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# Dream a Little Dream (& Save the World, Too!)

Ever entertained the fantasy of starting your own business? Well, stop dreaming and start doing! But first, read on to discover how other veg entrepreneurs turned their ideas into success—with ethics intact. *By Matt Flanzer*



BACK IN 1993, SHARI KALINA HAD A DREAM. In this dream, there existed a one-stop vegan shop—a mall, if you will—where everything an ethical consumer could possibly pine for could be found under one roof.

In this imaginary space, each and every product—shoes and body-care products, doughnuts and dog food—has been produced in a cruelty-free fashion and without any animal byproducts, and shoppers happily procure their goods without having to scrutinize each and every label. The staff is friendly and knowledgeable, and never balks when asked if a product is fair-trade or sweatshop-free.

But, alas, Kalina's dream was pure fantasy, because in the early '90s, no such destination existed.

"There were a couple of businesses that sold just vegan footwear, and a couple that specialized in vegan bodycare, but there was no centralized source for all the things vegans need," says Kalina. "Eventually it dawned on me that while it wasn't feasible yet to have a whole physical mall of vegan stuff, there was a need for something like that on a smaller scale, and I decided to take the leap and make it happen."

Two years later, in 1995, Kalina turned fantasy into reality when she launched Pangea, a one-stop vegan shop in Bethesda, Md., where shoppers could pick and choose among 200 veg products. Building upon their original goal "to make life easier and more pleasurable to vegans," Kalina and her husband Phil Murray have successfully transitioned Pangea into online sales, while maintaining a retail storefront in Rockville, Md. Today, their line has expanded to 1,000 products, and they receive orders from as far away as China, Singapore, South Africa, and even Oman. Despite a thriving business, it's not the profits that keep Kalina's doors—digital or physical—open.

*Pangea's Rockville, Md. store is veg-friendly and pet-friendly. Herbivore Clothing Company's interior reflects the hip-and-modern Portland veg scene.*



"We're motivated more by our principles than by the urge to make money," says Kalina. "I consider Pangea a success, because it has enabled Phil and me and our other employees to work for something we all believe in, and to do so in a great environment with like-minded people."

### Know Your Niche

The veg market is still relatively small compared to the great-big world of consumer goods, but it's growing: industry analysts project that sales of vegetarian products will reach \$1.7 billion by 2010. Following the arc of that ascent is the emergence of "niche marketing," something Alison Kilmer knows a thing or two about. Kilmer, brand director and a partner at Vertebrae, Inc., a Sausalito, Calif.-based branding and marketing company founded by a trio of vegetarians, says that finding that niche—in Vertebrae's case, it's

"emotional branding"—has helped her and her partners expand their business and watch it flourish.

There's no one single, tried-and-true blueprint for starting and maintaining a successful business, but keeping your ethics at the fore while keeping a level head is a good place to start. Since 2002, this approach has worked for Vertebrae, and while the company has seen steady growth year after year, you won't find them selling out and cashing in any time soon.

"This is where we are happiest and most fulfilled," says Kilmer. "This is where our heart is."

Seasoned business-owner Josh Hooten, who co-founded the now-defunct *Herbivore* magazine and the still-successful Herbivore Clothing Company, seconds Kilmer's statements. His business and activism have always gone hand-in-hand, he says, and his

## Tips from the Top

Always wanted to start your own business but didn't know where to start? Meet seven ethical entrepreneurs and learn their secrets for success.

**Who:** Josh Hooten  
**Company:** Herbivore Clothing Company  
(herbivoreclothing.com)  
**In business since:** 2002



**Words of entrepreneurial wisdom:** "We animal-rights-type business owners are a small group, so extend a hand to others, and try to benefit the animals at every turn. It's the right thing to do, and good business."

**Who:** Shari Kalina  
**Company:** Pangea  
(veganstore.com)  
**In business since:** 1995



**Words of entrepreneurial wisdom:** "We built up a lot of debt trying to get things off the ground. Be prepared to live on savings and borrowed money for a long time!"

