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TOP SELLERS OF KAZAKHSTAN: THE PATH OF AN ENTREPRENEUR FROM START TO MILLION-DOLLAR TURNOVER

Visitors to the 36th International Fashion Exhibition, Central Asia Fashion Autumn-2025, had an excellent opportunity to hear success stories from Kazakhstan's top sellers. At the business conference, entrepreneurs talked about their journey from taking their first steps to reaching the top, highlighting the key factors that led to their success. Topics of particular interest to the audience included the secrets of choosing a niche and creating a popular product, strategies for attracting the first customers, effective tools for scaling a business on marketplaces, the basics of financial and team management, and practical advice and life hacks for beginning sellers.

How to start an online entrepreneur correctly? The moderator of the business session, the head of the first community of online entrepreneurs of Kazakhstan Sellers.kz Ekaterina Svetlichnaya suggested that everyone present answer this question. E-commerce entrepreneur, founder of the NOMADICA brand, representing products for an active lifestyle Alexander Lesovichenko believes that the beginning of everything is the desire to do business: *«In our case, it was very simple. My friend and I wanted to make money, so we decided to give it a try. We took a direct approach – we found a product, put it up for sale, and sold it at a loss. But it was this experience that helped us understand how marketplaces are structured and which mechanisms work and which do not. Only then do you start asking yourself questions like: «How can I increase sales? How can I search for products correctly? How can I scale up?». Step by step, with motivation and faith in the result, you will grow. You can reach a turnover of 1–2 million tenge relatively quickly, but if you want to reach 10–20 million, you will need a team and a system. Training is the first step in any business. I always emphasise this everywhere. If you invest a million tenge in a product without knowing how to sell it, you risk losing your investment and burning out».*



CAF Business Conference Experts Share Recommendations for Beginning Online Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneur specializing in manufacturing goods in China, Maxim Chernov, urged his colleagues to honestly answer themselves at the beginning whether this is the path they want to take: *«Even learning requires courage. These days, it's possible to earn good money in employment. Therefore, you need to understand why you are choosing entrepreneurship. If freedom is important to you, then this is the path for you. If you are ready to take risks and take responsibility, then entrepreneurship is for you. If you feel restricted and want to manage processes, this is also your path. In any case, you should start with courage and a willingness to learn. This is the only way to build a sustainable e-commerce business».*

Top- seller on Kaspi in the category «Women's clothing», creator of the clothing brand PDWR Vyacheslav Kim jokingly agreed with his colleague: *«In this business, you need both a weak mind and courage. Then nothing will hold you back. If you're too clever, you'll start calculating risks, and so on, and you'll most likely achieve nothing. So first get into the business, and then figure it out».*

Founder of the MARSEL brand, top- seller Kaspi, a partner of the retail chains Sulpak and Mehta (more than 1 billion tenge in turnover in the commodity business) Marsel Khanafiev registered his own brand in 2023, and generally started the business with a batch of 50 screwdrivers: *«We were lucky with the promotion and sold the goods in just three days. The next batch was larger, but we couldn't put it up for sale as the brand of these screwdrivers had ceased to exist. That's when my wife and I decided to create our own brand. It was perseverance and my wife's support that helped us achieve our first large turnover. We always worked together and supported each other through everything. On the way to establishing the brand, we had to overcome many challenges. There were betrayals within the team and, last year, we were even robbed when a container containing goods worth 16 million tenge was stolen during transportation. However, it was our persistence that enabled us to persevere and continue on our chosen path».*



