



# Raymond A. Mason School of Business

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LEADERSHIP & BUSINESS PODCAST

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## EPISODE 51: HAMILTON PERKINS – TURNING PLASTIC BOTTLES INTO DESIGNER BAGS

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### Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. The average American throws away one hundred and eighty pounds of plastic each year. Much of that from water bottles. Well, Hamilton Perkins has decided to do something about that. He's taking those discarded water bottles along with recycled vinyl from billboards, and he's created an affordable designer travel bag that can be used as a duffel bag or backpack. His story has caught on, especially online, where thanks to YouTube, Instagram, blogs, and Twitter, he's reached thousands of supporters and customers. The Hamilton Perkins collection has all the elements of a new business in today's new economy. One that includes environmental sustainability, social media, and customers who become advocates. Well, last week, we sat down with Perkins, who gave us an update on his company and his story. Here's our conversation with Hamilton Perkins of the Hamilton Perkins collection.

### Ken White

Well, Hamilton, thank you for taking the time to meet. We're in the Slover Library in downtown Norfolk. This is an incredible facility. Thanks for joining us.

### Hamilton Perkins

Thank you so much for having me.

### Ken White

So you have gotten so much press it seems every time I turn around, there's another story about you and your business. Where did it all start? How did you get on this path?

### Hamilton Perkins

Yeah, it started for me with a personal problem. You know, I really wanted a bag that I could be proud to carry. Essentially I was looking for socially responsible goods and then

kind of marry that with style and function. My path led me to do my research, and you know I just it didn't sit well with me that I could go and try to shop at a department store and every bag in the store was gonna be 50 percent off or 75 percent off and you know I just kept asking the question why is it. Why is that the case? And I did research. I had, you know, access to tools to kind of figure out a little bit more about the industry and, you know, the market share of the key players. All that kind of led me to some prototyping and putting together a bag for myself and kind of my friends. And after that, we just started building an online presence so that we could go direct to consumer with the bag and, you know, try to stand out in a really crowded market but do that by being unique and by doing good.

### Ken White

The learning curve had to be incredibly steep. I mean, you don't do this for a living, and now you're creating a bag. You know this industry inside and out. What was the learning curve like?

### Hamilton Perkins

So the learning curve was fairly steep even though I had a retail background. I interned at a luggage good at a luggage company, and I got kind of the foundation thereof like you know how to sell, finance. I worked in boutiques, luxury big box retail, you know, mom and pop like I kind of did a lot of things here and in between that helped me kind of figure out that end of the business. But you know, the online part is really the that's the part that's so dynamic, at least for me. I had to really kind of hone in on, you know, basically, where is everybody, you know. You know everybody's on their phone, everybody's on mobile, but how to create this like experience for our customers, our backers? And that really was the learning curve for me was transitioning what I kind of envisioned was going to be an offline idea and then transitioning that into being online.

### Ken White

Got it. So you're finding the majority of your audience is online.

### Hamilton Perkins

Correct. We're right now with crowdfunding on Kickstarter. You know, we basically started out with our email list, which, you know, that was just kind of us going out and saying, you know, we're going to do this project. Are you interested? And if so, may we add to the list when we launch? That allowed us to kind of start our preliminary campaign. You know, we spent some time sort of just thinking about where would we have the best chance to kind of reach people and just kind of make it be a cool experience whether we're giving tips or, you know, just kind of showing the bag in a new way. You know, our product is a definitely like a storytelling-friendly product. You know, you have a lot of impact that sort of comes from the products. For example, you know we're saving water with every bag that we sell.

We're cutting carbon emissions with every bag that we sell, and then we're creating jobs in less developed nations with every bag we sell, and you know, really kind of diving deep on a lot of those topics and kind of introducing new customers to our brand. You know, all of those things kind of they came together online for us.

### Ken White

So I read one of the blog posts that I believe you wrote or were either quoted, and you said, you know, in this process, you become a media company. You really had to learn how to become an advertising agency, didn't you?

### Hamilton Perkins

Absolutely. You know, right now there's so much, you know, there's so many messages that we get in a day, and you know, finding out the happy medium or finding out the way to, you know, again just kind of meet people where they are, and you know if that's on mobile then you know finding the right app you know if it's Snapchat then you know we want to find ways to create stories that you know will you know have some entertainment value have some information value, and you know just introducing you know the product and letting people kind of get a chance to engage with us. So whether it's Instagram, you know, posting new photos there. Having captions that kind of educate and, you know, using the right hashtags, you know, all these things kind of come together to, you know, basically allow us to contain and build our community which right now we've had a lot of success with Kickstarter.

### Ken White

Yeah. Tell us about that. First of all, for those who don't know Kickstarter. Can you describe and explain that?

