

Meet Boox, the company supplying customisable and reusable shipping boxes

As part of our quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Matt Semmelhack, CEO and founder of Boox, about engaging with the circular economy, reusable shipping boxes, and eliminating single-use waste.

What was the catalyst for launching Boox?

I was working in operations at a food tech company and meal delivery startup in San Francisco in 2018. We were doing hundreds of thousands of meal deliveries per month, all in single-use containers. I realised that switching to reusable packaging could ultimately save the company money, make our customers happy, and hugely reduce landfill waste for the planet. I left and launched Boox soon after, to tackle this massive challenge, and make 'Reusables' accessible for all types of e-commerce brands and their consumers.

Tell me about the business – what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

In short, Boox is a platform for “reuse”. We provide a suite of services that enable brands and consumers to engage with the circular economy. Our stated mission is to “Eliminate Single-use Waste”, and we have made the decision to become a certified B Corporation to solidify our commitment to that mission.

Our core services involve supplying our proprietary, customisable, and reusable shipping boxes (“Boox Boxes”) and bags (“Boox Baags”) to e-commerce brands of all sizes, as well as the reverse logistics services to collect, refurbish, and redistribute the Boox shippers back to those brands. We have a network of partnerships that enable consumers to drop off their used Boox products locally in the US and UK, beginning the process of return and reuse.

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

We founded the company in November 2019, initially focusing exclusively on replacing single-use cardboard boxes with a reusable alternative. That led to developing our award-winning and patented first product, the Boox Box. The Boox Box demonstrates the concept of reuse really well, in the sense that it replaces a mundane, wasteful, ubiquitous, single-use object that is normally just thrown in the bin after being used once. And the scale of the issue is vast, with an estimated 200 billion+ boxes being shipped annually around the world.

The vision, however, has always been to create a “platform” which enables reuse by allowing any type of reusable object or entity to be easily returned or transported back to where it needs to be (products and their packaging, clothing, homewares, etc), thus completing the “circle” of circular economy.

We started with cardboard boxes and had a lot of early success, which led to additional fundraising in June 2021, an expansion into other products and services, and most recently a geographical expansion to the UK (May 2022). We’re now pushing heavily into enabling the reuse of secondhand clothing, by making it easy for consumers to send in clothes they no longer want or need, in our reusable Boox Boxes!

How are you funded?

We are backed by a group of venture capital funds based in the US, plus a handful of fantastic strategic investors that have had their success in the e-commerce space and have become great advisors and connectors for the company. We raised a \$2M USD seed round in 2019 then a \$9.25M Series A in 2021.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

Starting a company right as the pandemic hit was a challenge, and forced us to be more conservative than we might otherwise have been in terms of hiring or chasing big growth numbers that VC investors often want to see. Like most businesses that make a physical product, supply chain issues and delays (and added costs) over the last two years have been very challenging for us.

That said, I'm an unflappable, optimistic entrepreneur ... I think all these challenges will set us up for long-term success as our team has been forced to be nimble and scrappy from the beginning, and that will become part of our company culture forever. I'm really proud of how our team has dealt with the unpredictability of the pandemic, remote work, and rallying around our mission despite everything else going on in the world. We've been very intentional about making sure we communicate effectively, respect each other's work-life balance, and are generous with time off for physical and mental health.

Having a critical mission as the north star helps me get up in the morning and feel motivated that we're working towards pioneering something that has the potential to change the world for the better. The challenges don't seem insurmountable when you're working towards something you really care about!

How does Boox answer an unmet need?

Roughly 200 billion packages were shipped around the world last year, and that figure is set to continue growing rapidly. Indeed, e-commerce has evolved quite drastically over the past couple of decades, and the pandemic has significantly accelerated growth of direct-to-consumer e-commerce that was already growing 25% year-on-year. Nonetheless, there has been very little progress made with regards to the infrastructure provided to consumers to effectively deal with all the waste that has been created by all these single-use packaging, boxes, poly-mailers, and products that only get used once by one person before being tossed in the bin.

Building bigger landfills and putting more garbage trucks on the road is not a solution, it's a band-aid that won't move us towards the necessary targets for climate change reduction.

Boox is pioneering a systematically different way of dealing with all this waste, and has the potential to significantly curb climate change at-scale: 'reuse'. Moreover, we know that consumers are demanding change, and are looking at corporations to provide the necessary solutions. Boox offers a real, tangible solution that can be implemented today, to make critical, measurable reductions in emissions and waste for brands and their consumers.

What's in store for the future?

So much! We're particularly excited about expanding our reach in re-commerce and re-sale of secondhand clothing, by offering brands and consumers a suite of services to make it faster, cheaper, and more convenient to exchange secondhand clothing, keeping tons of textiles out of the landfill. In just two months of our beta program, we collected more than 115,000 items of secondhand clothing from consumers. The goal is to extend the life of these items by re-selling or donating as many of them as possible.

In addition to expanding into other types of reuse, we get a ton of inquiries from other countries and we intend to expand our service offering further afield in the next 9-12 months, including Canada, Australia, and several in the EU.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

If you're going to spend 60-80 hours a week working on something, make sure it's something that is truly world-positive. Not only will it be personally motivating and rewarding, but if you are successful, you'll leave the planet a better place for all of us.

Matt Semmelhack is CEO and founder of Boox.