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# How I Started A Bikini Brand And Landed On Sports Illustrated



Ally McCarthy



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Ally McCarthy

Founder, **Amanda Louise Swimwear**

\$5K

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1

FOUNDERS

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## Hello! Who are you and what business did you start?

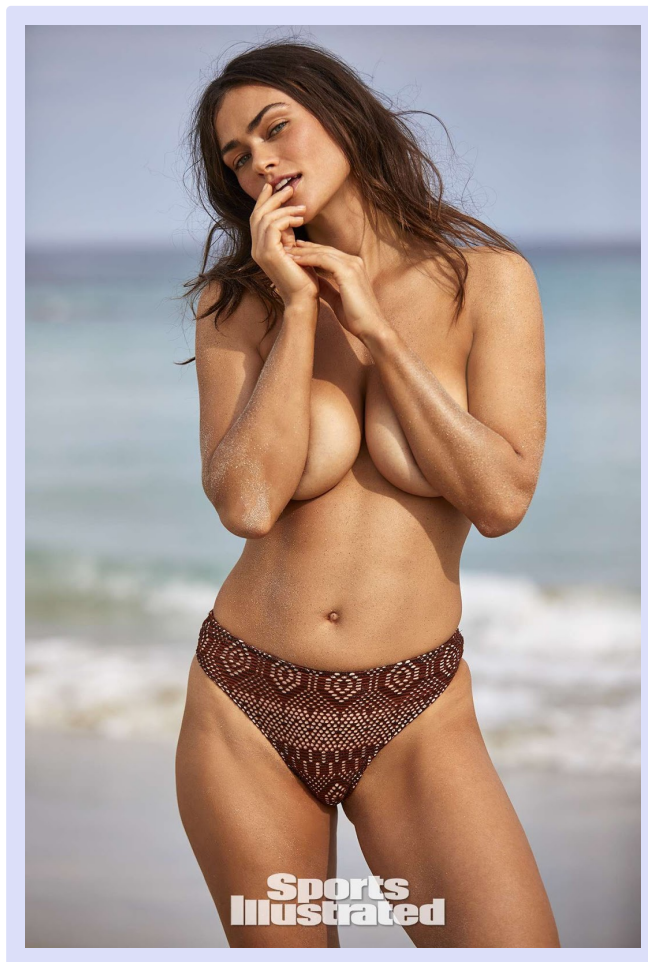
Hi, I'm Amanda... founder of [AmandaLouise](#) and a girl on a mission to help women find a community of love, light, and holistic wellness.

I started AmandaLouise in 2014 as a fitness competition swimwear brand. I had been taking the stage myself as a bikini competitor and was not impressed with the bikinis I was finding online.

I wanted a more personal, high-end experience. So, I created it myself.

The brand has completely transformed from those early days of local clients to not only working with women nationwide in the fitness space but now breaking into mainstream luxury swimwear. This year we were featured in the [2019 Sports Illustrated Swimwear Issue!](#) It's

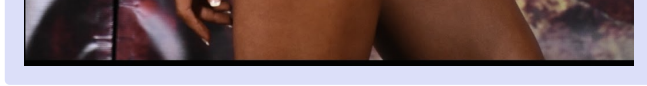
available on newsstands through August.



I like to consider the swimwear as the physical representation of my true mission of empowering women to live their best lives. It's the way I support women feeling physically amazing.

Beyond that, I run the [Confessions of a Fit Chick Podcast](#) and produce meditations to help support the mental and spiritual aspects of our community as well.





## What's your backstory and how did you come up with the idea?

My journey is an interesting one. I've spent my life as an overachiever. Valedictorian in high school, an electrical engineering degree in college, quick promotions in my career... always running, no, more like CHASING, what I thought was my dream.

Through some key relationships, and A LOT of self-work, I've found that most of that was just noise. Do I love my job? I love my WORK. I love connecting people for the greater good. I love finding the positive spin on things. I love creating something that helps women feel amazing.

