



ALUMNI ACROSS TECHNOLOGY SPACES

## XAVIER VAN MEERBEEK '06

# 21st Century Entrepreneurship



After an unsuccessful start on a scholarship at George Washington University, Xavier quickly came to realize that college was a privilege and not a right. Moving to City University of New York – Hunter College, his focus shifted from parties and fraternization to a double major in chemistry and interdisciplinary honors. Treating college very much like a job, he arrived on campus every day at 9 a.m. and left at 6 p.m. He was fortunate to be hired to do research in a chemistry lab, and after graduating with his undergraduate degree, he continued working towards a PhD.

When a business opportunity presented itself about a year into his PhD program, Xavier realized he couldn't possibly do both well and had to make a choice. So his entrepreneurial journey began, and along with a good college friend, Chuong, he started the Vaan Group on a whim and a bet that they had found just the right business to develop.

Well before electronic cigarettes had become the massive craze that they are today, Xavier was intrigued by them. When he used them in public spaces, people would ask what they were and where they could get one. After researching a variety of brands, Xavier and Chuong chose their favorite and proposed a meeting with the two owners in New Jersey. Convinced them how much they liked their product and wanted to work with them, they joined forces as junior partners. "We cut our teeth on anything that needed to be done. We would get booths at street fairs and sell them on the street. We would go to fashion events and get them placed in fashion shows. We had them placed with a couple of celebrities who were investing at the time. Being the "young guys in the company," we were also tasked with handling their online store." Thus, they came to understand the world of web design and e-commerce.

Doing the design and running the store operations for the e-cig company gave Xavier the background that would allow him to branch out and bring in other clients. By 2015, two of the four partners had left to pursue other opportunities, and Xavier was at the helm as CEO of a sustainable, full-fledged e-commerce agency he continues to run with Chuong today. They have landed very sizable and reputable clients, hired seven full-time employees, and expanded their business in extremely creative ways. As CEO, Xavier manages the bulk of communication with clients and scopes out projects, whether for design, development, or both. After assessing a client's needs, he will talk to the team about potential technology solutions or design strategies in order to craft a comprehensive project proposal.

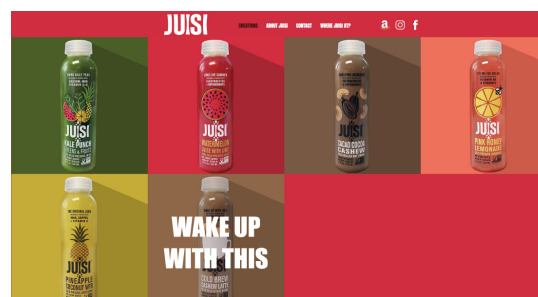


## REMOTE-BASED WORK: A MODERN BUSINESS MODEL

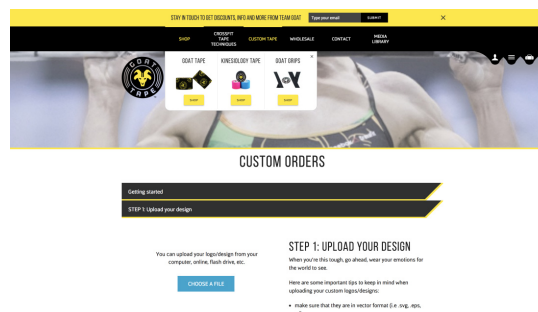
Using web platforms like Weworkremotely.com to connect with developers or designers overseas, Xavier has built a talent pool that can best serve their clients. “There is a lot of trial and error, but you find those who really stand out. Our Chief Technology Officer started off as a contract employee working for us from Warsaw. Eventually I flew there to offer him a full-time job, and now he helps hire new talent. There are a lot of companies now that are going fully remote. As the CEO of our company, I am constantly reading about how those teams operate, what software tools they are using, how they keep in touch, what the work flow looks like. For us, so far, so good.”

## MILLBROOK CONNECTIONS ARE EVERYWHERE!

In 2015 Xavier put together a proposal for friend and fellow Millbrook alum George Kuhnhardt '05 to redesign a webstore for George's Goat Tape business. The site launched in 2016 and continues to be maintained today. Xavier and his team created an interactive form that allows customers to check the pricing on custom tape orders, fill out all the necessary information, and upload the logo that they want to use in the correct format. What had been a long arduous process going back and forth on email became simple and streamlined. Xavier has also worked with Joe Savino '05, establishing his online store for Joe's Juisi brand, a line of cold-press juices that he continues to sell, and they have plans to work together on a new project in the coming months.



