

Small Business

Your trash, my treasure

These makers are upcycling everything from used tinsel to old uniforms and books and created successful businesses in the process.

STORY BY HANNA MARTON

If you ever had a grandparent who insisted on saving and reusing everything, from odd buttons to random bolts, they may have been onto something. Besides being better for the planet – because the reclaimed materials aren't fast-tracked to landfill – transforming old stuff into new things is creative and oh-so-satisfying. It's also just smart maths to take something people no longer assign value to and make it desirable – and worth money – all over again.

Every person chucks 1.48 tonnes of stuff, on average, into the bin each year, according to the Australian Government's National Waste Report 2022. Sure, some of that is nappies and light bulbs but much of the trash we disregard can be treasure with a little imagination. Here are three resourceful game-changers who have turned their passion for upcycling into profit.



Brisbane-based fashion designer Rachel Burke makes wearable artwork from reclaimed materials, such as tulle and tinsel.

“At 23, after dropping out of a musical theatre degree, I made a dress every day for a year to raise money for the Starlight Children's Foundation. I fell in love with deconstructing vintage garments and upcycled materials and

making something new out of them. Because much of my work is about embellishment, it's nice when half the job is done for me.

A Brisbane store started stocking my label and then hired me as their in-house designer. Eventually, I became the head of womenswear design at Universal Store. Five years ago, I went out on my own. I don't believe in the concept of the 'starving artist' and

wanted to be financially stable before quitting my day job. I've been so busy ever since and am grateful for that.

I've supplied garments to Beyoncé's kids via their stylist. Australian actor and playwright Anna McGahan wore one of my gowns – made from a second-hand dress and dead-stock tulle – to the Logies last year. For a concert on his birthday, Harry Styles was gifted a tinsel coat by stadium management, which I'd originally made for Fashion Week and then altered. I had asked my Instagram followers to send me used tinsel, which I sewed into a coat that would eventually be dubbed Harry's 'birthday suit'. Apparently, he loved it.

A studio assistant helps me one day a week; otherwise, I make everything myself. Despite offers to take my brand to the next level, I don't want to get sucked into mass-producing my stuff. If I ever stop loving my job, I may look at other things. But I've been obsessed with creating wearable art for 10 years. That said, I am taking on bigger clients and global styling gigs. I'm working on a theatre production and another book. There are always growing pains as you move into different areas of your business but I try to always keep my values and my feelings in check."

Rachel's tips

+ Start small People often take on risk by making a bunch of products and then trying to sell them. Lower the stakes by only growing the business when you need to. You can do things small and well.

+ Educate yourself I've done Photoshop and pattern-making courses. When I need information, I upskill. Even if you hire a professional, at least you know the lingo.

"I couldn't stop thinking about the books lying on dusty shelves in op shops."

From her studio in Sydney's Inner West, Foolhouse's Sarah Lamond transforms antique books into keepsake boxes and 3D sculptures in her spare time.

"Ten years ago, I had two young daughters and was running an interior design and graphic design business. It was rather foolhardy! I decided to concentrate on the children and not my career for a bit but I needed a creative outlet so Foolhouse was born.

A lot of design work is computer-based and being creative, I like using my hands. I'd been styling with vintage books on interior design jobs and I love that old, detailed, embossed aesthetic. I couldn't stop thinking about all the books lying on dusty shelves in op shops and antique stores. I thought, 'I have to keep these books in existence.'

I love the idea of something beautiful hiding something unexpected. So, Stanley knife in hand, I started carving nooks out of the book pages, which could be used to hide keepsakes or gifts. I sold out at my first market and invested in a scroll saw. This allowed me to carve out detailed curves, such as the shape of a seahorse or banksia. Customers started saying, 'I don't want to close them! I want them open on my bookshelf.' Like a little piece of art.

I hate waste so I began sculpting cameos and objects with the blocks of pages that I'd cut out, installing them in old vintage bell jars or cloches. I create bunting out of the dust jackets, as well. My base products are quite cheap – sometimes free. Many recycling plants won't take old books as it takes a lot of water to break them down. Neighbours even leave their relatives' vintage books on my doorstep. I cover my costs with some profit.

Now that my kids are grown, I can balance my commercial business, Anomaly Design, with Foolhouse. Every spare minute, I'm in the studio, cutting, glueing or clamping. Recently, a customer proposed to his girlfriend with a book – hiding the ring inside. Later, he emailed me one word: 'Yes!'"



Sarah's tips

+ Be brave Many creatives are scared to put themselves out there but just start doing the thing and the snowball will roll. Someone will always do it worse than you and somebody will do it better. You have nothing to lose.

+ Be friendly I was introduced to a magazine photo editor at a dinner with friends and she talked naught about her job. On Monday, I got a call from one of her staff wanting to put my product in the mag! The lesson: things take off when you least expect it.



As founder of social enterprise Loop Upcycling, Perth-based Dwayne Rowland turns unwanted work uniforms into useful products while also employing people experiencing financial or social disadvantage.

“The universe is a funny place. I’d been in the construction industry for more than 20 years when I randomly met the head of sustainability for Virgin Australia. We just hit it off. During one of our regular chats, he asked me what I knew about uniform recycling. I said, ‘Mate, tell me what your problem is. I’ll figure out a solution.’ Virgin was sending 16 tonnes of uniforms, belts, bags, cuff links – all kinds of stuff – to landfill each year. It was mind-blowing.

I talked to community partners working with people with disabilities, refugees, the homeless and women in domestic violence shelters. I asked, ‘What can I do to support you?’ The resounding feedback was around training and employment. Here, we had two problems that could negate each other so I created Loop. It made sense to bring in people who are desperate for work and to reconnect with society. They can either stay with Loop or use the training as a step-up to further employment.

Companies pay us to take away their waste but also to buy it back in the form of upcycled products. We’ve turned 7-Eleven uniforms into laptop bags for staff, Virgin uniforms into teddy bears for young travellers and Fortescue trousers into boot bags and laundry hampers for fly-in fly-out workers. For many clients, this costs less than

sending textiles to landfill and they get the environmental and social benefits.

Growing up in Darwin with an Aboriginal stepmother and Aboriginal half-brothers and sisters, I was very fortunate to have a real-life education on Indigenous culture. I’ve been able to use that to understand the challenges and help make change. The construction industry has been good to me as well, and it’s great to give back. Loop’s not about being some massive conglomerate that makes billions. It’s about changing people’s lives.” ♦

Dwayne’s tips

+ Say yes If you’re given an opportunity, say yes. Then figure it out. Cry yourself to sleep if you need but get to the table. And surround yourself with good people.

+ Be realistic You need to have money to support yourself. If you think it’s going to take six months to reach a sustainable point, it will probably take you two years. That’s just how it is.

Five affordable ways to find your customers

How to promote your product when you’re starting a business on a shoestring.

1 Use social media
Take advantage of free channels like Instagram, Facebook and TikTok and stop potential customers from scrolling with eye-catching content.

2 Write blog posts
Pop a blog vertical on your site and write SEO-strong (that’s “search engine optimisation”) articles that are relevant to your brand and answer questions people are asking on Google.

3 Get endorsed
Know an influencer? Send them a product with compliments and ask them to kindly share it on their social media channels.

4 Go to events
It’s tempting to hide in your studio or office but in-person networking can help build your brand, especially if it’s business to business.

5 Send emails
The return on investment for email marketing is high since customers typically opt-in to receiving news from you and, let’s face it, who doesn’t check their email every three minutes?