Founder of the MARSEL brand, top- seller Kaspi Marcel Khanafiev

Vyacheslav Kim said that in 2018 he left the SEO business, left the IT direction to his partners and decided to try himself in selling clothes: *«It seemed like a trifle was the impetus. A colleague was constantly going on holiday and buying suits in Russia. She bought them for 20,000 tenge and sold them in Kazakhstan for 40,000. I took one of the suits, studied it, and realised that production could be cheaper and the cost price reduced. I went to Istanbul and ordered the first batch of suits. They arrived three months late, and I spent three years trying to sell them, investing almost all the money back in the process. Soon after, I tried selling dresses. I invested around a thousand dollars and they «took off». I set up targeted advertising based on age and interests, and began selling ten dresses a day, which I delivered myself. When I launched an advertising campaign in Kazakhstan, sales increased, but a new problem emerged: logistics. At Kazpost, it took us half a day just to pack and send the goods. This changed when we started using Kaspi at the end of*

2020. An intermediary emerged that eliminated two major issues: buyer mistrust, as people were no longer afraid to pay in advance, and logistics — the courier now collects all the goods and delivers them himself».

The entrepreneur began to actively expand the range and increase the number of cards. In 2021, when there was almost no competition in the women's clothing category, he took top positions in all segments. *«The only problem was that each variation - size, color - was counted as a separate article. Because of this, we were losing conversions. Only in 2023 was the situation corrected by combining all the cards, and sales volume grew even more. The next challenge was production. I had to move to Bishkek for two years to personally establish work with factories. The tasks were clear: improve quality, speed up production, reduce the percentage of defects. I studied the process chains in depth. For example, in the production of knitwear, I paid attention to the raw canvas. Usually, factories knitted to order, first knitting, then dyeing, drying. This took time. I suggested keeping 5 tons of raw canvas of different types in stock. Then the cycle was shortened: all that was left was to paint, and the knitting machines did not stand idle. This optimization seriously increased the speed indicators. At the same time, I established contacts with other larger manufacturers. Gradually, I built trust with both the main supplier of the fabric and the largest manufacturer of ready-made clothes. As a result, in two years in Bishkek, I have assembled a solid production base, resolved the issue of quality and speed, and now I am ready to return to Kazakhstan to build a full-fledged network»*, - Vyacheslav Kim shared his success story.

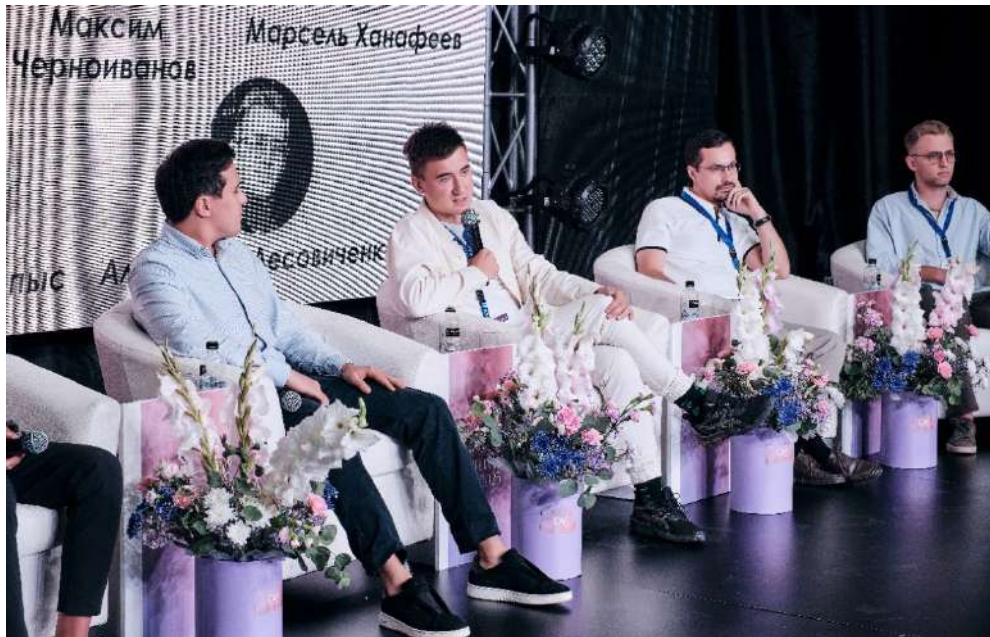


Top- seller on Kaspi in the category «Women's clothing»,
creator of the clothing brand PDWR Vyacheslav Kim

