

Ambr Eyewear eyeing European domination

ThinkBusiness spoke with Daniel Nugent, co-founder of Ambr Eyewear, about his journey in business and the challenges he has had to overcome.

Where did the idea for the company come from?

Both myself and my girlfriend Sacha, also a co-founder, were working in tech jobs after leaving college. We were spending so much time at screens both in our professional and private lives. So much so, that eye-strain and headaches were becoming an issue. We'd also just had a baby girl and adding disrupted sleep into the mix we weren't the most pleasant people to be around.

I had recently read about the potential hazards of too much 'blue light' exposure - strain, headache and sleeplessness to name the most prominent. Blue light is the wavelength of light that our digital devices emit in abundance. I could really make a connection between the symptoms described and the difficulties I was having. I bought a pair of cheap non-prescription blue-light blocking glasses from Amazon to see if they helped. They were poor quality, not great looking, and fitted with dark orange lenses. However, they made a massive difference. I felt relief from the strain and my eyes were less tired, and I was also sleeping much better.

The voila moment occurred when the two of us thought, 'what if we could make these types of glasses, but better quality and design, with a clear lens?' And that's what we did!

When was the company founded?

We began [Ambr Eyewear](#) in May 2017. We'd just put this idea and homemade website out into the world and weren't really expecting much. We said to each other that we'd be happy to recoup the €500 each required to purchase our first batch of stock. Turns out the idea was a hit and we managed to get up and running with considerable sales and some great press.

What's your unique selling point?

It's expected that by 2020, 77% of jobs will require computer use. It's also a fact that 90% of people in Ireland and the UK use screens for three or more hours outside of work. This is a huge shift in screen habits in a very short space of time. Our eyes cannot possibly be ready to deal with this.

Ambr Eyewear glasses filter out the harmful blue light wavelengths that are emitted by our digital devices. This blue light has been shown to trigger symptoms known collectively as Digital Eye-

Strain - including migraine, sore and itchy eyes, blurred vision and even sleeplessness. By blocking this blue light, the wearer can expect a decrease in eye-strain and a more comfortable workday.

We differentiate ourselves from the competition in a few ways. Firstly, we're the only blue light glasses brand that has an ISO-certified laboratory. We're able to provide a number of very technical products with this same blue light blocking technology, such as varifocals and extra high prescriptions, because of our team of dispensing opticians and top-class lab facility.

Secondly, our focus is constantly on design and aesthetic. Whereas most blue light glasses will appear poor cosmetically, with deep orange lenses, our glasses are created not only to be functional, but to be just as beautiful as regular eyeglasses. We love to produce colourful and quirky designs and combine this with our virtually clear lenses. In summary, it's the quality, design and expertise that separates us from the competition.

How exactly do the glasses work?

The lenses contain a naturally-occurring pigment that filters out a high proportion of this blue light. Depending on what your specific need is, they can of course be used all day, every day; or solely for specific issues you're facing.

For example, if you're working at a screen all day and eye-strain is driving you mad, then just pop

them on in the morning and wear them until you're done. You'll certainly notice a difference. Blue light has also been shown to deplete melatonin production, which is the sleep-inducing hormone. If you're experiencing difficulties getting to sleep or poor quality sleep, wear your glasses for a couple of hours before bedtime and you should fall asleep a little easier.

Of course, even if you don't experience any of the above, it may even be worth your while wearing blue light glasses as a safeguard against possible long-term damage.

What are the biggest challenges you face selling online?

To be honest, I feel like online selling has eliminated so many of the problems that we would have faced with a traditional model. The ability to be open for business 24/7, while having access to the entire world gives us an edge over a shop.

The challenges brought about by being online are probably on a more personal level. Being constantly connected to your company via your laptop or phone does not do many favours to your sanity. Sometimes I find myself watching live Google Analytics on a Friday night, wracking my brain to figure out why the conversion rate has dropped by 10%!

Is it a competitive market?

We were lucky to enter this market first in Ireland - before blue light was a hot topic. We've established ourselves as the dominant voice here despite a few challengers. We had one particularly unsavoury incident with a partner we had worked with, who launched his own brand alongside a well-known rugby player. They've given us a headache in terms of copying our content and our ideas, but I wouldn't quite classify them as a challenger.

Our target is European domination, and I think we're well placed to achieve this.

How did you fund and start the business and what are your growth plans?

Ambr Eyewear remains a boot-strapped company still owned by myself and Sacha. We were lucky in that our respective skills allowed us to build and launch the site between us with virtually zero financial cost. The only start-up cost was the cost of the manufacture itself.

We had this idea and thought it was a risk worth taking, so we put the very small savings we had into prototyping and production. We said at the time we'd be happy to make our money back, which was about €1,000. Fast forward two years and we've sold glasses in over 70 countries in the world. It's been an entirely unexpected journey.

We feel now that we're at that stage where we're turning from a start-up into a more established business. It's time to ramp up the growth and really make a move to be the dominant brand in our space. We were delighted to launch multilingual versions of our site, targeting the German, French and Spanish markets - so we hope to see big progress there.

We're also in the process of raising our first round on financing. With the additional financial support, we feel we can grow significantly both domestically and internationally. More products, more designs, more advertising and all-round polishing of the brand would be the goal! We're also on the verge of entering the high-street for the first time, with Ambr's first store due to open in Dublin City in November.

What (or whom) has helped you most along the way?

The support that we've received from state bodies like the Local Enterprise Office and Enterprise Ireland has been absolutely essential. We've taken part in great programs like Short-Term Enterprise Allowance and Enterprise Ireland's New Frontiers (winning the Lead Entrepreneur award for 2018).

This helping hand they've given us has always enabled us to take things to a new level and we're very grateful for their continued help.

If you were to do it all over again, what would you do differently?

This is our first business venture, and one that we foresaw as more of a hobby than a business. Mistakes were inevitable and we're still learning every single day. Thinking back, I think I would have looked for funding earlier. It's taken an awful lot of work to get to where we are, and we probably could have gotten here a lot quicker if we hadn't been bootstrapped. There is a charm to being bootstrapped, but we've so many grand plans and ideas that we haven't been able to execute.

Now the other side of that is, who would have given money to a couple selling glasses from their couch in Dun Laoghaire - with no optical experience and no idea what the demand for their product would be. We're as surprised as anyone!

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