

How Three Friends Built A Successful Online Apparel Company By Combining Technology and Fashion





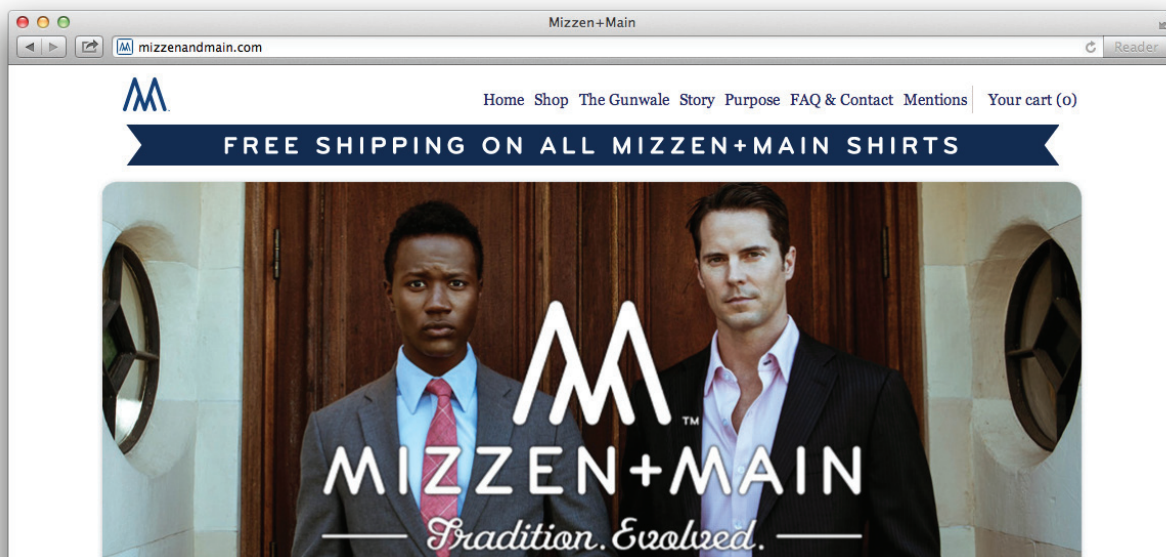
What do you get when you combine **hi-tech performance fabrics** with **mens fashion**?

The answer is [Mizzen+Main](https://mizzenandmain.com).

Mizzen+Main is a fast growing men's apparel company that's on a mission to get rid of pit stains with their performance dress shirts.

The company was started by co-founders Kevin Lavelle, Web Smith and Steven DeWitt who all came from different backgrounds but all bring something different to the table. Mizzen+Main has been featured in **Fast Company** and **Forbes** and has garnered key partnerships with **NFL players** and **ESPN**.

We caught up with Kevin to find out how they came up with the idea, how they run their company and what advice they can offer to entrepreneurs looking to start an ecommerce business.



DESCRIBE YOUR BUSINESS & PRODUCT.

Mizzen+Main is revolutionizing the apparel industry, starting with our one of a kind moisture wicking, wrinkle free, American made dress shirts.

We have combined the best of performance fabrics, heretofore reserved for athletes on the field, with the refined look of a traditional dress shirt. We're now introducing henleys, blazers, and accessories, all with a unique approach to combining advanced fabrics and components with an eye on tradition. We are Tradition. Evolved.

HOW DID YOU DECIDE ON YOUR PRODUCT? WHAT EARLY MARKET RESEARCH DID YOU UNDERTAKE?

The idea for our performance dress shirt came from watching a Congressional staffer run into an important meeting in Washington D.C. on a sweltering summer day, soaked in sweat.

We thought we should bring the advances of performance fabrics, previously reserved for athletes, to the world of men's dress apparel and fashion.

After years of researching the market, we decided there was no one even close to bringing this revolutionary product to market.

Athletic apparel companies were only focused on athletic apparel. Men's fashion companies and traditional shirt makers, such as Brooks Brothers, were only focused on standard cotton dress shirts, with little to no innovation.

We spent nearly a year in product development to find the best fabrics, craft a perfect off-the-rack fit, and build the foundation of a strong, timeless, American brand. Our focus was on combining innovation with an eye and respect for tradition.

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE MAIN TIPPING POINTS (IF ANY) OR A-HA MOMENTS? HOW DID THEY HAPPEN?

The main tipping point in knowing our company would become a reality was when Kevin's wife saw him in their first prototype and didn't realize he was wearing the first performance fabric dress shirt – she thought he was still wearing a normal dress shirt.

This came as a result of intense product development to create an organic looking shirt people wouldn't see any differently than a traditional dress shirt.

Other big moments have come through major press breakthroughs, such as our profile in [Fast Company](#), and creating custom shirts for the 2013 Reebok CrossFit Games announcers on ESPN. These all came through hard work, perseverance, and demonstrating our products superior characteristics.

KEY MANUFACTURING AND MARKETING LESSONS LEARNED? TELL US A BIT ABOUT HOW YOU ORGANIZE YOUR BUSINESS.

