



Five Startup Lessons for Fast-Growing Companies

By Kit Hickey

Within our first month of publicly launching Ministry of Supply in June 2012, we sold more than 6,000 shirts and gained 4,000 customers. Our company grew fast because it had to. We were an adolescent trapped in a baby's body — we had to learn how to sprint before we could learn how to walk, and we had some serious growing pains as we tried to scale production from 300 to 6,000 shirts a month.

However, we quickly realized that by empowering

our customers and empowering our company, we could truly grow the way we wanted. Everything we do comes down to empowering people to be their best.

As a co-founder, I focus a lot on how we can scale our team, our operations and our distribution. We're a startup, and face many of the same challenges that startups face. Here's what we've learned along the way about managing fast growth.

Championship vs. Ownership

There are six members of our team, and we all champion different areas of the business. For example, co-founder Gihan Amarasiriwardena focuses on product development and technology. Devin Cook, head of Customer Advocacy, spends all day thinking about how we can make customers as happy as possible. Over the months, we realized that we worked better as a team when we moved away from ownership and moved towards championship.

This philosophy ensures nobody feels possessive about his or her area of focus, while encouraging teamwork and collaboration. So while Devin may be focused on customer happiness, we all chip in with ideas and often have company-wide brainstorming about improving the customer experience. As champions, we're all really proud of the areas we focus on and are encouraged to get others behind our initiatives.

Holistic Views of the Business

I love knowing what's going on in all areas of the business, and we've found that everyone the team does too. We have an open office space and are constantly talking and bouncing ideas off of each other throughout the day. A few months ago, we realized that our communication wasn't great despite the fact that we spent all day talking — some people didn't know what was going on in various aspects of the business because decisions get made so quickly and a lot of decisions get made outside of the office.

We've been trying to get better at making sure that everyone in the company knows what's



going on and has a holistic view of the business. Being transparent and giving everyone the opportunity to know as much as they can enables everyone on a team to be their best.

Agile Problem-Solving

We act fast whenever we see problems. When we realized that some of the shirts we were shipping were running too slim, we halted production, created a new pattern, trained our manufacturers, and got better-fitting shirts on the market in three weeks.

Being able to adapt quickly and iterate in real-time is a huge benefit of a startup and we will forever try to retain that ability. In this example, by acting quickly to solve a problem, we were able to minimize exchanges — and more importantly, make our customers happy.

Technology Is in Our DNA

As a fashion brand born out of MIT, we use technology to create the best products possible — from our use of thermal mapping



to optimize venting in our Aero pants design to the NASA phase-change performance materials we use in our Apollo shirts.

We truly believe that technology can improve everyone's lives and we democratize technology through apparel. As such, we don't stop at the use of technology in product development; we leverage technology in every touch point of our brand.

Brand Is Culture

At Ministry of Supply, we all live and breathe the mission. We are intentional

about hiring people who fit both our brand and our culture. When we take company retreats, we challenge ourselves to be our best. Our last one included hiking and winter camping in negative degrees. We want our customers to be their best and our employees to be their best. Everything we do comes down to that.

Obviously a startup is a tremendous amount of work and nothing is certain. However, by staying true to our mission and empowering our customers and employees, we know that we'll be here for the long haul.

About the Article

Kit Hickey is the co-founder of Ministry of Supply, a brand which is inventing the future of men's professional wear. The company has been featured in NYT, TechCrunch, Inc., Forbes and Elle Magazine. In addition, Kit is a lover of mountain sports and has half an MBA from MIT. Follow her: @kit_hickey

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