always look for the cheapest option available.

As I branched out into other types of products like leather goods, sketchbooks, and bags, each one has a big learning process. I spent countless hours researching and asking lots of questions to figure things out along the way.

There are no real secrets or shortcuts to this, it's just about *being dedicated and willing to put in the time to learn*.

The most involved product so far is our Waxed Canvas Messenger Bag.

Since this was a completely different product than anything I have produced so far, I needed a place that would help guide me through the manufacturing process and give input based on their expertise.

Many of the larger factories I contacted wanted a fully-designed bag to work from and didn't seem to take a personal interest in helping me through the process.

After contacting over 40 places I finally found a company in Portland, Oregon (with help from Maker's Row) that specialized in making the type of bag that I was looking to produce.

Moral of the story: don't give up even when the search seems hopeless.

It took over *2 years* from the initial sketches to releasing the finished bags in our shop, but I'm incredibly happy with the results.

We get compliments from customers all of the time about how much they love their bag.

How did you promote your business initially and where did your first sales come from? Any major media mentions or PR wins since then?

When I launched back in 2008 I was fortunate enough to get featured on several design and tshirt blogs (like NotCot, ILoveTypography, AisleOne and others). Back then social media was nothing like it is today so blogs were still the main way of getting exposure online.

Some sites I reached out to and some reached out to me. I sent personal emails to blogs that I was a fan of and thought their readers might enjoy my products.

I kept **every email personal and to the point** and avoided sending any type of press release in bulk.

Rather than trying to bribe with free products, I just asked them to post if they liked what I was doing with Ugmonk. Many sites never responded but some did and those helped build some initial traction.

In the beginning word-of-mouth played a huge part is spreading the word about Ugmonk and still continues to be our **primary marketing strategy.**

I'm all about creating products that customers will like enough that they want to tell their friends about and come back for more.

Over the years we've built a very loyal community and following and have our customers to thanks for much of our growth.

This process has been [slow & steady](#) and far from an overnight success, but we're in this for the long haul and are more interested in sustainable growth.

> Building personal relationships with influencers in your market can be tremendously valuable in the long run. It's important to make every point of contact personable and not just a copy-and-pasted email that is sent out to a number of influencers in bulk.

How did your sales pick up?

Sales picked up quite a bit when we were featured on some of the bigger blogs. Those features led to being featured on other design blogs and inspiration websites.

One of the coolest things about being featured online is that we were being seen by people all over the world, not *just* in the USA.

We are able to connect with people who share the same love for design and typography regardless of their geographic location.

Some hit press spotlights: [Ugmonk is featured on PayPal](#), Ugmonk in the movie [Diary of a Wimpy Kid](#), The band [Hawk Nelson rocks Ugmonk](#), Seen on [Cougar Town](#) (ABC), In a [Demi Lovato music video](#), and many, many more dating back to 2008.

I've also been invited to share the Ugmonk story and my design philosophy at a variety of design conferences over the past few years.

> It's important to continue to build momentum throughout the ecommerce journey. Having a strong brand, and something that stands out from the crowd will be extremely beneficial in the long run. Ugmonk is a timeless brand in that sense.

How do you handle fulfilment and organize the back-end of your business? Can you share some key lessons and tips on doing this successfully?

We still do all of our fulfillment and shipping in-house. It's a *ton* of work, more than most people realize, but it allows us to have complete control of the ecommerce packaging process to the end customer experience.

In the beginning we were doing everything manually. From printing postage in PayPal to filling out international customs forms by hand to standing in line at the post office, it was a tedious process.

As business picked up we spent more and more time on the fulfillment side and new we had to streamline things.

That's when we discovered ShipStation which has been an absolute lifesaver.

This also allows us to see all of our products in hand before shipping them out and do quality control first hand. Providing great customer service is super important to us.

We want to make sure our customers have a great experience from the moment that they land on our website to the time they receive and use the product.

Thankfully I have help with shipping and customer service and hired my mom and sister-in-law to handle those crucial parts of the business.

You now work on Ugmonk full time. How did you make that transition?

Through the first two years, we continued to build Ugmonk by working late nights and weekends refining designs, organizing logistics, and packing orders.

Each new release received an enthusiastic response from the community and knowledge of the brand spread organically through word of mouth and online features. My dream of starting my own brand was no longer just a dream.

Just before Ugmonk's 2nd anniversary, I decided to leave my full-time design job so that I could focus all of my energies on the passion that I had for Ugmonk.

As part of this change, my wife and I moved back to our hometown in PA, and my parents graciously agreed to allow their house to become the Ugmonk warehouse and shipping center.

In the past you've blogged about productivity. Can you share some of your tips and tricks for staying productive?

I've tried a lot of task management apps, but none of them seemed to stick. I've spent more hours than I'd like to admit just comparing features, reading reviews, and testing out demos.

While a lot of people have success with digital task apps, they all just felt like too much effort to incorporate into my workflow. I didn't want to spend time categorizing, tagging, and organizing tasks, I just wanted to get stuff done.

I always seem to come back to good old fashioned pen and paper. It's the most frictionless method and there are several keys things that make it work for me.

Crossing things off feels so good. Sure, you can digitally cross off tasks, but nothing beats taking a pen and scribbling out a task on the list.

I can easily jot down additional notes, sketches, or info for a particular task. For example, if I'm on the phone with a supplier and need to make some notes about production details, I can easily write it down right next to the task.

My daily routine starts with looking at my whole list of projects on my paper to-do list and then writing the most urgent tasks on a small sticky note. This allows me to focus on the 4-8 things I want to accomplish that day.

You've done an Ugmonk charity drive in the past—what was that like?

Just a few months after opening shop, we decided to hold our first annual Ugmonk Gives Back charity drive –

donating a portion of each sale during the holiday season to provide meals to children in orphanages around the world.

To date we've been able to supply over 30,000 meals!

We partner with a great organization called Rice Bowls who is extremely efficient in stewarding the donations they receive in order to serve the children in orphanages around the world.

My wife and I got to experience this first hand when we were invited to visit a few of the orphanages in Honduras and Nicaragua. We are so grateful for the support of our customers that enables us to give back to these children!

What software, tools, and resources are crucial to your business?

There are a lot of different tools that go into running Ugmonk. These are some of the most important for our online store.

Shopify - for all things commerce related
Wordpress - for all of the non-shop pages
Klaviyo - for email marketing and automation
Google Analytics - tracking website traffic and conversions
Shipstation - is an absolute lifesaver for processing and shipping orders

What are your top recommendations for new store owners?

You only have a few seconds to grab people's attention so it's important for your site design to capture your story and clearly tell people what you are about.

Before launching a store, **think about what makes you and your products unique and how you want to communicate that message**.

About The Author

Tucker Schreiber is an ecommerce entrepreneur and content crafter at Shopify. He writes to inspire, educate, and inform readers on all things commerce.
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