### Hamilton Perkins

So Kickstarter is a place to bring a creative project to life. It's not a store, technically. It's a place where you can show up, and you can pledge to help bring a project into the world. And you know everyone that basically goes on there is a backer of a project, and you know you have creators and backers. So we created a project where you know our feature product was our Earthbag. And you know it's a bag that's made out of recycled plastic bottles. It's lined with vinyl from repurposed billboards. And we kind of told that whole story throughout the whole video and through the campaign page, and you know Kickstarter is a great place because it's for early adopters. You know, it's normally for kind of how a market fit. Testing an idea, even you know creative design, you can include that as something that Kickstarter is really good at helping companies achieve. So for us, we hit the goal that we set, which was a 10,000 dollar goal. We hit that goal in under a week. We were also selected as a Kickstarter project we love, which is really a way to get organic traffic from the platform and to get backers and serial backers, so people that go on

Kickstarter and they're already looking for projects to back, and they're looking for new companies, new products, exciting ideas. And so you know that momentum that also carried us into their newsletter, which was huge. We were able to kind of, you know, we were sent out in a newsletter maybe halfway through or something like that. And you know, the momentum from there that attracted more press, you know. So, for example, getting featured in The Washington Post was huge. You know, Fast Company was, you know, that was amazing as well, and you know, ultimately, that kind of led to me doing some blogging for The Huffington Post. So you know, we started the process kind of like really early. You know, the best thing I could probably say about crowdfunding, you know, advice is just, you know, it's never really too early to start. You know, start making those relationships. Start finding the influencers that are in your niche and try to start there because you know it's going to help you in the long run when you're live and the clocks kind of ticking.

Ken White

Right.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Hamilton Perkins in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you get to the next level with its certificate in business management program coming up in late October. It's a five-day program for the professional who lacks an MBA or wants to improve on critical business and leadership skills. Each day is devoted to a topic including leadership, strategy, managerial accounting, communication, and organizational effectiveness. For more information on the certificate in business management program, visit our website at [wmleadership.com](http://wmleadership.com). Now back to our conversation with Hamilton Perkins.

Ken White

You know you've had a lot of success with media. Media hits, media relations, whether it's to the traditional media like you were saying the Washington Post or Fast Company but also online. And I think that, you know, when people talk about it, it has a lot to do with the product because it is an interesting product. Can you tell us about it?

Hamilton Perkins

Yeah absolutely. So our feature product is a duffel bag. It's made out of recycled plastic bottles, and then it's lined with vinyl from repurposed billboards. That makes each bag different, and each bag is unique. So the inside is basically using a billboard or vinyl from a print shop, and we're repurposing that. So it makes it personal, makes it custom, and there's a bit of a discovery element there that you can't necessarily find with, you know,

another bag company, and then the recycle plastic bottles, you know, that's basically a big project because for every thousand bags we sell we'll divert about 16,000 plastic bottles from landfills. We'll kind of reduce the water consumption by about 80 percent compared to a project, maybe with, you know, another textile. We also will create direct revenue in low-income populations in the developing world, which we've partnered up with another certified B corporation. We're a certified B corporation named Thread, so they help us source the recycled plastic bottles and basically bring that fabric here to the US, where we have a cut-and-sew factory that helps us actually manufacture the bags and products and then we kind of use fulfillment on the back end depending on our kind of volume with this first project. It will kind of solidify all of our partners in that regard, but you know it's gonna be a direct-to-consumer.

Ken White

Yeah, you're not in stores. So go to the website, basically, right?

Hamilton Perkins

Just go in direct to consumer, and you know you get to build a, you know, that's when I'm most authentic relationships that you kind of build as a new company. You know you're really trying to learn more about your customer. I mean, in our case, we really want to do more for our customer than any other company that's in our space. Going direct is one of the best ways to kind of achieve that. So you know it really it's like you know when I guess when Apple was getting started or you know even if it was you know Tesla or one of these companies it's like you would have never probably had a chance to kind of interact directly with the founder and it was never like a like a necessary crowdfunding situation but you know that's something that's really unique about Kickstarter is like you can you know you never know who your backers are and you know the backers are gonna reach out and they're going to ask questions and you can interact and you know there's a lot of value there that you know we really saw the platform is a great place to to launch and you know for now I'm really I'm just really excited that we had the response that we've had and you know and I know that it's a great way to continue that momentum and kind of iterate in a way because you know you're always going to be testing you're always going to be iterating if you're going to have some success kind of introducing you know a product direct to consumer online.

Ken White

Sure. Well, you mentioned the website. What is the website?