Ekaterina Svetlichnaya asked if it was difficult to switch from Instagram to the Kaspi platform. Vyacheslav Kim answered affirmatively: *«At first, yes. As soon as we entered Kaspi, there was no traffic from the platform at all. We specifically tracked how many clients came from Kaspi and how many from our own channels. So, no one came from Kaspi. All 100% of the traffic was ours. Then we deliberately began to transfer all traffic to Kaspi. We launched targeting, sent people there, recommended making buyouts through the platform. Why? Because Kaspi's logistics were much more convenient. We understood that it was better to share a percentage with the platform than to spend a lot of time on delivery ourselves. We did not offer any bonuses or promotions. The prices were the same on Instagram and Kaspi. It's just that when clients wrote to us in direct or WhatsApp, we sent them a link to the required article on Kaspi. They went through and placed their order. It was easier than we thought»*.

A novice entrepreneur without a large budget usually faces a dilemma of which platform to choose for promotion and whether a website is needed. However, Maxim Chernovanov suggested looking at the situation more broadly: *«You need to think not only about costs, but also about how you envisage your company in 10 years' time. If you envisage it as a major brand with its own network of stores, then having*

your own website is essential. However, I would still sell products on marketplaces. Why is this important? Previously, Wildberries took a commission of 15–20%, but now, with logistics, it's 50–60%. Expenses have tripled in 3-4 years! This is how the market works: while the platform is new and investing in development,



Entrepreneur specializing in the production of goods in China Maxim Chernov

the conditions are favourable. But when it comes time to make money, commissions increase and your profits automatically decrease. Therefore, your choice depends on your goals. If you just want to earn money quickly, without thinking about long-term development, marketplaces can provide up to 80% of all sales, which is normal. However, if you are building a family business for the long term, it is dangerous to depend entirely on marketplaces. It is important to develop independent sales channels. We are currently moving away from platforms ourselves and investing in brand development. Incidentally, here's a question: why should an entrepreneur spend money on brand registration, packaging, and trademark protection? After all, you can simply sell different products without doing so. A good example is Oleg Tinkov's story. He has tried different niches and used one slogan all this time: «Tinkoff is the only one like it». This brand became the basis of his entire business. If you're just dipping your toes into a topic for a short period of time and working according to the «buy cheap, sell expensive» scheme, then a brand isn't necessary. However, if



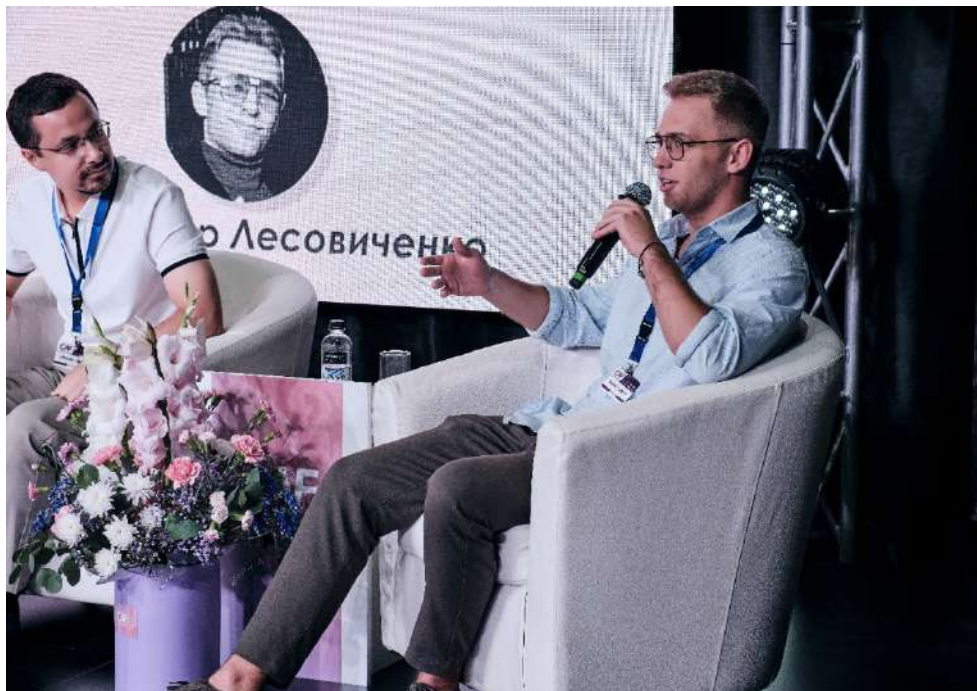
CEO of a licensed platform for financing sellers on Kaspi and Wildberries GoCrowd Alpamys Alpys

