

SUCCESS STORY

Ingredients of Success: Lisa Q. Fetterman's Journey from the Kitchen to a Crowdfunded Triumph

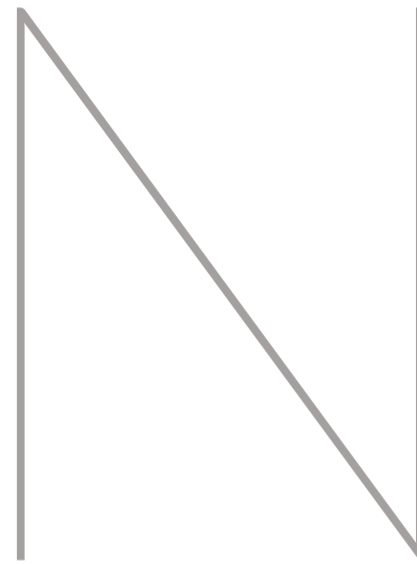


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here's a simple rule that all entrepreneurs live by: Aim for disruptive change. Everything you need to know about being an entrepreneur lies in that beautifully simple rule. As many entrepreneurs will tell you, it's easier said than done. But that's exactly what Lisa Q. Fetterman did as the cofounder and CEO of Nomiku.



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omiku
takes its
name from
nomikuii, a
Japanese
word that
means to
eat and
drink,

and a perfect name for
the revolutionary kitchen
appliance that's finding homes
in professional and personal
kitchens worldwide. Nomiku
is creating disruptive change
as it simplifies the science of
gastronomy for food-lovers
everywhere.



It started with a device few home chefs had ever heard of, but was a secret weapon behind restaurant-quality food—the sous vide machine. Lamenting the fact that she couldn't have one of these expensive, clunky machines at home, the avid foodie sought to change that.

Ever since that simple idea in 2010, Nomiku has drawn more than \$1 million in funding between its two Kickstarter campaigns. Gaining the distinction of having raised the highest amount of money for any product within its category with just the first campaign alone, Nomiku raised nearly \$600,000 within 30 days. Then the company went on to break its own record by raising \$750,000 with its next project. Today the Nomiku is in kitchens from the White House to Michelin-starred restaurants around the world.

Nomiku is an entrepreneurial success story that can only exist within the 21st century. Fetterman has tapped into the power of hackerspaces, accelerator programs, and crowdfunding to land several accolades—including being invited to the White House as an “Honored Maker,” listed on Zagat’s 30 under 30 list in 2014, and the following year in Forbes’ 30 under 30 list.

“I think ultimately,” she says, “what brought me to what I’m doing today is definitely because I cannot do anything else. This is the only thing I want to do and if I try anything else I would be really, really super miserable.”

SUCCESS STORY

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BRINGING SOUS VIDE HOME

Fetterman is a self-professed foodie. She loves good food, good cooking, and appreciates the fine art of gastronomy. It was while cooking for her cofounder, and now-husband, that she mused over the difference between home cooking and restaurant-quality food.

“One day while I was cooking I lamented about how there’s this one thing that separates restaurant quality food from home-cooked food, and that’s the sous vide machine.”

To the uninitiated, the sous vide method of cooking is placing your food into vacuum-sealed plastic bags and placing it into a precise, temperature-controlled water bath. This is done in order to cook your ingredients with pinpoint accuracy and achieve the best possible flavor.

“There’s a reason why you’ve never heard of it—it’s every top chef’s secret weapon!” she says proudly.

At the time, sous vide machines cost thousands of dollars, were big and bulky, incredibly hard to use, and in no way designed for the home kitchen. Knowing she wasn’t the only foodie out there wanting a better cooking experience, the first portable immersion circulator was created.

“When we first created this, it was so exciting, you could feel the momentum behind you, that you created something really cool, you know? Sometimes you get that feeling, like a wind behind your back,” she says.



THE FOODIE MARKET

The foodie phenomenon has been going strong for years. Statistics by the Institute of Food Technologists (IFT) now show that 53 percent of US adults enjoy watching cooking shows, 76 percent enjoy talking about new or interesting foods, and 68 percent purchase specialty foods for everyday cooking.

It's clear that more and more people are getting more interested in cooking and becoming more experimental with cooking at home.



After a number of her friends asked her for their own machines, Fetterman realized that there was a large untapped market out there. So she set out to discover just how big that market was.

“How do we get this out to more people who are like-minded? We just went on Twitter, put it out there: ‘Hey who wants a sous vide machine?’ We’d go to random people’s houses, like cheese makers, and make them a sous vide machine to help them make cheese,” she says. “I went to food blogs and I wanted them to try it out; I called up chefs around San Francisco to try our prototype.”

By utilizing social media, bloggers, and word-of-mouth she was able to generate buzz and excitement for her product well before it was even officially released.

If this were to

happen in a different era, this invention could have easily been just a useful home gadget unknown to anyone. But Fetterman took advantage of hackerspaces, makerspaces, and classes to find her first customers.

“We put together a kit, and we sold hundreds of these kits to makers,” she says.

Initially there was a DIY component and people would purchase the kit and have to build it themselves. Despite that, people were definitely interested, and Fetterman ensured that she followed through with each and every customer.

A common issue was that you needed to know how to solder in order to build the initial sous vide machine. She made sure to address every complaint to help her customers build their own machines, even going so far as to personally visit their homes.