Xavier also brought in Millbrook alumnus Oliver Cohen '16 to work as an intern during the summers of 2016 and 2017. Oliver had met Xavier during a 2014 Intersession focused on technology and entrepreneurship; Xavier and Chung hosted the Millbrook group at their Brooklyn office and discussed how they were growing their business in e-commerce and online marketing. Impressed by what he learned about the Vaan Group's work, Oliver kicked off a gap year by joining their team for a few months after graduation; he was pivotal in marketing their co-working space, Workspace Williamsburg, and assisting with social media marketing for Goat Tape, among other things.





While the Vaan Group continues to grow, there is only one full-time employee—their UX designer—working alongside Xavier and Chuong in the Brooklyn office. Their CTO is based in Warsaw, another developer is in Norway, and another developer is in Croatia. The entire Vaan Group meets up a few times per year or as needed in either Warsaw or Berlin. “We can afford to hire the top talent in Warsaw or Croatia before we can afford the top talent in the states. So it makes us more competitive and able to service our larger clients.”

## E-COMMERCE AND BRAND LOYALTY

The Vaan Group has found their niche as an e-commerce agency, so they have really focused on building web stores that attract shoppers and convert sales. A really successful direct-to-consumer webstore is a smart investment that provides a retailer with detailed customer datasets, more profit per sale (without middleman charges), and superior brand management.


“Companies that are purpose-driven, sustainable, care about their practices, source from the right places, and create products that are high quality—all of that helps create a customer that is brand loyal. A webstore is definitely the best way to gain those customers and far superior to Amazon in that regard. While Amazon grabbed about 44% of all online sales (and 4% of total retail sales) in the U.S. in 2017, there is still a ton of revenue to be made in other e-commerce spaces.”

Some of Xavier’s favorite clients are companies that have achieved strong e-commerce growth. Ann Taylor has been a steady client and is a great example of a customer who invested in e-commerce early on, resulting in huge dividends and driving their profits up over the last several years. Extra Butter, a retailer selling trendy and cool

sneakers, bags, and apparel, needed a more cinematic approach to their site, so The Vaan group developed cool animations and interactions to support their brand identity. Another client, Pilgrim, sells a line of diffusers and aromatherapy, and Xavier and his team elevated the brand, created a clean interactive site, and overhauled their packaging as well. Sustain Natural is another great success story. A feminine care and sexual wellness brand, they launched their online store in February of 2017 and experienced a massive amount of growth in a very short period of time. Excited about the future, their client list continues to grow with high-value well-known brands coming on board.

## THE FUTURE IS HERE: SUBSCRIPTION BASED E-COMMERCE

Positioning their expertise in the e-commerce space, Xavier and Chuong are developing tools to meet the challenges that their customers are managing on a daily basis. They are currently beta-testing an app that analyzes data for subscription-based e-commerce businesses. As more and more businesses jump into this model—ideal for products with recurring use like skin care, household goods, pet food, vitamins, and so much more—growing datasets are getting harder to decipher and manage. “Our application will give businesses more insights into this data... What is our average order size? How many line items are their per order? When people cancel, what is the average cancel time, and what marketing strategies worked or didn’t work? Subscription data is so solid because there are repeating patterns—our customers can use this data to negotiate rates for their shipping providers, for example, or manage their marketing campaigns when they see a large spike or drop off in business.”

A man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a red and blue plaid shirt over a white t-shirt, is sitting in a modern office environment. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera. The background is blurred, showing office furniture and large windows.

I had a recent Millbrook student reach out to me about how to break into the technology space. I think the most beautiful part about tech is the egalitarian nature. If you're really good at it and you're passionate and you do good work, your portfolio speaks volumes. It's about doing it—even if it's just for fun. The internet offers so many free courses on every subject, and they really do work.

Coding classes would be great to offer in schools. However, knowing code isn't a panacea—it doesn't guarantee a job. But the thought process and methodology of coding is quite beneficial from a pedagogical perspective. It's learning a new language and then problem-solving using that language. And it's a story that you can keep building forever. It teaches you process, much in the same way you work on a piece of art that takes a long time to create.

To current students I would also say, take a year off. College shouldn't be something you just need to do right after high school regardless of what you want to get out of the experience. So many friends of mine who came into college after a year off were better students, better citizens, and ended up on a much better path. And, don't be so obsessed with the name of a college or university. There are some industries where the name of your school has a measurable impact, but those sorts of standards are changing. There should be a lot more that goes into your college choice beyond the US News and World Report ranking.