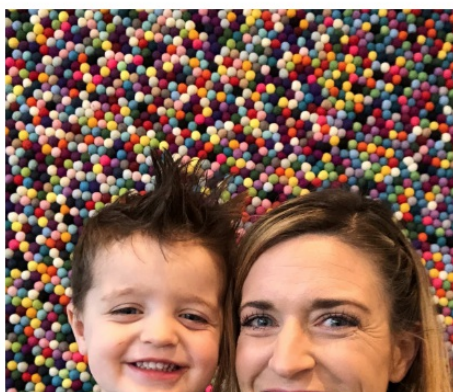
It's taken a while for me to realize that the things that light me up do not come in a specific form. They are realized in my "day job", in my "side hustle", and everywhere in between.

“ Choose wisely on where to invest your time and money. It's so tempting to want to do all the things, but that won't make you successful. This is a marathon, not a sprint.

The idea for Amanda Louise came about in 2013 when I was preparing for my first bikini competition. I had ordered a suit online, and quite frankly, wasn't super happy with it. I have been sewing for as long as I can remember and KNEW I'd be able to do this better. Not only the physical quality, but the customer experience. These suits are quite the financial investment, and athletes are preparing for months to step on stage... they deserved to have individual attention for such a special event. After over a year perfecting my sewing skills on Lycra (which is a PAIN to work with!!) and nailing down the pattern, I launched Amanda Louise by wearing my own original design to a show in Spring of 2014.

Although I am wildly passionate about AmandaLouise, I also have a true love for my life within the electric utility industry. My "career" is working as an Operations Director for an international Engineering Firm. In this role, I travel quite a bit and get to support an industry that is so vitally important to the way we live.

Having a demanding corporate career while building my own business is not an easy balance... especially when you add in a wonderful family that includes a darling two-year-old boy. But it's worth it. HUGE shoutout to my amazing husband Ken who also has an incredibly demanding job, but somehow still supports me in all my crazy dreams. #TeamFreick







I have been obsessed with swimwear since I was a teen and creating AmandaLouise allows me to have a creative outlet and also let my entrepreneurial spirit thrive.

## **Take us through the process of designing, prototyping, and manufacturing your first product.**

To create the first AmandaLouise bikini, I literally ripped apart a few bikinis I had, created patterns off of them, and then tweaked that for over a year until I had the fit just right.

I'd done pretty complex pieces in highschool, including a homecoming dress, but this was really different. The bikini is tiny, so there's no margin for error with cutting/sewing.

Also, working with lycra is a BEAST! The fabric is stretchy and slippery. From my days quilting with oh so easy to work with cotton, this was a whole new challenge. It also took me to working on a serger (a specific type of sewing machine) that I had not used before.

### **Handmade vs. production**

The important thing I've discovered about apparel design is that there's the handmade route and the production route.

Going into major production is a WHOLE different animal. I recently went down that path and was completely unprepared for the incredible financial investment it took.

Because of that, we've come back to keeping our collections small and couture and made to order. Honestly, I love it this way because our suits are each constructed here in Arizona with a small team that loves what they do and pours in the same passion I have for making women feel beautiful.

## **Describe the process of launching the business.**

The launch was almost by accident. I wore my handmade suit to a show, and had several ladies ask me about it. From there, I started making suits for friends, which turned into referrals, which turned into a full-blown brand.

“ Your network is everything. Every opportunity I've had to uplevel my brand has been because someone was nice enough to go out of their way to make an introduction. Literally, every single one.

Since the beginning, I've basically done everything from YouTube video tutorials and lots of Google searches. My first website was WordPress.

I later moved everything to SquareSpace since my time is limited and SS is a lot easier for me

to maintain and update.

Our social media presence has ebbed and flowed. I've had several contractors over the years come on and help, but am back to a one-woman shop for the time being.

Starting the business financially wasn't too extreme. Because everything is made to order, I could limit the materials I kept on hand until the orders came in. This was ideal for my situation.

## **Since launch, what has worked to attract and retain customers?**

It is ALL about referrals. The swim market is so flooded with what I lovingly call "cheap crap from China." I'm not trying to offend anyone, and I fully realize there are some amazing companies that produce ethically overseas, but that is NOT what you're buying through a lot of those social media ads.