SUCCESS STORY

TIME TO SELL YOUR KIDNEY

Soon after quitting her job to focus completely on Nomiku, Fetterman traveled to China to join an accelerator program called HAXLR8R, spending most of her time negotiating with factories to find a manufacturer. She recalls struggling to find investors and constantly getting rebuffed.

“The accelerator program puts in money for you to go,” she says. “They gave us \$15,000 for the whole program and we went deep into personal debt. There was a time when we were sitting on a subway station, and I said seriously to my husband, ‘Hey I can go back to America, sell a kidney, and come back with the money.’”

Desperate for capital, they turned to crowdfunding. The couple created their first Kickstarter campaign, asking their wedding videographers to help film the promotional video. They set an early goal of \$200,000, and ended up raising nearly \$600,000 within 30 days.

Despite the success of their initial Kickstarter campaign, she talks about the financial troubles she still went through.

“Kickstarter funding is to build your product,” she says. “It’s not to build your startup. It’s not so you can hire people. It’s not so you can have a place to live. It’s for product only. If you have a well-funded Kickstarter, that does not necessarily mean you’re going to be able to pay yourself.”

MANUFACTURING REVOLUTION

The Nomiku was the first of its kind. While imitation products have appeared on the market, nothing has matched the portability or design of the Nomiku. “Our product was so revolutionary, it had never been made in the history of the Earth, so we had to make it,” Fetterman says. “That meant we had to live next to our factory.”

Fetterman lived in China for the next two years to oversee the manufacturing of her vision.

She adheres to the lean startup mentality—a constantly iterative product development strategy that produces small batches at a time and stress tests each iteration for errors or faults. This way, you’re assured a complete final product without wasting unnecessary resources. She recalls the difficulty of trying to adhere to such a mentality in China.

“The biggest struggle was trying to be lean in a manufacturing world that was completely ‘waterfall’ method. Manufacturing in China is a game for very

big companies; they’re not very conducive for lean manufacturing, and that was the struggle.”

Of course, this led to setbacks and delays in production, causing them to miss their proposed deadline. While understanding that it wasn’t an ideal situation to be in, she asserts that they received minimal complaints from dissatisfied backers. This is in contrast to some high-profile horror stories of crowdfunded products crumbling in the face of manufacturing challenges.

“Our story is very different because we are very, very transparent about our manufacturing process. We updated at least once a month to our Kickstarter backers.”

This transparency allowed backers to understand the difficult process of manufacturing, as well as giving her the leeway to ship out a final product that she was happy with.

“We got to ship out the product that we wanted to, great quality, that people loved. We kept to our promise that we’d make the best machine that we could. And I think that was most

important promise to fulfil.”

Today, Fetterman is in the process of developing a Wi-Fi-compatible version of the Nomiku, allowing users to safely start cooking even if they’re nowhere near their kitchens. Nomiku has also developed an active community around their product, with members, including top chefs, actively swapping recipes and sharing posts and photos of their food.

Despite the struggles and setbacks she’s faced, Fetterman happily explains that she wouldn’t trade her business for the world, because, again, she isn’t very good at anything else. She offers this final piece of related advice for any aspiring entrepreneurs out there:

“Don’t become an entrepreneur unless it’s the only thing in the world you can do. If you suck at everything else, become an entrepreneur. ... This life is so uniquely painful that you have to want it with all of your heart, you have to be emotionally behind it don’t be an entrepreneur as a business exercise.”

Take Advantage Of The 21st Century

Nomiku will be likely become a case study for business schools about entrepreneurship in the 21st century. Lisa Fetterman identifies the three key factors that brought her such great success with crowdfunding and marketing:

Launch no later than a Tuesday

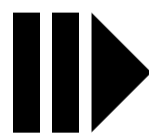
“There’s two big things that are completely immutable in strategy in launching a crowdfunding campaign. One of those is, launch no later than Tuesday during the week. So don’t launch Saturday, Sunday. Either launch Monday or Tuesday, at the beginning of the news cycle of the week. The best time to launch is on a Tuesday, 9 a.m. EST. You should move with the news cycle; if you want to get picked up by news you’re going to want the whole week.”

Find 100 True Fans

“Have 100 true fans, people who will put down money the moment you launch. Work your email list, knock on people’s doors, call people that have been to your classes, who’ve bought your initial product and tell them what you plan to do. Make 100 of those people promise you that they’re going to put down money, that they’re going to click on your campaign, they’re going to share your campaign the moment you put it up. I love crowdfunding—the thing is that it’s really hard to browse crowdfunding projects. You need to be on the front page and the way to get there is through this strategy.”

Make The People Who Care Happy

“I search on social media, find who’s posting good photos [of food] that I want to eat, who’s tweeting about the latest restaurant. I get out a lot, I want to eat that new hot dish, and I want to go into the kitchen and talk to the chef. I zero in on people who care and basically ignore everybody else. ... If you care about my product, I’ll bend over backwards to make you happy.”



PRESS PLAY TO LISTEN TO
THE FULL INTERVIEW



Jonathan Chan is a freelance writer from Melbourne, Australia who prides himself on writing awesome pieces of content for any business looking to make their mark in the cluttered online world. When not following the startup scene, he can be found keeping his mind and body active as an avid mixed martial artist.