

Grow

Make it count



WORK LIFE

Ultra Violette

How two friends turned decades of beauty-industry experience into a successful new business.

How To...

The Explainer

The Collector

Work Life

Business with benefits

STORY BY HANNA MARTON



Can friends make great partners in business?
Or is it too messy? These entrepreneurs say it's
the secret to their success.

There's an old adage that says, "Don't mix business with pleasure." The idea of starting a business with friends can be daunting. What if it ruins your relationship, the lines between work and play become blurry or you get sick

of spending time together? The what-ifs can make your head spin. But there's another cliché that rings true: "Birds of a feather flock together." If you share values, goals and ambitions, they may be your ideal business partner. After all,

it worked for Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin. We sat down with four groups of entrepreneurs who successfully moved out of the friend zone and into the office. Spoiler alert: they're still talking to each other.

“One of our strongest assets is our relationship.”

Bec Jefferd (pictured, left) and Ava Matthews (right) spent more than two years plotting, ideating and planning Ultra Violette, a prestige sunscreen brand.

Ava: “Bec and I used to build brands for a beauty retailer. We had front-row seats to what consumers wanted and could see there was a need for a beauty-focused SPF brand. Most sunscreens on the market were thick, greasy and didn’t sit well under make-up.

We worked through a plan one day in winter in 2016 and kept brainstorming and getting more serious. More than two years later, Ultra Violette was born.

Before that, Bec and I were close and cared for each other very much but we weren’t in the same social group. So, it wasn’t like we hung out on the weekends and then had to hash stuff out together at work. Of course, we do hang out as friends now – and with each other’s families – but because of those separate friendship groups, we weren’t really concerned about going into business together.

Anyone can have an idea but making it happen is the hard part. Bec is great at execution. If it had been left to me, it likely would have stayed an idea.”

Bec: “We weren’t deterred by how hard it was going to be to launch Ultra Violette. We were as resourceful as possible, working with savings and sourced loans from friends and family. We’ve subsequently taken some small loans for inventory financing. But we didn’t under-capitalise the business at an early stage, either. We also didn’t take a salary for the first eight months.

From the beginning, we outlined who would be responsible for what.



Ava looks after ecommerce, retail, brand marketing and education. I have HR, legal, operations and finance. And we overlap on product development. We’ve mostly stuck to this as Ultra Violette has grown. We’re both outgoing and comfortable in foreign situations. That’s important for running a business – you’re always doing something that you’ve never done before and don’t necessarily think you’re equipped to do. You need self-belief.

If Ava really puts her foot down on something – and it’s in an area that she’s rock-solid on – then I’ll forego my view and let her take the lead. Showing the team that we can have a difference of opinion shows that all views are respected. We don’t want to be dictators.

It’s wonderful just to have company. A friend, who’s the CEO of a growing business, said to me, ‘Don’t you find it’s lonely at the top?’ And I said, ‘Actually no, because I’ve got Ava.’ I’m grateful to run this business with someone who cares about it as much as I do.”

Tips from Bec and Ava

+ Do get a co-founder

You might have a senior leadership team but you can’t reveal too much of the hard stuff because it can destabilise the team.

+ Have difficult conversations up front

Make a robust plan and set out your expectations for the brand and your salaries. Consider how much money you’ll need to get through each month.

+ Trademark your brand

Invest in a lawyer to protect your products and ensure you don’t inadvertently copy other brands.



Tips from Ed and Dan

+ Address issues

Hash it out because if a bunch of little issues build up, it can lead to negative energy or a massive blow-up.

+ Understand each other's work styles

Learn how the other person operates and know your individual strengths and weaknesses.

+ Communication is key

Going into business together is much like a marriage and takes constant work. You don't just put the ring on and the job's done.

Former tradies and Queensland Australian of The Year 2023 nominees Ed Ross (pictured, left) and Dan Allen (right) created TradeMutt, a colourful workwear brand that starts conversations about mental health and suicide.

Dan: “We always joke about Ed being in two marriages – with his wife and with me. But if we hadn't been lumped together as the two new blokes on a building site in 2014, we may never have crossed paths. We have a similar sense of humour and talked about everything, including why workwear was so boring.

In December 2015, I lost a mate to suicide. It deeply affected us both because Ed was my main support person at the time. Suicide was such a heavy topic and we thought, ‘No wonder nobody wants to talk about it.’ So we explored the idea of funky work clothes to start conversations and were introduced to social enterprise. That's how TradeMutt came about.

Ed and I did side jobs for extra money, working seven days a week for two years. It tested our resolve and ability to work together but we saved enough cash to buy 1500 work shirts and two laptops. In exchange for our website, we did some renovation work for some brothers who owned a creative agency. Our website is still standing but I'm not sure if their house is!

Once we launched, we were cash-flow positive in five days and then a few months later, in 2018, we found a seed investor. That got us both off the tools; today, we employ about 35 people. If we didn't have enough on our plate already, navigating the world of tradie fashion, we started not-for-profit TIACS – This

is a Conversation Starter – which is embroidered onto our shirts. It's a free phone- and text-counselling service to support tradies, truckies, farmers and other blue-collar workers. Fifty per cent of our profits go into TIACS.