If a bikini is \$15, there's a reason. Let's leave it at that. Our business truly comes from our clients spreading the word about how much they love the product, and more importantly, the community that comes with it.

On the more technical side, I use an online program called [17hats](#) to run my business. In one word, it's BRILLIANT. It may not be right for every business, but for one like mine where we have a lot of client interaction, it is just great. We get a lot of feedback that our onboarding of new clients sets us apart.

I want every woman who works with me to feel like it's an EXPERIENCE, not just a purchase. 17hats allows me to have automatic emails for every part of the process, built in quotes, invoicing, and more. I literally could not grow AmandaLouise without it.

I've chosen to force every client to have a 1x1 conversation with me before purchasing a custom suit. I do this because it's a big investment for them, and stepping on stage at a competition can be really stressful. I want to make sure they are 100% confident in their suit choice, and I'm often able to help with questions about the whole process which builds an even stronger foundation of trust. So, each potential client fills out an intake form that includes basic information about them (name, address, social profiles, etc) and also specifics about the competition they're participating in. Once sent, 17hats fires off an automatic email with a welcome video from me, and a link to book their consultation.

During their consult we go over not just what they want their suit to look like, but what they want their OVERALL look to be on stage. Choosing a color and other details is really important because in the Bikini division they are judged on their complete presentation. I love having these conversations and building friendships with my clients.

When it comes to marketing, our main source of clients is definitely the referral as I already mentioned. Beyond that, it's social media and working to "legitimize" the brand.

What do I mean by that? In apparel, especially swimwear, there's a new brand every day it seems. And with social media, anyone can shell out some cash to get a few large influencers to make a post and drive traffic.

I don't want to build a business on inauthentic recommendations. I want to build a community of like minded women that come together for a purpose bigger than themselves, and the swimwear is just the physical representation of that. So with that, we are definitely active on social media, but look for collaboration opportunities that can truly set us apart. We've been featured in several major publications... with the holy grail of Sports Illustrated being an absolute dream come true.

This opportunity came about from a serendipitous string of events which includes an amazing new friend in PR sending a screenshot of a private PR facebook group. It called for swimwear for a celebrity photo shoot... which turned out to be Gretchen Rossi. Through her PR team, I was connected with Sports Illustrated and given the chance to submit pieces for the 2019 issue. Some brands send BOXES of options, and I only sent in seven handmade pieces. My thought was "it only takes one..."

Most recently we launched Gretchen Christine for Amanda Louise, which is a small collection I designed with Gretchen Rossi of Bravo TV's the Real Housewives of Orange County. It's been an amazing experience and we're only just getting started! This happened after I sent her options for the aforementioned photo shoot. She loved a custom one piece I made for her, and her team reached out to see if I'd like to discuss a business partnership. It took about a year to work out the details, finalize designs, and wait for the right season to launch, but it was 100% worth the wait.



## How are you doing today and what does the future look like?

Right now things are shifting. We had major growth in 2017 but slowed way down in 2018.

This is 100% due to a shift in my career that pulled more of my "after hours" time back into



corporate. That said, although sales were down last year, I was building relationships that literally changed everything. For the sake of full transparency, AmandaLouise has not “made money” in years.

Every penny, and then some, has gone right back into the business to help build the brand I have fallen in love with. I read once that the average apparel line doesn’t go “profitable” until year seven. I’m not sure if it’s true, but I’m only in year five so it does make me feel a little better!

I keep bringing it up, but the Sports Illustrated feature is a game changer. For marketing purposes, it’s like a seal of approval. I couldn’t be more proud to now be able to say “as seen in Sports Illustrated.”

Another HUGE opportunity that will be launching soon is a collaboration project with Gretchen Rossi. She is most well known for her time on the Real Housewives of Orange County, but let me tell you, this powerhouse entrepreneur is SO much more than that show ever made her out to be. Our line, **Gretchen Christine** for AmandaLouise, will be a couture, made to order collection that brings luxury to the masses. It’s not “cheap”, but it’s also not unattainable. Gretchen and I are both so passionate about helping women feel AMAZING in their own skin, so the partnership just made sense.