The two biggest lessons in manufacturing we've learned are things always take longer than you think and will inevitably go wrong somewhere, and to find partners you can trust and rely on.

If you think something will take four weeks and x dollars, budget six to seven weeks and 25% higher than x dollars. It's just the nature of manufacturing, even if all your partners do their best. It just happens.

When it goes exactly on time and budget, count your blessings and move on knowing it will likely go wrong next time. In this vein, be sure to stay on top of everything along the way, checking in regularly and having back up plans ready to go in order to mitigate any issues and minimize any losses.

This inevitably leads to the second lesson: find the best partners to make your business a success and treat them as partners, not vendors. Trust us on this one – there is no better feeling in running your business than knowing you can rely on your vendors/partners. You will have things go wrong on a regular basis. Reliable partners can help you sleep a little easier at night.

In terms of marketing, there is nothing more important than being authentic. Customers easily see right through corporate phoniness. We have been authentic in everything we do from day one, helping our customers, current and prospective, the media, and vendors/partners believe in and trust the brand we are building.

“Find the best partners to make your business a success and treat them as partners, not vendors.”

From our social media, blogs, customer engagement, and interaction with press, we are building a brand bigger than any one of us or any one thing we do. This is impossible without true authenticity.

As a startup, everyone participates in nearly all activities across the company, though we do each have a particular focus.

We are all, of course, focused on building our brand with unity in everything we do, though this is Web's primary area

of expertise managing our presence and general branding efforts, from new product development and selection/vision to our social media presence, blogging, copywriting, and external partnerships.

Steven, our Creative Director, is the creator of the beauty everyone sees externally, from our name and logo, to all graphics and creative. He's our self-proclaimed “brand police” to ensure any creative produced is consistent with our brand at every level. Web and Steven work in a magical creative harmony with Web dreaming up new branding material and ways to communicate with our customers, and Steven bringing it to life with his own creative genius. I manage the back office, supply chain, customer service, and financial planning and accounting. This trinity has proven to be incredibly effective.

ANY MAJOR PR WINS OR MEDIA MENTIONS? HOW DID THEY HAPPEN?

We've had a few tremendous PR wins, including Fast Company, American Express OPEN with Donna Fenn of Inc., and becoming guest mentors for the Wall Street Journal's [Accelerators blog](#) along with several others. These have come through our own efforts finding the right points of contact at various publications, being respectful of their time by making perfectly clear why we are worth writing about, and careful persistence balanced with not overdoing followup contact.

There is no greater champion for your business than you.

Mizzen+Main is proud to partner with NFL superstars Chris Ogbonnaya and Malcom Jenkins, provide dress apparel to the broadcasters of CrossFit and the 2013 Reebok CrossFit Games on ESPN, and hard hitting national journalist Thomas Roberts. These relationships were developed through personal outreach and a belief on behalf of these individuals in our story and potential. We're incredibly grateful for these relationships and partnerships.

We also carry a number of fantastic brands alongside our shirts on our website as complementary products for our customers looking to add something unique to their purchases. These relationships began through a number of conversations and demonstrating a commitment to these brands that we will probably

WHAT WERE YOUR BIGGEST MISTAKES, OR BIGGEST WASTES OF TIME & MONEY?

Our primary mistake was not diversifying our product lineup early enough. We were too focused on our initial product. Of course, it's difficult to diversify too quickly with various constraints such as manufacturing requirements, capital, and time. It's a delicate balance.

WHAT SOFTWARE, TOOLS AND RESOURCES HAVE YOU FOUND CRUCIAL TO YOUR GROWTH?

We have been absolutely thrilled with the "E-Commerce 3.0" platform we've built with Shopify at the center.

Mizzen+Main utilizes [Stitch Labs](#) for inventory, [Ship Station](#) for shipping, [Xero](#) for accounting, and various other apps to execute our business with lean efficiency and off the shelf solutions. For more information on this, please read our piece in the [Wall Street Journal](#).

One of our biggest mentors and successful entrepreneurs we admire is [Gary Vaynerchuk](#). His approach to customer service, branding, and marketing overall is an example for all to follow, regardless of stage of business or industry.

ANY OTHER ADVICE TO PEOPLE STARTING THEIR FIRST ONLINE BUSINESSES?

Get out there and do it.

You can waste precious time trying to make everything perfect. Focus on real revenue from a growing list of customers.

Raising capital is not success. Revenue and profits are.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✔ Keep an eye out for everyday problems people face that you can solve with your expertise.
- ✔ Think of ways you can combine historically separate niches, ideas or technologies in a way that uniquely positions yourself in the marketplace.
- ✔ Diligent product development in the beginning will set you up for success down the road.
- ✔ Allow plenty of time for manufacturing as you will likely face unforeseen issues.
- ✔ Find partners and vendors you can trust and rely on.
- ✔ Be authentic when telling your story and marketing your business.
- ✔ PR takes research and hard work. You need to be the champion of your business.
- ✔ Don't try and make everything perfect. Go out there and do it.



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