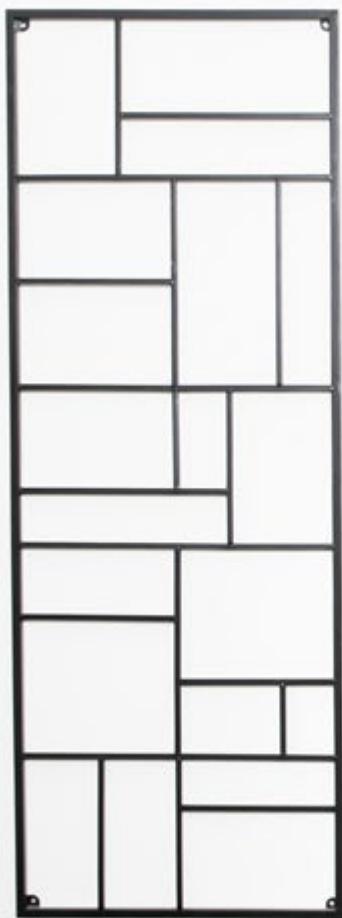


#FUCKFASTFASHION



THE SUCCESS STORY OF THE STARTUP UNITED WARDROBE

'A microcredit paved the way to millions of euros'

It is the dream of everyone starting a new business, and three Wageningen students managed it: their company's sales figures have gone through the roof. Last year, the Lithuanian multinational Vinted bought up their company, United Wardrobe – a kind of eBay for second-hand clothes. 'In a few years' time less new clothing will be needed; and we will have contributed to that. How cool is that?'

TEXT RENÉ DIDDE PHOTOGRAPHY JUDITH JOCKEL

Sjuul Berden and Thijs Verheul were only in the first months of their degree course in Business and Consumer Sciences at Wageningen when they discovered they would never be scientists. They wanted to go into business. 'We were fascinated by the up-and-coming companies of the time, such as Facebook and Twitter. The incredible speed at which they succeeded in bringing millions of people together through websites and apps, building communities that way,' recalls Berden. Verheul was equally captivated by the fast-growing companies that knew how to exploit a gap in the market. 'If they offer sustainable

or circular products, they have to be cheaper and better than the standard products available. Then they can grow very big. So we looked with admiration at Airbnb, which grew at astonishing speed with its cheap alternative to hotels.'

This budding entrepreneurial spirit inspired by American successes developed slowly until something 'small' happened in 2013. Berden noticed that his sisters often swapped clothes before they went out on a Friday night. 'They tried them on and compared notes. After all, women generally like having lots of clothes, and frequently wearing something new,' says Berden. He thought up the

idea of an 'online fashion community' that revolved around second-hand clothes and was called United Wardrobe.

TACKLING FAST FASHION

'I didn't have any faith in Sjuul's idea of a virtual marketplace for second-hand clothing at first,' admits Verheul, who comes from a business-minded family – 'At secondary school, I bought scooters, did them up and sold them again.' But he soon saw the potential for setting a transition in motion with something as everyday as clothes. 'Fifty per cent of the clothes that are sold should be second-hand. At that time, it had just be- >

‘After the sale I had to wipe away quite a few tears’

come possible to sell concert tickets through TicketSwap. That was a similar idea, really.’ United Wardrobe stood for countering the fast turnover in clothing because of its environmental impact, and profiled itself with the slogan ‘Fuck Fast Fashion’, which still hangs on the wall of its former headquarters in Utrecht. Berden was referred to as the hippy with the idea, Verheul was the hustler who got things organized, and they were joined at a later stage by Thijs Slijkhuis, the hacker who threw himself into the technology. From 2014, it didn’t take the trio long to build a website along the lines of eBay on which people offering and looking for clothes could meet. A safe and visually attractive online environment with good photos meant that shoes, T-shirts and dresses changed hands fast. ‘It was the norm on United Wardrobe to provide good photos. Our algorithms decided which photos were good and went at the top of the page,’ says Verheul. ‘Originally there were just a few clever chicks out of our target group of 18 to 26-year-old women joining in,’ says Berden. Men are not so much part of the target group. ‘Men don’t buy as many clothes. They wear trousers, shirts or shoes for much longer, and quite often until they are worn out.’

INFLUENCERS AND VLOGGERS

After their Bachelor’s degree, the men had a gap year in which they perfected their payment system and made it easier to create ads, so that users could upload a photo of their Nikes with one click. Within a year, United Wardrobe had clocked 30,000 users who had downloaded the app and visited the website. But the business really took off when they thought of involving influencers and vloggers in their initiative. ‘They wear a lot of different clothes. They tell their subscribers about their ups and downs and express their views every day,’ says Berden. ‘Of course, a lot of people wanted an item of clothing that idols such as Enzo Knol or Monica Geuze had worn. Knol has a YouTube channel with two million subscribers. Geuze has a chan-

nel with videos in which she tells 500,000 subscribers about her daily life. Our sales really went through the roof when they got involved. We ended up selling more than 100,000 products per month.’