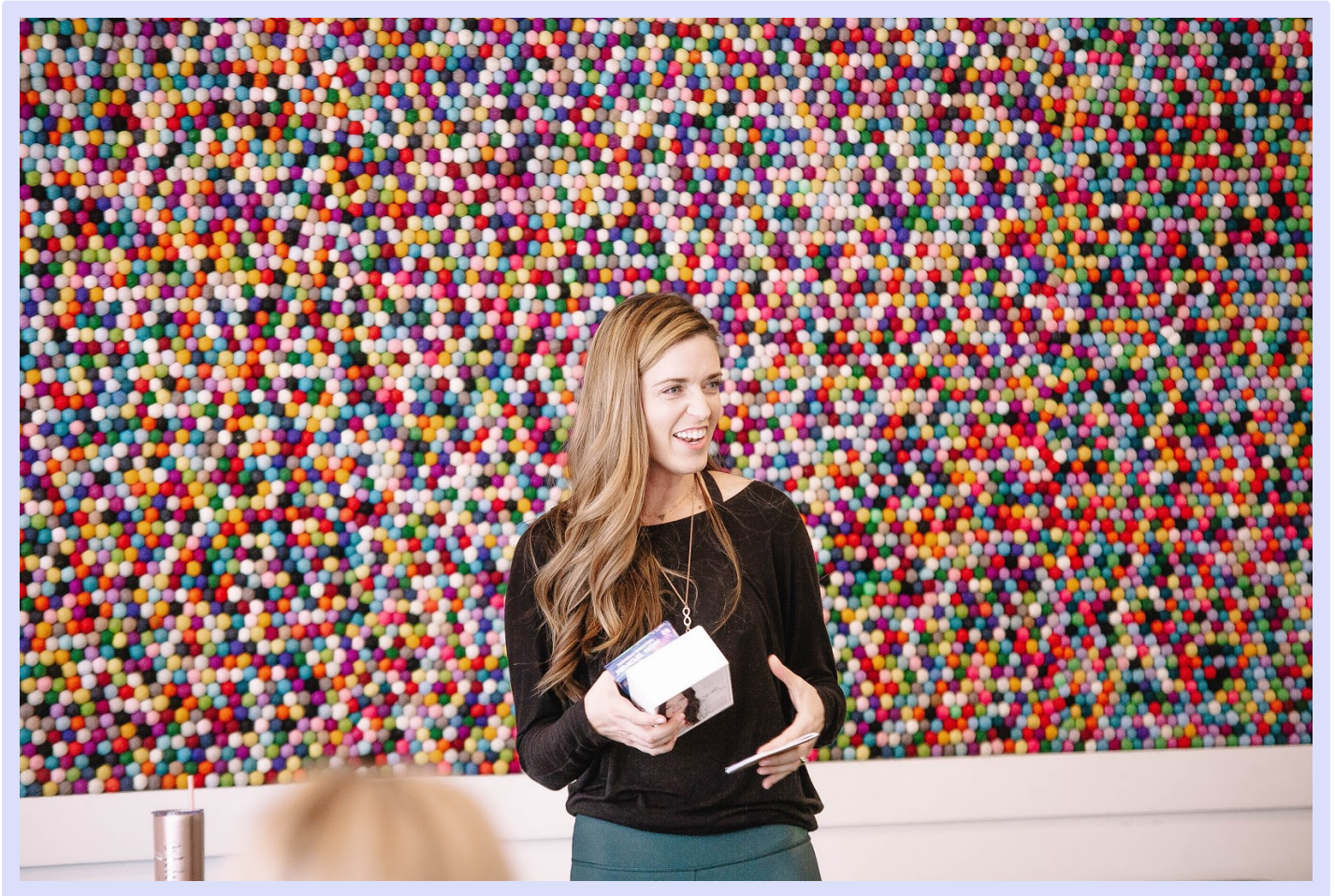


Our operations remain 100% here in Arizona for now. We’re looking at opportunities to partner with small-run facilities in Los Angeles if things really get hectic, but I am a bit of a control freak and like to hand check everything that isn’t personally made by me.

