How do I start a custom apparel business?

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Starting a business is never easy, but with the right focus and a well-planned strategy, it can be very rewarding. Here are the six basic steps for starting a custom apparel business.

1. Choose your target audience

2. Find a print partner

3. Develop your product list

4. Create an online store

5. Test it out

6. Review and improve

1. Choose your target audience

To help you stand out, it's best to select a niche. A niche is a segment of the market that has its own unique needs that may differ from the rest of the market.

The ideal niche is medium-sized. It is not so big that it encompasses most people, and it is not so small that it becomes hard to locate customers.

Examples of good sized niches:

- Coffee lovers
- Extreme sport enthusiasts
- Work-from-home parents

- Active seniors
- Rabbit owners
- Fashion bloggers
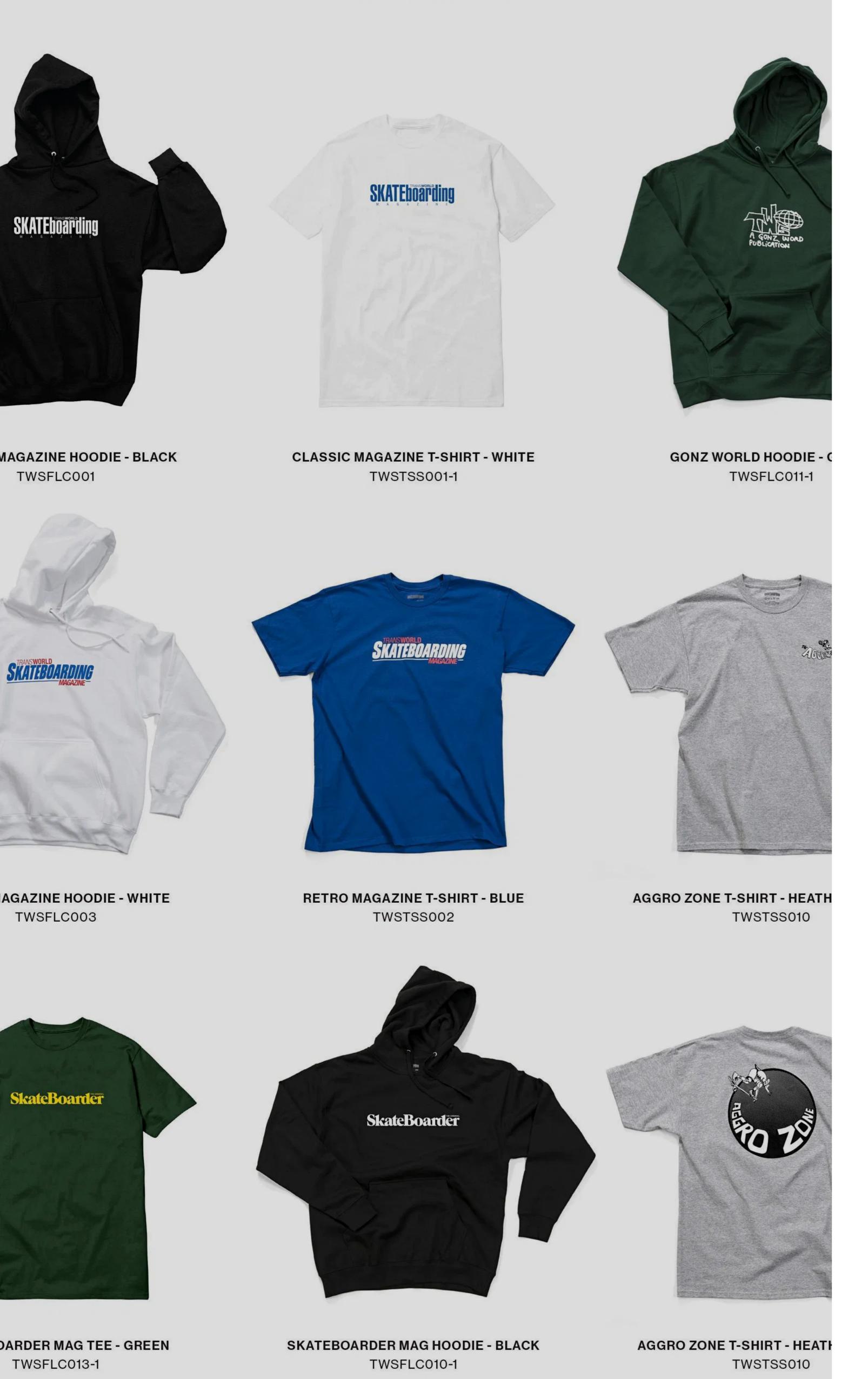
2. Find a print partner

When just starting off, it is risky to invest in your own equipment. That's why finding a print partner—someone who can both obtain the blank garments and print on them—is the easiest and safest way to get started.

SinaLite, for example, can buy the garments at a lower cost and print on them right at their facilities. This results in a lower cost for their print partners, who can now sell the printed apparel for higher profits.

Here are some important things to consider when choosing a company to work with:

▸ Do their prices allow you to profit?