Berden and Verheul never went back to the classroom, but Slijkhuis did complete his Master’s degree. The trio made a good living from 10 per cent of the price from the seller and 1.99 euros in transaction costs from the buyer. Sellers take care of postage and packaging themselves. At an average sales price of 20 euros and 100,000 products sold per month, you are talking about 400,000 euros a month. There were no problems with malpractice. ‘If a product was disappointing, the buyer could return it within three days,’ says Berden. ‘Good quality goods are in both the buyer’s and seller’s interests; quality control is built into the system,’ adds Verheul.

TAKEOVER BY VINTED

At the end of 2020, the successful United Wardrobe was bought up by the Lithuanian company Vinted, the biggest online marketplace for second-hand clothes in Europe. Vinted’s objectives are almost identical: to earn money and to stimulate reuse. Berden and Slijkhuis joined Vinted. ‘A marketplace should be a magnet that attracts a lot of people. When Vinted became active in the Netherlands, we realized that two magnets get in each other’s way,’ says Berden, as an explanation for explaining the takeover. Thijs Verheul stepped out of the business at that point. ‘I’m not good at accepting authority, I want to go on doing my own thing and be my own boss. Sjuul and Thijs want to get the maximum out of it and go on learning about the ins and outs of fast-growing tech companies.’

Promoting the use of second-hand clothes is a noble cause. Do you have clear-cut views on the often controversial labour conditions and environmental pollution in the sector?

Berden: ‘Solid facts and figures on the la-



SJUUL BERDEN (29)

Co-founder of United Wardrobe, now a product director for second-hand clothing at Vinted
Degree: WUR BSc Business and Consumer Sciences 2014.



THIJS VERHEUL (29)

Co-founder of United Wardrobe, now an independent entrepreneur and the author of the book *Voor hoeveel heb je het verkocht (How much did you sell it for)?*

Degree: WUR BSc Business and Consumer Sciences 2014.

bour conditions are lacking, actually. You hear different things from different sources. The situation in factories and workshops in Bangladesh is said to be improving. But others don't share that view.'

Verheul: 'We did produce reports last year giving broad environmental audits on clothing use, including delivery. In terms of production and transport, second-hand clothing is better, of course. United Wardrobe scored the best and especially so when buyers pick up the goods themselves from collection points.'

Berden: 'It's difficult for us to do anything about the environmental impact of things like water consumption and pesticide use in cotton cultivation. I see that as the job of government. Consumers, including the young, mainly want to buy clothes as cheaply as possible. If H&M were to opt for exclusively sustainable clothes, they would become more expensive. As a result, even more people would shop at Primark. The government could regulate that with things like import tariffs.'

Verheul: 'And yet old clothes are always available! I think in the long term this leads to lower production of new clothing and less waste and pollution. How cool is that, that we have contributed to that!'

Thanks to your successful idea, you left university after a Bachelor's degree. What did you get out of Wageningen?

Berden: 'Although science is not my thing, I do think Wageningen has a great university. The standard of research is high. But in those days, there was no spirit of enterprise yet, and no group of successful entrepreneurs to fall back on. Still, we did get support from StartLife, the organization that helps innovative startups. We applied for a micro-credit of 5000 euros, and they gave us 7500. "Do some proper testing," they told us. "You don't have to pay it back if you are unable to." You see, that gives you some room to manoeuvre, and a little push. And we sure did pay it back.'

Verheul: 'That microcredit paved the way for the millions of euros we made later.

Wageningen was important. I still use course books about economic miscalculations that led to projects such as the North-South line going ahead in spite of exceeding their budgets by millions. Or the hellish Decision Science course about how to maximize your profits.'

What does your future look like? Have you become millionaires?

Berden: 'I still find it fascinating to work in the fashion industry and improve the world of fashion. I'm in the right place. With United Wardrobe, we worked with 40 people in the Netherlands, last year there were 500 of us working for Vinted, and this year there are already 1000 worldwide. We operate in 13 countries. The expectation is that second-hand clothing will continue to be a trending growth market for the next 10 years,' says Berden, who wants to conquer Canada together with Slijkhuis. He declines to answer the question as to whether the trio are millionaires. 'If you go into business, you always stand a chance of success. If you do nothing, you won't have any successes. If you want to win the lottery, you have to buy a lottery ticket first.'

Verheul: 'Last year I wrote a book called *How much did you sell it for?* That's a question I'm not supposed to answer because it's competition-sensitive information. I'm self-publishing the book because publishers only give you a tiny percentage in royalties. I'm also investing in startups and I'm interested in investing in blockchain technology. I think it's a method of distributing wealth more fairly in the world.'

Do you miss each other?

Berden: 'I still see Thijs regularly and we talk on the phone a lot. He's a real entrepreneur who likes to do everything himself.'

Verheul: 'I must say, I have wiped away many a tear. We were like family for seven years. Having a beer together on a Friday afternoon. Helping each other with bidding on a house or arranging a mortgage. I do miss that.' ■