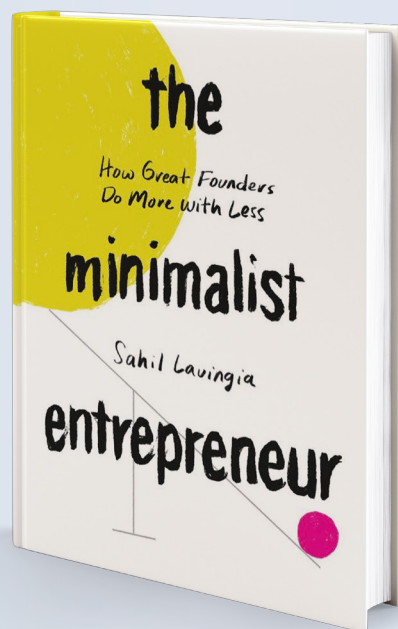


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Zooming In On Your Next Read



The Minimalist Entrepreneur

By Sahil Lavingia

Sahil Lavingia is the Founder and CEO of Gumroad. Gumroad exists to help every creative earn a living selling the stuff they make directly to their audience. Sahil is also an angel investor, a painter, and a writer. He resides in Beaverton, Oregon.

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How Great Founders Do More with Less

Minimalism has swept the world. In a culture that's all about more, more, more, thought leaders and authors who preach the disciplined pursuit of less are finding massive audiences— and for good reason. Science and research show that paring down our lives to their essentials can lead us to feel more joy, fulfillment, and peace than the constant pursuit of more possessions, more achievements, and more status symbols.

But there's one area in which the minimalist approach may seem at odds on the surface— the world of entrepreneurship. After all, an entrepreneur's goal is to create things— to make more, better, stronger, faster in order to attract as large a customer base as possible. Is there really a path for entrepreneurs who want to embrace the minimalist mindset?

In Sahil Lavingia's *The Minimalist Entrepreneur*, he advocates for exactly that. Not only does he believe in the idea that entrepreneurs can do more with less, he convincingly argues that the greatest founders in business have been doing exactly that for decades— we've just failed to learn from their approach until now.

Lavingia himself is a minimalist founder. He created Gumroad, a self-publishing digital marketplace platform where users can sell digital services such as books, memberships, courses, and other services online. He built it in a single weekend in 2011, released it, and raised over \$1 million in initial seed funding. Soon, Lavingia's creation was partnering with Twitter and raising millions more. Lavingia did it all with a team of one in response to a frustration he had experienced himself— the complexity of trying to sell one's creations online.

Today, Lavingia is an investor, thought leader, and writer who continues to embrace the minimalist entrepreneur's mindset. Along the way, he's developed a core group of principles that he believes can help entrepreneurs everywhere do more with less.

Start with Community

Interestingly, Lavingia begins his guide to becoming a minimalist entrepreneur with a decidedly un-minimalist concept— finding and joining a community. But while maximalists collect



things and possessions, Lavingia believes that minimalists see the value in choosing communities over other resources because of the singular benefit they can provide.

Lavingia recounts the moment when he moved from Silicon Valley to the burgeoning startup culture in Utah's area known as 'Silicon Slopes,' just south of Salt Lake City. Here, Lavingia realized that he wasn't particularly interested in the technical aspects of entrepreneurship — he didn't attend programming conferences or tech meetups. Instead, he found himself a community of creatives, meeting up at coffee shops to write sci-fi concepts and even paint in the open air. He even found a faith-based community of churchgoers that helped him see how the power of community can transcend political or socioeconomic boundaries.

Soon, the more Lavingia discovered people who wanted nothing more than to turn their creative passions into livelihoods, he began to see his life-changing idea take shape. He began to wonder, as others in his community did, why it was so difficult to share and profit from one's own creative ideas over the internet? In a world that connected people instantly across the world, why was there no simple platform for someone to sell their creations to any interested buyer online? This was the beginning of Gumroad. The lesson for readers is that whatever interests you, seek to find a community of people like you who share your interests and let them inspire you. Instead of collecting things as resources, collect perspectives. These will have more value than you can possibly imagine.

Build as Little as Possible

Lavingia famously released the first version of Gumroad after working on it for just a single weekend. Does that mean that you should rush out a shoddy product before it's ready? Well, in a sense, yes. Lavingia believes in building 'almost nothing,' saying that if you're addressing a true pain point for people, they won't fault you for the simplicity of your early offering. He believes in refining what he calls a manual valuable process — some action that makes life easier for your community or your audience — before worrying about turning it into a minimum viable product. Through this process you'll discover whether you're offering something people actually need and want.

In practice, this looks like a gradual shift from being paid directly for your time to being paid for the outcome you provided, an outcome you've hopefully automated one way or another. Think of it this way. Essentially, this means that before you even worry about creating a 'product,' you should be the product. Offer your services in an area you think there is demand for — in Lavingia's case, it was selling people's creations online. Don't worry about the time demands this requires, at least at first. In this stage, you're establishing demand. Once you've developed a service that's good enough people will pay for it, it's time to start shifting from being paid for your time to being paid for your product, the thing that will complete the service you've been offering faster and more efficiently than ever.

Lavingia also advocates for the fastest possible 'feedback loop' between you and your customers. Basically, the more quickly

you can get your product into people's hands, find out what they hate about it, and fix it, the better off you'll be and the more quickly you'll reach a solution people will actually pay for.

Sell to Your First Hundred Customers

If minimalists are all about giving things up, then there's one thing that Lavingia wants entrepreneurs to give up more than anything — the outdated ideas of a 'launch.' He writes passionately about the way that building up to a magical 'launch day' when the product becomes available to customers with the equivalent of a big shiny banner is a mistake and, in many cases, devastating.