If I were to write the future for AmandaLouise, it would include continuing the path of epic collaborations that MEAN SOMETHING. I love partnering with incredible women and producing



pieces that are filled with passion. Additionally, I have been so grateful for recent opportunities to share my story through live speaking engagements. I'm looking to continue and expand on that because I think my story is a unique example of what's possible and I am so humbled to get to inspire others to follow their passions.



## **Through starting the business, have you learned anything particularly helpful or advantageous?**

Your network is EVERYTHING. Every opportunity I've had to uplevel my brand has been because someone was nice enough to go out of their way to make an introduction. Literally, EVERY SINGLE ONE. My network has grown into the most incredible, love filled, supportive community... and I believe that is because I approach my business and relationships that way.

Many business coaches will tell you to network to figure out how others can help YOU, I say network with the hope that you can help THEM. It's amazing how quickly the opportunities start pouring in when you focus on others and not yourself.

I've got to shout out a few special women who've really been there for me and transformed my business:

### **Sarah Lyons of PictureGroove Photography**

Sarah has been there through IT ALL. We've done some amazing destination photo shoot projects together, and have truly become amazing friends. (I was even a bridesmaid in her recent wedding!)

She is by far the most talented photographer I have ever worked with, and she constantly motivates me to dream big and GO FOR IT. I am so incredibly lucky to have her in my corner.



motivates me to dream big and GO FOR IT. I am so incredibly lucky to have her in my corner (and behind the lense). She has truly brought AmandaLouise to life through her images.



**Karey Northington** of **Protein House Gilbert** and **Northington Fitness and Nutrition**

Oh where do I even start with this one. We built our online businesses at the same time, and spent COUNTLESS hours figuring it all out together.

She is someone I turn to when I need a fresh perspective or a swift kick in the pants. She's built an EMPIRE in the fitness industry and I am so proud to call her my friend.





### **Ellen Berry: Every girl needs a best friend.**

She has been my ROCK since the 7th grade and I would be lost without her.

### **Mary Claviers of [The Transitions Collective](#) and [Brief Transitions](#)**

Mary and I met in an entrepreneurs mastermind and quickly became soul sisters. We use an app called Voxer to communicate constantly throughout the day.

She also had a “big girl” corporate job, so she is the one who I relate to the most on that front. She’s been absolutely transformative in my life recently, and I am so grateful for that.

### **Megan Greenwood of [Greenwood Brewery](#)**

My engineering sister. We met at the same company working in corporate. She has now left the corporate world and started the first 100% female owned brewery in the state of Arizona. To say I’m proud is a wild understatement.

We do a lot of accountability work together, and serve as a sounding board when things get overwhelming. She is incredible!!

### **Olenka Cullinan of [#iStartFirst](#)**

Olenka is a freaking POWERHOUSE who has helped pushed me out of my comfort zone to take risk, and also provided amazing opportunities to really uplevel. She is changing the world one entrepreneur at a time.

There are so many more... and you know who you are. I love you.

Another thing I’ll say is that I have wasted a lot of money on online programs. Now, I’m not saying they’re bad... in fact, many are absolutely incredible! But for me I just don’t have the time and discipline to actually follow through on those types of things so I have learned that if I’m going to make an investment, it needs to be in a real time session. That can be an event, a singular coaching session, or something else, but I need to the REAL accountability.

To everyone out there still in corporate and building a business on the side... LISTEN UP. I used to be one of those people who constantly said “ I hate corporate. I can’t wait to get the hell out of here and just work for myself.” Let me tell you, that is the WRONG thinking. The moment I realized that every business was once a small business, and that the larger corporations have gone through MAJOR shifts and pivots to get where they are, was the moment I realized I was sitting in the best real life business school ever and needed to LEVERAGE my corporate career, not resent it. And it’s funny, now I love both of my jobs in such different ways. My corporate career is an industry I love, and provides challenges and experiences that help me grow and prepare for the future. AmandaLouise lets me be creative, and build a community that I am obsessed with. Together, I am full.

**What platform/tools do you use for your business?**

## What platform/tools do you use for your business?

I already mentioned [17hats](#), but it gets a second shout out because I would be dead in the water without it.