## The Cruelty-Free Cubicle

**Putting together an office that reflects your veg values—from the ground up—is easier than you think.**

How do you take your big idea for a vegan business and make it work from the ground up? Colleen Holland, associate publisher of VegNews, offers this advice to would-be vegepreneurs: “Treat your office like your home and create an environment that reflects your standards.” At the VNHQ, the belief in plant-fueled power is evident in everything from the vegetable-oil-run carpet-cleaning service to the box of local, organic veggies delivered weekly that comprises the majority of VN’s scrumptious staff lunches. All office furniture is Studio EG, a line specializing in recycled and non-toxic materials, picked up from a defunct dot com; the desks are secondhand scores; the ginormous conference table was a gift from the super-generous staff at *Mother Jones* magazine. Printing is something of an inevitability in the publishing biz, but VN wouldn’t consider using anything but recycled paper. Used ink cartridges are donated to a local school’s recycling program, and every sheet of paper gets a second life in the office printer. Ye olde water cooler? Don’t have one. Instead, the on-site distiller ensures totally pure drinking water, though it doesn’t afford as many excuses for work-time chat breaks. At any given time, the VN fridge may be host to all sorts of unusual things—faux intestines, for instance—but it will never, ever, not in a million years, have anything that is animal-derived. And that’s the way the VN staff likes it!

training as a graphic designer has come in handy not only for his own projects, but for collaborating with other veg business owners.

“This is something I’m always encouraging people to do: figure out what you’re good at and what you enjoy doing and apply that to the movement. You’ll be more effective doing that than doing something you find tedious, anyway. We’ve had a decent amount of success doing what we do, the way we do it, and this has enabled us to help tons of other groups with donations, offering design services, and speaking engagements.”

As someone who’s had to make the tough

and an all-consuming focus.

With proper planning and determination, merging that business with your own ethics and lifestyle *can* be fun, rewarding, and a great alternative to the usual nine-to-five daily grind. As Kalina and her fellow ethical entrepreneurs have proven, maximizing profits and leading the good life are *not* mutually exclusive, but understanding the unique challenges facing those who wish to start a veg company is the first step toward making the dream a successful reality. For many, at the top of the list is whether or not to broadcast the vegetarian angle.

**While the rest of the world catches on to the idea of cruelty-free living, we can gently ease them into it by giving them products and services that *just happen* to be vegetarian.**

choice to shutter one business, Hooten can speak to the difficulties that face small-business owners. “[At the magazine] you have to rely on ad dollars to pay your bills, but in a niche like veganism, you can’t—and don’t want to—charge a ton for ads because those who you want to advertise don’t have much to spend. It’s really hard,” he says.

### Fantasy vs. Reality

Working for a cause you believe in is just one of the many reasons to consider going into business for yourself. Who *hasn’t* dreamed of being his or her own boss? In theory, you get to set your own hours, work alongside people you like and who share your vision, bring the dog to the office, and never again experience disappointment when the holiday bonuses are being distributed. In practice, however, new business owners are more likely to work straight *through* lunch than to make the midday meal a lavish, two-martini affair. Think long hours, loss of sleep and hobbies,

Deliberately making the veg factor a non-issue by deflecting attention away from a product’s vegetarianness is one approach entrepreneurs are taking to avoid the dreaded pitfall of “veg-phobia.” The idea is that while the rest of the world catches on to the idea of cruelty-free living, we can gently ease them into it by giving them products and services that *just happen* to be vegetarian.

“Many of my clients are not vegan at all but are just looking for great cake,” says Hannah Tai, the founder of Hannah’s Edible Art, an artisan wedding cake bakery in the San Francisco Bay Area. Tai’s cakes are vegan by design, but are baked with such great care and high-quality ingredients that customers often don’t notice the absence of eggs and butter. Downplaying the dairy-free angle works for Tai. “There’s always the thought that you are cutting off consumers who may have preconceived notions about what a vegan product represents and who won’t use your services based on that,” says Tai. “My

**Who:** Blaire Kessler  
**Company:**  
Pristine Beauty  
(shoppristinebeauty.com)  
**In business since:** 2008



**Words of entrepreneurial wisdom:** “Don’t give up your principles or ethics, or compromise what your company is about to save a few bucks.”

**Who:** Alison Kilmer  
**Company:** Vertebrae  
(vertebrae.us)  
**In business since:** 2002



**Words of entrepreneurial wisdom:** “Clearly articulate what you stand for. Focus on your target audience and don’t try to be all things to all people.”