Why? Because a business or product is not an event, it's an ongoing relationship people have with something someone has created that improves their lives. So why do so many entrepreneurs put so much pressure into their launch? Because it feels good! It's exciting! It feels like the culmination of months or years of work, a moment that people can point to and say, "Look, I actually made something!"

But that need for public validation can be damaging. Instead, Lavingia says that your first focus should be selling to your first hundred customers. Forget a big launch date, just get out there and find a hundred people who will buy and use your product. Will they all become lifelong advocates and make you go viral by shouting about your product online? Of course not. There are no overnight successes, no matter what journalists would have us all think. But those first 100 customers are the gateway to more customers, to greater visibility, and to a 'launch' that actually has momentum behind it rather than a fabricated attempt to drum up excitement that doesn't exist. Just ask Quibi, the mobile entertainment streaming app that bought Super Bowl ads, paid millions to celebrity promoters, and planned a massive launch day only to have its day-one subscribers absolutely dwarfed by competitors like Disney Plus. Soon, the company shut down and had to return its \$1.8 billion in raised capital back to investors.

Don't be like Quibi, Lavingia says. Just start finding customers, find product-market fit, and find a milestone worth celebrating before you think about your 'launch.' Skip the one-time grand opening and instead focus on the steady journey that comes from selling to your first hundred customers.

Market by Being You

In this section of *The Minimalist Entrepreneur*, Lavingia hones in on a few of the most powerful (and free) ways to begin building an audience of potential customers. He speaks largely of the power of thought leadership — providing value with your ideas before you convince people that there is also value in your products.

Lavingia even outlines his 'Minimalist Marketing Funnel,' which is a simple but surprisingly effective framework to follow when you're trying to generate customers without investing time. It begins with engagement — you create something that people are interested in and either watch, read, or interact with online. If they get engaged enough by it, they'll become followers. They're



Educate, inspire, and entertain at every turn and engaged followers will come.”

not quite interested in your product yet, but they’re interested in what you and your business have to say. Eventually, they’ll start to wonder what your business is all about—and that’s when they’ll begin researching your product. They may even consider buying it. Some of them, eventually, will turn into customers.

At the top of the funnel is social media activity and SEO-based writing, designed to bring in an audience. Educate, inspire, and entertain at every turn and engaged followers will come. Next comes more direct communication via emails and communities where you engage more directly with followers who have expressed interest in you and your business. Then, finally, comes the phase that’s in the customer’s hands—when they research your product, consider it, and ultimately buy it (or don’t).

Grow Yourself and Your Business Mindfully

In personal development, mindfulness and minimalism go hand in hand. When we relinquish the attention we pay to things and products, we find ourselves more able to be present and in-the-moment, attuned to the world around us. Can those same principles apply to launching a business as an entrepreneur?

“At this stage,” Lavingia says, “the real question is: How can I grow with intent, without jeopardizing the impact I make for my customers or damaging the life I’ve built? On the surface, it might seem straightforward to stay the course when you start to see results, but slow, sustained growth is its own kind of challenge that requires deliberate, conscious decision making.”

It’s no secret that many businesses that began with great promise have been taken down with complacency and a lack of mindful decision-making. Whether due to overspending on resources they don’t need with money they don’t have, hiring too many people too quickly, or devolving into infighting and disagreements, too many companies fail to take deliberate steps to insulate themselves against the most common startup mistakes.

In this regard, Lavingia writes on the importance of ‘profitable confidence’—an infinite runway that will maximize your creativity, clarity, and control. Basically, it means spend less than you make—something that’s simple in principle but difficult in practice when the sales start coming and the future looks boundless. This is, at its core, what being a minimalist entrepreneur is about. Resist the urge to turn a little early success into a giant office space, a move to Silicon Valley, and 50 new employees before the time is right.

Build the House You Want to Live In

In the book’s final chapter, Lavingia turns his minimalist approach to company culture. After all, he says, a company is made up of people. Does that mean that you should start hiring people as soon as possible? Not so fast. First, you have to make a company that people will actually want to work for. It has to be built on values, not just profits. One mistake that Lavingia highlights as being made by too many startups is that they don’t worry about company culture early, because the ‘company’ is just them and a friend or in many cases just them. They don’t think deliberately about the kind of culture they want to create. Then, when they’re growing fast and in need of employees, they don’t take the time to establish that culture. Before long, their company is growing but developing a reputation as a place no one wants to work at because it’s unpleasant, unfocused, and not designed to make the people who work their happy day in and day out.

One of Lavingia’s most powerful insights is the idea that entrepreneurs should treat their company like their second product. Their first product was built for customers, the second is built for employees. He says that while building a place where people are happy to work is even more rewarding than building software or technology, it’s also much more difficult. His tips in this regard include articulating values early and often, and having difficult conversations with employees early as well—they’ll only get harder the longer you wait. Always along the way, ask yourself—Would I want to work at this company if I hadn’t created the product it sells myself?

Conclusion

The Minimalist Entrepreneur is the rare business book that contains actionable, detailed guidance on launching a business without getting lost in the weeds of technical business terms and strategies. Lavingia never loses sight of the big picture when delving into the small details, and in fact he helps us all see how those little details in many cases are actually the big picture in hiding.

Vividly written, inspiring, and well-suited to the minimalist esthetic, *The Minimalist Entrepreneur* is an excellent handbook for applying mindfulness and essentialism to the wild world of starting a business.