I also love Trello. I use it to track where my sizing packages and rental bikinis are. It's also great for organizing massive amounts of to'dos!!

For my email list I use MailChimp. It works for what I need.

Last but not least, I run my podcast on SoundCloud. I've been really happy with them due to the ease of uploading and ability to schedule go-lives.

## What have been the most influential books, podcasts, or other resources?

Oh gosh, this could be a 10 page report. First and foremost, Lori Harder's [Earn Your Happy](#) podcast. I have had the opportunity to meet her several times in person, and she is just a gem of a human. Her show is so motivating and has gotten me through some pretty challenging times.

I'd also recommend Ali Brown's "Glambition Radio." Ali is no-nonsense and I love her interviews with super high performing women.

When it comes to books, there are SO many... but here are my favorites:

- [You Are A Badass at Making Money](#) by Jen Sincero
- [The Universe has Your Back](#) by Gabby Bernstein
- [Close Your Eyes, Get Free](#) by Grace Smith

## Advice for other entrepreneurs who want to get started or are just starting out?

Find your tribe and love them hard. Entrepreneurship is not for the weak at heart, but it can be the most rewarding thing in the world if you're willing to put in the work. I would not be able to do this without the support of my family, friends, and soul sisters.

Also, because I have to constantly remind myself of this, CHOOSE WISELY on where to invest your time and money. It's so tempting to want to do ALL THE THINGS, but that won't make you successful. This is a marathon, not a sprint.

## Are you looking to hire for certain positions right now?

I am always looking for amazing individuals to partner with. If you are in the fitness or wellness space and would like to be on the podcast, [APPLY HERE!!!](#) I'd love to help you share your story.

I'm also needing more seamstresses. Who knows? Maybe I'll get lucky and YOU are the one I'm looking for? Email [info@amandalouiseswimwear.com](mailto:info@amandalouiseswimwear.com).

## Where can we go to learn more?



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## Instagram Accounts

- [@amandafreick](#) (this is my personal account)
- [@amandalouiseswimwear](#) (competition swimwear)
- [@amandalouisebeach](#) (mainstream swimwear)

If you have any questions or comments, drop a comment below!



Ally McCarthy, Founder of Amanda Louise Swimwear

## Amanda Louise Swimwear has provided an update on their business!

Almost 3 years ago, we followed up with Amanda Louise Swimwear to see [how they've been doing](#) since we published this article.

About 1 year ago, we followed up with Amanda Louise Swimwear to see [how they've been doing](#) since we published this article.



Pat Walls, Founder of Starter Story

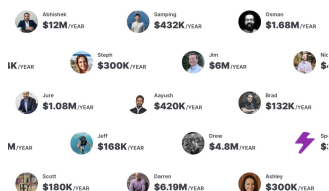
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Hey! 📧 I'm Pat Walls, the founder of Starter Story.

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details with you - down to the exact amount of money they are making.

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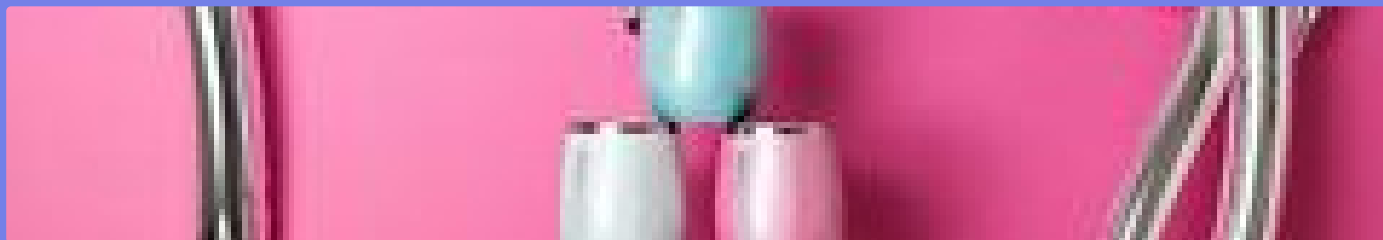
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Dylan

**I Grew A Drinkware Brand To \$1.1M/Month At 23 Years Old**



Drinkware brand

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Chris

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Michael  
\$1.08M/YEAR



Scott  
\$300K/YEAR



Chad  
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Garrett  
\$300K/YEAR

Resources to keep you building

Building a business is not a game of luck.



