



A Forgotten Accessory

An Interview with
Justin Kerzner, Co-Founder, UPTON Belts



EDITORS' NOTE Justin Kerzner assumed his current post in July of 2015. He studied at St. John's University School of Law and received his B.B.A. in Business Administration from University of San Diego.

COMPANY BRIEF Born from a vision of democratizing luxury, UPTON was launched in 2015 by Justin Kerzner, then a law student in New York, after noticing luxury retailers' disinterest in a key component of their portfolio: leather accessories. While many brands included belts and accessories in their fashion lines, belts were too often treated as an afterthought: un-thoughtfully constructed and overpriced. Seeing an opportunity in the market for something new, UPTON was born. Using the same raw materials as high-end retailers, UPTON creates luxury-quality goods sold at accessible, honest prices. All UPTON products are conceptualized, designed, and crafted in the United States.

What made you feel UPTON could differentiate in this space?

I wanted to build a brand that looked and felt like a high-fashion brand but operated a bit differently. Similar to Everlane, the goal was to create an elevated product and differentiate by delivering it at a reasonable price. The belt category seemed to offer the greatest amount of "white space." It always seemed impossible to find a great belt, especially one that lasted, and actually fit properly. Borrowing a page from Warby Parker, we created a Fit Kit that we send to the customer so they can measure before submitting their size. This is just one example of how we differentiate.

In terms of quality, we use an Italian-tanned, American leather. It's not cheap, but it's

incredible. In designing, we focus on a fairly minimal aesthetic. Nothing flashy, no big buckles or crazy prints; it's all very muted. We use three pieces of leather to construct each belt. Again, not easy, but it holds up and feels great.

Designing the product was probably the biggest challenge, but we're very happy with how it turned out. The goal was to make something that appealed to a wide demographic. My customer base ranges from about ages 18 to 75.

Being an online brand is nice, but our biggest challenge is convincing customers that the product is as good as we say it is. It isn't always easy to believe that a Hermes-quality belt can retail for \$120 to \$140. Yet, once the customer experiences it, they typically appreciate the value.

Are there natural brand extensions?

There are plenty of natural brand extensions in leather goods. Our brand was built around using the best materials and practices to make everyday products better, so there is a lot that we can innovate on. We recently introduced a new card wallet. It's handmade in New York City and retails for \$98. We also have a few new extensions that we'll launch online in the coming months, everything from dog collars to backpacks, but our primary focus is belts. To put it simply: we want to own the category and do what Warby Parker and Dollar Shave Club did.

With so many brands in the space, is it really about creating that buzz today?

Launching something the way we did – online with a small budget for a product that people have trouble getting excited about and in a city like New York – was not easy. It's absolutely about creating a buzz and, in such a busy online marketplace, it's challenging. We wanted to achieve organic growth in the most natural way possible. It may be surprising, but our most powerful marketing initiatives thus far have been through pop-up shops at Lululemon stores in New York City. We've been partnering

with them since November of 2015, and it's been amazing. It's also incredibly simple: we arrive about an hour before the store opens, display the product and packaging experience on a table near the window, and sell.



Justin Kerzner at work (top left); UPTON belt products

Belt buying hasn't always been the most exciting thing, but I think we've changed that. Belts are very different from shoes, watches, eyewear, etc. in that most other products have a far greater potential to go "viral." We're working hard to develop a strong network of celebrities, influencers, brands, etc., specifically through social media. Influencer and brand partnerships are very valuable and can become quite lucrative if executed properly. We didn't start out with many connections, but that's one of the reasons I moved to New York. It made the most sense since I could build my network here.

For you, at just 26 years of age, did you know early on that you had the entrepreneurial bug and that the desire to create your own company was so strong?

I always wanted to explore retail. I grew up in it, and I love it. My parents have a chain of chocolate stores in Canada, and my grandfather runs a car rental business. I put a lot of hours behind the counter for both brands. I love selling. It's an art. What I love about UPTON is that I get to work on both the manufacturing and selling sides. Designing and sampling product is a blast, and it's so cool to see how much people enjoy what we make. ●