▸ Do they offer a large variety of apparel?

▸ Do they offer fast turnaround times?

▸ What type of apparel printing do they do?

▸ Do they have order minimums?

▸ What is their printing quality like?

▸ Do they provide drop shipping?

▸ Do they have good reviews?

▸ Is it easy to place an order with them?

▸ Have you worked with them in the past?

MAGAZINE HOODIE - BLACK
TWSFLC001

CLASSIC MAGAZINE T-SHIRT - WHITE
TWSTSS001-1

GONZ WORLD HOODIE - C
TWSFLC011-1

MAGAZINE HOODIE - WHITE
TWSFLC003

RETRO MAGAZINE T-SHIRT - BLUE
TWSTSS002

AGGRO ZONE T-SHIRT - HEATH
TWSTSS010

OARDER MAG TEE - GREEN
TWSFLC013-1

SKATEBOARDER MAG HOODIE - BLACK
TWSFLC010-1

AGGRO ZONE T-SHIRT - HEATH
TWSTSS010

3. Develop your product list

First, calculate the costs and compare them to the price that you're planning to sell the items at. Will you be able to earn a profit from this? How much will you need to mark up?

Next, research what other businesses are selling. This will help you get an idea of what products you want to test out.

Remember, the initial stage is just testing, so you don't need to be completely committed to the products you are choosing right now.

Then, run some test orders with your print supplier. Take note of what the process is like, how long fulfilment takes, how the order is packaged, and of course, the quality of the finished product.

Once you have taken a look at the results and are satisfied, pick a few of the products to test out. You can always introduce more products later.

4. Create an online store

While you may opt to also have a physical store, the fastest and most cost-effective way to set up a custom apparel store is online.

There are three ways you can create an online store. Each of these methods have their own advantages and disadvantages.

1) Set up a shop on an ecommerce platform with a print-on-demand integration

Example: Creating a Shopify store and integrating SinaLite's print-on-demand app

Advantages

Fastest and easiest way out of the three methods

Once set up, it will run on autopilot so you can earn a passive income

Your store can have special features provided by the print supplier (e.g. online mockups)

Many integration apps are free to use

You don't need to create your own product images

You are protected by the ecommerce platform's policies and transaction security

You don't need a lot of technical expertise

Disadvantages

You have limited control over the way the listings look

You will need to pay fees that the ecommerce platform requires

You have fewer opportunities to engage with your clients during the ordering process

2) Set up a shop on an ecommerce platform without integrations

Example: Creating a WooCommerce store and listing products without using additional apps

Advantages

You have more control over the way the listings look

You are protected by the ecommerce platform's policies and transaction security

You can use your own branded product images

You may have some opportunities to engage with your clients during the ordering process

You only need a moderate amount of technical knowledge

Disadvantages

It takes more time than using an integration app

You need to create your own images

You will need to pay fees that the ecommerce platform requires

You will need to place orders manually with your print supplier when you receive orders from your client

3) Set up your own website with ecommerce features

Example: Creating your own website without third-party ecommerce platforms or integrations

Advantages

You get maximum customization abilities to meet your unique needs

You don't need to pay for an ecommerce platform

You can use your own branded product images

You have more opportunities to engage with your clients during the ordering process

You can add additional marketing features (e.g. popups)

Disadvantages

It takes considerably longer than the other two methods

You will need to either be highly technically proficient or hire someone who is

You need to create your own images

You will need to place orders manually with your print supplier when you receive orders from your client

5. Test it out

There are two things you need to test out here:

1) How well the ordering process works

Always test out the ordering process first before allowing customers to place real orders in your online store. Get someone who is not familiar with your store to try placing an order.

2) How well your products sell

This will help you decide whether you want to stick with those products or replace them with items that could sell better.

Running ads

One of the most effective ways to do initial testing is to use online ads. Here are some examples of where you can run online ads:

Facebook

Google

Instagram

LinkedIn

Pinterest

Gmail

We recommend setting a $5 budget for running initial Facebook ads for your products.

For more accurate results, try to keep the ads similar. The product should be the only difference in your ads.

Run the ads and monitor their progress. At the end of the test period, review which product ads did well. Now you know which of your products did well, and which ones didn't.

For the products that were not so popular, decide whether you want to keep these products but spend less on marketing them, or replace them with other products that could potentially do better.

6. Review and improve

Keep track of the data that accumulates as you run your store. Most ecommerce platforms will provide this data. Some things you may want to be aware of are as follows:

▶ Traffic to your online store

▶ Where the traffic is coming from

▶ How many times particular products were viewed

▶ The geographic location of your customers and/or viewers

▶ Which ads are getting more click-throughs

▶ Which ads are generating more sales

▶ Which products are getting the most and least orders

▶ Which products are generating the most and least revenue

Think about the implications of each set of data.
Example: You notice that most of your customers are from a specific state. Maybe it's time to invest more resources in marketing to that state.

Reviewing and improving is an ongoing process, so schedule some time every month to see what you can do better. There's always room for growth!

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