you are building a systemic business; a brand is essential. It is also important to choose a memorable name. It should be unique not only in Kazakhstan, but also in neighbouring markets such as Russia, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Otherwise, scaling up will be impossible».

CEO of a licensed platform for financing sellers on Kaspi and Wildberries GoCrowd Alpamys Alpys commented on the investment of financial resources: *«It is always better to test a product with your own money. If, for example, your turnover is 1 million tenge per month, and you suddenly take 50 million and start testing products, then the risk is huge. The consumer may not like the product, and you will be left not only without sales, but also with debts. Business in such a situation simply dies. It is worth attracting investments when you already know for sure that a certain category is selling steadily. For example, you are sure that laptops are bought from you every month, then it makes sense to take additional funds, increase the purchase and scale up. Investments are not attracted for testing, but when there is already analytics and predicted demand».*

Business conference experts shared a life hack «How to find the very product that will take off». Vyacheslav Kim studied the sales of Russian brands: *«I spied, ordered from them, reordered in China, launched a target and everything worked. My principle is simple: «Take the best», «I watch and repeat».*

Lesovichenko joined his opinion: *«Yes, most ideas in our market come from more developed countries. In Kazakhstan, we often look at what works in Russia. In Russia, they look at Amazon. The easiest way to find a good product is to analyze what is popular in other countries and adapt it to the local market. Even if the entrepreneur is just starting out and has limited finances. Analytics is always the key. For example, we went to Wildberries and immediately worked with data. Without analytics, you can easily get into trouble. Sometimes it is enough to buy just 5 units of a product to check demand, and not invest in hundreds at once. It is the same story on Kaspi. Information and numbers are the seller's main tool».*



E-commerce entrepreneur, founder of the NOMADICA brand Alexander Lesovichenko

Marcel Khanafeyev's situation was a little different: *«In the beginning, I didn't use any analytics services at all. I just went to Kaspi, chose a popular category, bought a product from a competitor and immediately listed it. If the product sold, I repeated the experiment again. If things went well again, it meant it wasn't a coincidence, and it was time to bring a batch from China. That's a kind of analytics. In general, the cheapest and most useful way is to go to work for an existing seller, whether in target or cards. There, in a few months, you can gain practical knowledge that will save you several years of your own trials and errors».*