Ed and I have been in the trenches together from the get-go, which helped us through stressful periods. We've still had our fair share of blow-ups but we've become really good at conflict resolution. We just started a new tradition for our birthdays – which are about a month apart – where we go out and buy each other essentially the same present. This year it was nice new jackets; maybe next year it'll be boots. Who knows?”

“There's no way I could have done this on my own.”

Camilla La Fleur (pictured, left), Luci Hassen (middle) and Elin Marcic (right) run Unikspace – their timeless and comfortable clothing collection – from Sydney’s Northern Beaches.

Camilla: “The idea for Unikspace came during a conversation in Luci’s car one night, when she was dropping me and Elin home. It was 2018 and we worked together in a fashion and lifestyle store. It had changed and we were all feeling a bit fed up. That’s when Luci suggested we do something on our own. The next day I messaged the girls: ‘I can’t stop thinking about this.’

The fact we’d worked together was a good foundation. We became friends through work, which made us feel a lot safer about going into business together. Since none of us had a commercial background, we’ve been learning on the go, from developing the business to the financials, marketing and PR. We educate ourselves through listening to podcasts and watching online seminars. We still have a lot to learn.”

Luci: “We worked from Elin’s house for two years – around the dining table – which kept costs down and was easier with our kids. When we were planning Unikspace, I became pregnant with my third child. Eight months later, Elin had her first baby. Just over a year ago, Camilla had her third and now Elin is due with her second!

Even though we work together, we still see each other socially and even have getaways together. Boundaries between work and friendship have happened organically as we’re usually so busy at work that we don’t really have much time to chat about our personal lives. We also know each other so much better now that we’re in business together so our friendships have deepened. We know each other’s strengths and weaknesses, what we like, how we operate and how we would most likely respond to a situation.

Working with friends allows you to speak honestly, as your business partners know where you’re coming from. We don’t always agree but we keep our work hats on and figure it out.”

Elin: “In the beginning, our roles were muddled and we did everything – even the photography with friends as models. It sounds unprofessional but it looked good. When we started Unikspace, we had a supportive customer base from the boutique we worked at previously. More than 200 people from the local community came to our launch event.

To fund it, we scraped together a tiny investment each and built from there. I had contacts in Bali, where we had the pieces made. There’s no minimum order so we could launch with a small collection. In the first three months, we made our investment back. We then started making a profit but reinvested it, not taking a wage for the first year.

Our roles are defined now. Camilla does social media, marketing and PR. I look after the website and graphics. Luci does the financials and the two of us manage production. And all of us design. I can’t wait until we have the means to bring in experts and grow the business. We’re time-poor with packing orders and doing the day-to-day work but we have so many ideas.”

Tips from Camilla, Luci and Elin

+ Set up your roles

Have a clear understanding of what’s expected from each person in terms of responsibilities and commitment early on.

+ Check if the hats still fit

As a small business owner, you tend to wear all the hats. Assess whether they’re still best suited to you and if not, use experts when you can.

+ Control the cash flow

Since opening multiple bank accounts for specific purposes, we’re more on top of our finances.



“We
made big
decisions
with
babies on
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“We have a really deep respect for each other’s skill sets.”



Melbourne-based Andrew Kelly (pictured, left) and Duy Huynh (right) became partners – in business and in life – when their production company, Beyondedge, emerged 20 years ago.

Duy: “When we started dating in 2002, Andy was a landscaper and I ran Beyondedge, which I’d founded a year earlier. I’d taken a voluntary redundancy just after the dotcom crash and figured I could build websites without all that infrastructure. But I needed an extra pair of hands and Andy had the skill sets that were missing – logical, financial and management skills. As a creative person, I’m not particularly good at those things. This division of labour has worked well for 20 years.

We’re together almost 24/7 and we’ve learnt that to have a relationship outside of our professional one, you need to be present. When you’re working with a friend or partner, you create those boundaries by being in the moment.

We worked on a campaign to bring doctors and nurses into Queensland.

And most recently, we produced the documentary *How To Thrive*, which follows Marie McLeod, a positive psychotherapist, as she teaches people with mental health challenges to flourish. Andy and I choose meaningful projects that align with our values.”

Andrew: “In the early days of Beyondedge, we had to really hustle to win projects. Eventually, we had a full studio with 20 people working for us on the Gold Coast. Then, in 2013, there was a change in government and almost overnight, many of our contracts were cancelled. So we moved to Melbourne and slimmed down. We now bring on teams for specific projects as required.

Duy and I ensure we get time apart. I do a bit of hardcore hiking, which is good for my mental health. Duy catches up with friends or works on creative projects. We travel together a lot – there’s always something in the calendar that we can look forward to. When it comes to happiness, the anticipation is just as important as being on the trip.” ♦

Tips from Andrew and Duy

+ Set boundaries

Our work finishes at dinner time and then no more shop talk! If you want to remember to discuss something, send it in an email (but don’t check emails at night).

+ Do your own thing

Spending time apart means you can say, “Hey, this is what I did on the weekend” on a Monday, like regular colleagues.

+ Find the yin to your yang

Go into business with someone who can pick up where you might drop the ball and vice versa.