Abhishek  
\$12M/YEAR

It's about taking action every day.



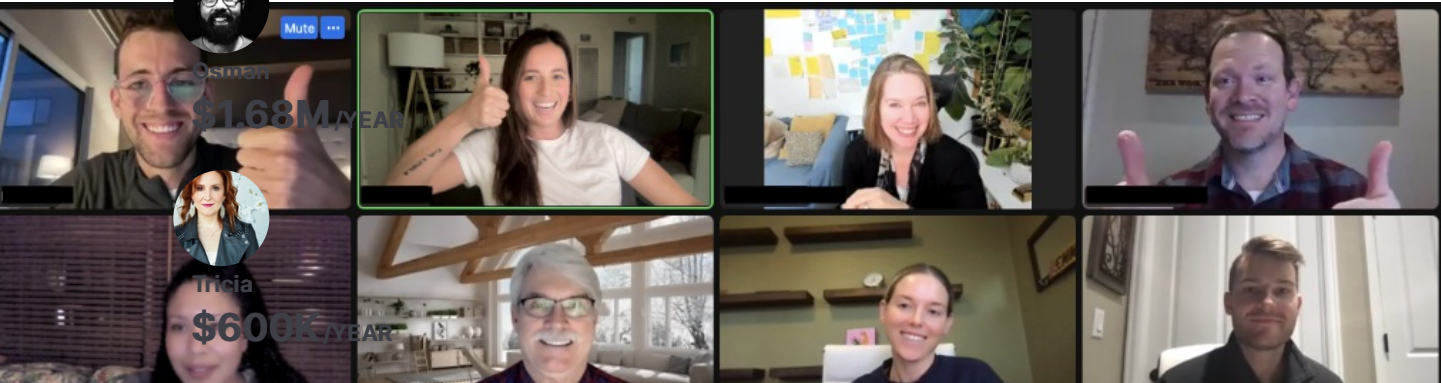
Sampang  
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You'll get access to courses, frameworks, weekly live events, alongside a group of people that genuinely want you to succeed.

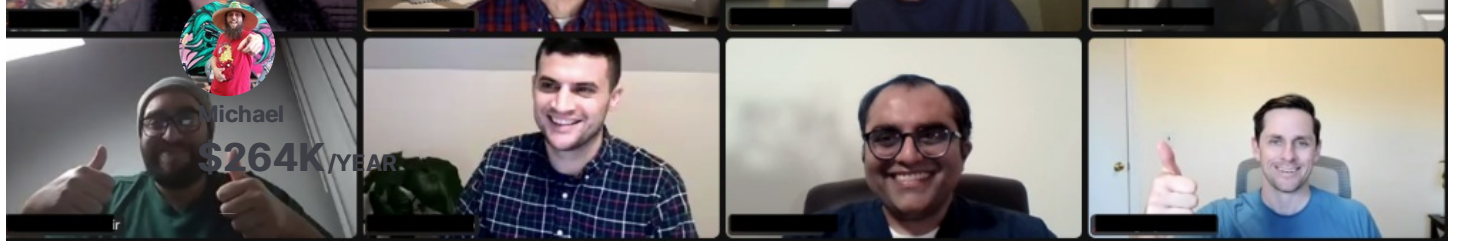
You'll start making real progress, and experience first-hand what it's like to put your ideas into the world.



Osman  
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Tricia  
\$600K/YEAR



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**Sam Parr**

My First Million

I love this website.



**Rand Fishkin**

Moz / SparkToro

Love Starter Story's transparency.



**John Vang**

Be The Match

You can't find this information anywhere else.



**Trent Baren**

Instagram

So much valuable information.



**Bilal Budhani**

Entrepreneur

I was hooked on Starter Story as soon as I discovered it. Resonated with me right off the bat.



**Jenn Leach**

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**Starter Story: Learn How People Are Starting Successful Businesses**

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