In response to a question from the audience about what is more difficult - to go from zero to 100 million per day or from 100 million to a billion, Maxim Chernov answered exhaustively: *«It was quite easy to*

get to a billion. The difficulties begin further. My main division of the company is located in Russia, and there are some peculiarities of tax legislation there. For example, small businesses pay only 6% in taxes, and when they move into the category of large businesses, the tax burden increases sharply to 43%. This is a colossal difference. To take such a step, you need to build marketing, processes, put in all your efforts so that even at 43% you remain in profit. The problem is that the conditions are the same for everyone and it is becoming difficult to compete. Previously, the limit for small businesses was 1 billion tenge, now it has been reduced to 60 million rubles (approximately 360 million tenge). Anything higher is already a different level of taxation. In Kazakhstan, by the way, it is easier. Here, the limits for the simplified system are used up faster, and many complain that the state limits the simplified tax system. But if you look at it from the management side, it is logical, because otherwise companies remain in preferential conditions for too long and distort competition. Therefore, it is easy and clear to grow to a billion. But to scale up further, by 10 times, is a completely different level, where not only taxes increase, but also all costs: logistics, team, system. For me, the main difficulty now lies precisely there».

Marcel Khanafiev also answered this question: «It is easier to work with a small turnover than with a large one. At the start, you have fewer figures, fewer difficulties. But if you do not build a financial system from the very beginning, it will come back to haunt you later. When a business develops, everything becomes sluggish: processes slow down, there is less maneuverability. For example, we had such a story when the turnover increased, and we faced the fact that it was no longer possible to manage money chaotically. We had to hire a financier, build a system of accounting, settlements, control. Therefore, the main advice is that you need to establish order in the figures from the first days. Then scaling will be easier».

The experts discussed the topic of defining the audience segment, which was raised by one of the Kazakhstani designers. «We designers know how to create, but we don't know how to sell. How can we increase sales? I work in a mid-range segment. I make the clothes myself, so my prices are lower than those of my competitors. For example, a dress costs about 180,000 – 200,000 tenge», - asked one of the visitors to CAF.

Vyacheslav Kim immediately objected: «If you sew and create things yourself, this is no longer the middle segment. Especially with such a price. Our market is not very solvent. Try going out on the street and asking how many people are willing to pay 100,000 tenge for clothes and how many 10,000. The mass segment always sells faster. All big business is built on the mass consumer. Therefore, working in the expensive segment is much more difficult: you need large investments in marketing, promotion, brand recognition. You have to compete with large brands and strong players who have investors and budgets behind them. You should clearly understand your segment, otherwise it will be very difficult to scale up».

Maxim Chernov also expressed his opinion: «We ourselves entered the market with budget goods for the home, toothbrushes and combs, and now we understand that we want to move up, to more expensive goods. Your situation is the opposite: you are already working closer to the premium. It is difficult, but if you know how to work systematically with clients, provide excellent service and build loyalty, then the model is viable. In e-commerce, the premium clothing segment is represented only by Lamoda. Wildberries and Ozon are focused on the mass market with a low check. And here it is important to understand who your client is. In addition, do not forget to include your salary in the cost price. You say: «I see myself, so mine is cheaper». But if you recalculate that a specialist of your level should receive at least a million tenge a month, the picture changes. Add materials, consumables here - and objectively, production in Kazakhstan is expensive. Therefore, the question is, what is more important to you - money or inspiration from working with a premium product? It is easier to go to the mass market, but there is a different client and a different philosophy. And premium requires more effort, but allows you to build a personal brand and provide value».

When asked about where and how best to look for partners and manufacturers, Alexander Lesovichenko answered: «If we are talking about manufacturers, then today literally everyone can be found on the Internet and work even with the help of a phone. Chinese factories are available online, as well as Turkish and Dubai ones. But with partners, the situation is different. Here, communication and networking are most

important. For example, I met my partner in a business club completely by chance, and this is where our joint work began. Therefore, the main thing is to constantly communicate with people and be open to new acquaintances».