Hamilton Perkins

So our website is [hamiltonperkins.com](http://hamiltonperkins.com), and that is kind of our main landing page. That will take you to Kickstarter, which is where you can find our project. You can always search it in Kickstarter. Our social you can find us on Instagram. We're at Hamilton Perkins. The

Snapchat for us, our user name is Hamilton Perkins, and that's probably where we spend most of our time doing kind of behind-the-scenes exclusive offers. We're using Instagram, you know, kind of showing more product shots, you know, showing you know the product in use, and then there's still Facebook, you know Facebook is great for you know, kind of linking all of our you know updates, and you know kind of a mix of all the things that we're up to. So we're on Pinterest as well, Hamilton Perkins.

### Ken White

You've learned so much throughout this process, and you work for a living to boot. Right. So, what are some of the lessons you've learned that maybe there were surprising or lessons that you'd like to share with others who might follow in your footsteps?

### Hamilton Perkins

I think one of the biggest lessons, and it's probably because it's a physical product, you know, just that direct-to-consumer relationship. I mean, when we got started, I really wanted to talk to as many people as possible, you know, and I had a conference space kind of, you know, kind of like this where I had ideas, and I brought people into this conference room, and I interviewed them, and I set up focus groups, and I found a lot of value in that in the really early days. And that was something that you know probably would have never happened if you know there's parts of our product that would have never been created or designed if we wouldn't have gotten those early, you know, points to design from. So I'd say, you know, start as early as possible. You know that relationship-building process with your customers or potential customers? You know they will let you know what you need to do, or you know what they want to see from you. And you know, I would also, you know, looking back, I mean, you know, I didn't really. I was kind of again not against the Internet, but I just didn't really understand like what to do on the Internet. You know, I didn't understand you need an email list. You know, I didn't understand, you know, how to, you know, kind of just create a presence, and all that kind of took time and research and just, you know, just learning. But you know the principles, like the business principles, are still there, you know, and I think that's probably, you know, if I could sum it all up, is that you know everything you're going to find whether you stay in like strategic marketing or you know you're learning about advertising, PR like all the I guess the concepts are still there it's just how you connect with your customers that's different. So you have to find, you know, kind of a unique way to kind of appeal and at the same time, you know, you're still kind of staying true to the concept that you know it's been working for hundreds and hundreds of years for businesses. So I learned I learned that kind of by working on the Internet, and you know, it changed my perception, I guess, of the Internet. Once I started doing it because, you know, it looks totally different, like when you're just kind of when you're a consumer.

## Ken White

Yeah sure. Sure yeah. What about advice you might have for someone who's got a great job, full-time job, but man, they've got an idea, and they really want to run with it? How do you pull all that off? How do you balance that? What's your advice?

## Hamilton Perkins

Yeah, I would say if you've got an idea, you know, just use the constraints that you may have, whether they are capital or time to your advantage, and use that as a way to foster this sense of creativity. You know, if you, if you know you've only got, you know, two hours a day for, you know, four weeks, then that's fine. Or if you know that you only have weekends or nights to do something, make that be your time and really maximize what you can do because you know you'd be surprised there's some quote, and I'm probably gonna tear it all up, but it's like you know if you give someone a task and you give them some time you know the task will fill that time. So if you can kind of just keep that in mind and say, I've only got this amount of time, I've got this amount of resource, you know I'm going to use this to be better than my competition, you know, and I'm going to find ways to kind of outmaneuver them you know like for us we know we don't we have a tiny ad budget we have a very tiny marketing budget we just can't compete there. But you know we can definitely care for the backers and customers of the product, and you know we can do that in a very social way. So what do we do? We send out handwritten thank-you notes. Then we also thank our customers on our social media platforms. So we use Snapchat. We use Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter all together to, you know, just kind of show our appreciation which, you know, there's no other company that's kind of using and leveraging that part of a kind of service model. So you know I would say fine. And even if you could find two or three things that you can just do, you know, find those things that you can be best at. Find the things that you can be great at and that you know, maybe your competitors are, you know, they're just overlooking it. And that's going to be an inevitable if you're kind of getting started, you know, for us, we're offering a bag, you know, it's just kind of tough for a bigger company to care as much about the one bag that we care about. We can care about it, you know, with you know if we had a heart as a company that the company cares about that product with all their heart and the you know competitor if it is one of 400 or 2000 products it's just not going to get the same attention. It's not going to be as quick to maneuver, so use all that to your advantage. The small companies want to be big companies. The big companies, you know, they want to be small companies on things, so you know, just remember, and that's my advice is probably just remember that those are the forces at play, you know, it may seem like you got your back against the wall, but you know you can definitely do it.

## Ken White

That's our conversation with Hamilton Perkins, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the

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