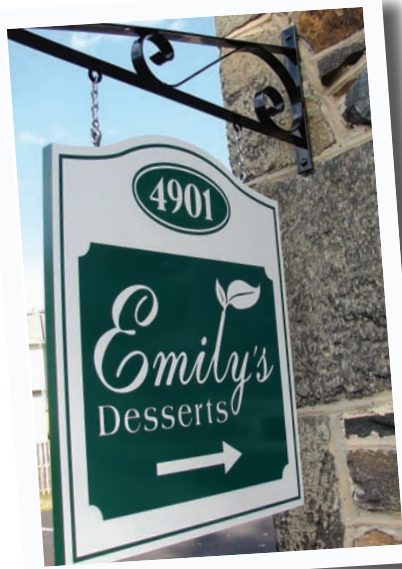
**Who:** Emily Mainquist  
**Company:** Emily’s Desserts  
(emilysdesserts.com)  
**In business since:** 2008



**Words of entrepreneurial wisdom:** “Don’t forget your mission. Never lose sight of your goal to help the world with your vegan business.”



The Emily's Desserts empire is about to expand with a new vegan café. At *Vertebrae*, the staff is vegan and the ambience is très chic.



greatest challenge continues to be among clients who have never had experience with vegan products in the past."

In Baltimore, Md., Emily Mainquist took a different approach to her business model. At Emily's Desserts—the baked-goods company she runs out of a 100-year-old, historic-landmark building—Mainquist strives to perfect her line of doughnuts, cookies, and chocolate-dipped pretzels. In the process, she continues to attract a loyal consumer base, and she does it with "vegan" stamped right on the packaging. "The whole reason I started my company is because I found out what happens to animals in factory farms," says Mainquist. But it's what's *inside* that packaging that's helped her establish her brand as a contender among the endless variety of non-vegan treats out there.

"I've found that the best way to bring non-vegans towards veganism is to show them how great the food is," says the 24-year-old. Her

approach—blending her passion for sweets with her passion for animals—works. "Most of the people in this neighborhood never knew what 'vegan' was before my bakery moved here," says Mainquist.

Oh, and that mall pipe dream of Kalina's from way back in the last century? It's now a reality, and it's thriving in Portland, Ore. Loudly and proudly all-vegan, four businesses—Herbivore Clothing Company, Scapegoat Tattoo, Food Fight Grocery, and Sweatpea Baking Company—make up the world's only vegan mini-mall. "[All four businesses] bring in different people, and we all benefit from each others' traffic," says Hooten. "Giving back has always been a big part of our business, which leads to more support, and round and round it goes." **VN**

**Matt Flanzer** is a writer for screen and print living in Los Angeles. Visit him online at [matt.flanzer.com](http://matt.flanzer.com)

**Who:** Rey Ortega  
**Company:** Sun Flour Baking Company ([sunflourbaking.com](http://sunflourbaking.com))  
**In business since:** 1994



**Words of entrepreneurial wisdom:** "Don't expect things to happen overnight, don't borrow from credit cards, and get everything in writing!"

**Who:** Hannah Tai  
**Company:** Hannah's Edible Art ([hannahs-edibleart.com](http://hannahs-edibleart.com))  
**In business since:** 2001



**Words of entrepreneurial wisdom:** "It's crucial to reach some segment of the non-vegan population as part of your client base. Keep an open mind about where [your] clients come from."

## Dollars&Sense

So what, exactly, will it take to make your dream of your very own veg business a reality? Unless you happen to have what's known in business as an "angel investor" who has absolutely limitless coffers and is completely happy to let you plunder them, you're going to need some funding. Sites like [businessknowhow.net](http://businessknowhow.net) and [resourcenation.com](http://resourcenation.com) offer calculators for projecting your actual costs, depending on what type of business you want to open. When it comes down to the financial side of things, here's a basic look at what you can expect to need for the first year:

→ **Rent:** No shock here, but remember that if you're going to be doing any remodeling before your official grand opening, you'll need to have enough money in the bank to cover rent before you see your first customer.

→ **Wages/benefits:** Yes, if you want people to work for you, you'll have to pay them. "Internships" will only get you so far. Nationwide, minimum wage is now \$7.25 per hour.

→ **Legal fees:** Will you be an LLC or an Inc.? Any patents or copyrights coming into play? It's even a good idea to get a set of legal-eagle eyes on all your contracts, preferably before you sign them. Shelling out for legal advice up front can certainly save you the hassle of lawsuits later in your business life.

→ **Branding:** For a, ahem, brand-new business, establishing your brand is important for beginning a relationship with your customers. Work with a professional to design a memorable logo, business cards, and website.

→ **Build-out:** Tables and chairs? Ovens, freezers, desks, desk lamps, or display cases? How about painting over the dreadful mauve left by your space's previous tenants? Depending on the business you choose to go into, plan on some hardware expenses.