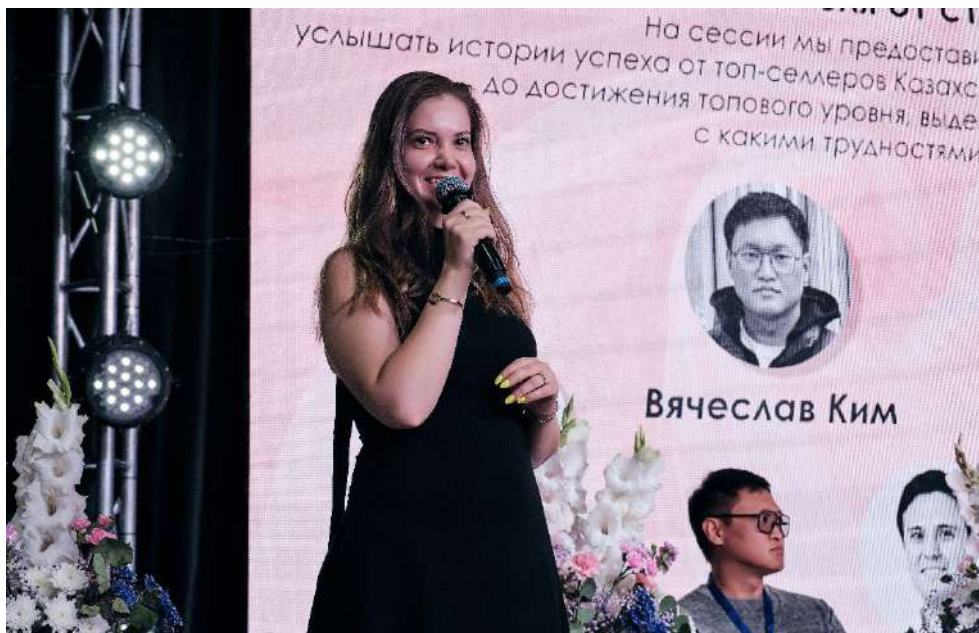
Business conference experts claim that communication and active networking are very important in business

Maxim Chernovikov added that the main thing in searching for suppliers is to make up your mind and start the process: *«The first supplier could be anyone; the important thing is that you feel comfortable working with them. Then you need to be able to optimise the conditions, such as negotiating, reducing the cost price or looking for alternatives. The easiest way to search online is via Alibaba or 1688.com. If we're talking about the Central Asian region specifically, Kyrgyzstan has very good conditions for clothing. The country is also part of the EAEU, which greatly simplifies trade throughout the region. There is a wholesale market called «Dordoi», but there are many intermediaries. However, it is quite suitable for getting started. Uzbekistan is also quite good in terms of prices, but Kyrgyzstan is still the best option. Also, sometimes you can start by purchasing from a competitor at a loss. The main thing is to check whether the market is active and whether there is demand for the product. Only then should you look for ways to optimise the cost price. All the necessary information is available; you just need to be brave enough to take action».*

Experts also raised the issue of promoting product cards. If the card has «sagged», Vyacheslav Kim recommended increasing the rate on target: *«But you need to consider the price. If you sell, for example, a black T-shirt for 8,000 tenge, and your competitors have it for 5,000, then the buyer will not see the difference visually. It is impossible to understand from a photo which fabric or quality is better. If the budget is quickly burning out, you need to consider whether the production costs are too high. You need to focus not on price, but on uniqueness. Make non-standard prints, look for your USP. Then you will not compete with sellers who carry T-shirts for 2 dollars».*

Marcel Khanafeyev spoke about the method that allows you to bring a card to the top: *«The principle is this: for the first one or two weeks, greatly reduce the price. People buy, the product gets reviews and rises to the top. And then you can return the price back».*

In closing the business session, Ekaterina Svetlichnaya recommended that aspiring online entrepreneurs seek information wherever possible, including in professional communities: *«There are strong entrepreneurial communities that support newcomers. It's not entirely clear why many newcomers feel isolated, as if they don't know where to go, when the resources for education and acquiring the necessary skills are right there on the surface. You can find training, mentors, recommendations and much more there. Everything is nearby and within arm's reach; you just need to take the initiative».*



Head of the first online entrepreneurs' community of Kazakhstan Sellers.kz Ekaterina Svetlichnaya

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