Bidules: establishing an upcycling model in eyewear

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In 2012, N. Musty, then a sophomore in college, found a box of old glasses in the basement of his mother's shop. As the son of three generations of opticians, he quickly realized the superior quality of these 40+−year-old glass frames compared to the contemporary ones. This discovery was the genesis of "Bidules", a company that would challenge the norms of the eyewear industry.

Using the tools in the family workshop, N. Musty freshened up the glasses and replaced the old lenses with state-of-the-art sunglasses. The result was a few dozen unique pairs of sunglasses that combined vintage craftmanship and style from the 60s and 70s with modern UV protection. They were new, having never been worn, yet distinctly vintage due to their design and origins.

In May 2014, as N. Musty started his MBA, "Bidules" was officially launched. The name, meaning "Thingy" in French reflects the brand's upcycling business models: transforming forgotten and worthless frames into valuable and high-quality eyewear. By freshening them up, fixing, modifying or replacing some parts and fitting them with contemporary lenses, these discarded products gain value and can be sold for a price comparable to new glasses.

This case study provides context by examining first the eyewear sector and then explores Bidules's journey in developing a new business model in eyewear.

The eyewear industry

Eyesight represents both a rising health crisis and a business opportunity. The size of the eyewear industry is projected, in 2024, at 148.60bn worldwide and an expected annual growth rate equal to 4.04% (Statista, n.d.). It still has important growth potential, especially in the developing countries that are currently vastly underserved (Coughlan, 2018). In the Western world, such as Belgium, where Bidules was founded, lifestyle evolution (screen time, aging, time spent inside, …) means that around 70% of the population will need prescriptive glasses at some point in their life (Info Santé, n.d.). There is also an underserved need for tinted glasses to protect eyes from harmful ultraviolet rays from the sun but also from parts of the spectrum of LED lights.

While magnifying glasses were used to read, and sunglasses made of transparent stones were used in 12th century China (Foster Grant, n.d.), spectacles themselves were invented in Italy in the 13th century (College of Optometrists, n.d.). They consisted of magnifying glasses connected by a metal frame that was balanced on the nose. The two legs passing along the temples and resting on the ears were added four centuries later by a British optician.

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Disclaimer. This case is intended to be used as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a management situation. The case was compiled from published sources.

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The invention of celluloid, the first artificial plastic, in the late 19th century represents another major step in the development of eyewear technology. This resistant, heat pliable, cheap-to-produce material allowed the industrial production of glass frames. In France, starting from the 19th century, the Jura region became the major center of the eyewear industry. In this rural mountainous region, making glasses was an activity shepherds and farmers turned to during the long winter months. For over a century, this industry flourished in the Jura, leading to the development of a local expertise and an industrial network composed of hundreds of small manufacturers across the region. At the time, the glasses were sold to opticians by the dozen. Each manufacturer had their own brand; there were thus a large quantity of small brands without much brand capital; the value came from the products' quality, not the brand equity. Glasses were thus marketed as a health product solving a physical deficiency.

Over the course of the twentieth century, eyewear was transformed as an industry. In parallel, the way glasses are perceived was also transformed, going from a visual health product to a fashion statement. Glasses do, after all, sit in the middle of one's face; they influence the way you see the world but also the way the world sees you. Leonardo Del Vecchio was the first to understand the business potential this represented. In 1961, Del Vecchio founded Luxottica s.a.s. in Agordo, in the province of Belluno, northern Italy, the heart of the national eyewear industry. From there, Luxottica grew through acquisitions and licensing deals with designers' labels, eventually gaining control over the entire production chain, from manufacturing parts to finished frames and retail stores. They were the first to bring luxury label licenses to the optical sector. Nowadays, they own or operate licenses for brands such as Ray-Ban, Chanel, Prada, Oakley, Versace and Dolce & Gabbana, among others. They also own retail brands such as LensCrafters (USA) and Sunglass Hut (UK) (Knight, 2018).

In March 2018, EU and US regulators approved the merger of Luxottica with Essilor, creating EssilorLuxottica. Essilor, a French company born from the merger of Essel and Silor, is the leader in the prescription lens sector. The company owns lens manufacturers, instrument makers and prescription labs. It supplies between 300,000 and 400,000 retailers worldwide. This merger thus created a giant controlling both the frames and lenses from production to retail (Knight, 2018).

This powerful position allows them to impose huge margins on the glasses they sell. The retail price of a luxury frame, without lenses, ranges from €150 to €410 (Pearle, n.d.). The median gross profit margin earned on eyewear is approximately 61% or 2.9 times the cost of goods (A&A Optical, 2022). The profit margin can sometimes reach even higher percentages, particularly in the sunglasses industry (Still Friday, 2023).

Since Bidules's inception in 2014, the eyewear market has seen the rise of low-cost eyewear, ranging from €40 to €190 (with corrective lenses). Brands such as Polette, Ace & Tate or Jimmy Fairly have set up a whole new business model: eliminate all intermediaries to manage the production line from design creation to sale and thus reduce costs. As they provide a basic offer, customers have to pay a fee for any upgrade, such as antireflective lenses or warranty (Rossius, 2018). Low-cost models are suitable for moderate sight problems, but their quality is criticized by ophthalmologists for more severe corrections or progressive lenses (Van Lerberghe, 2023).

Bidules's business model

Following his initial discovery, N. Musty was able to find more discarded glasses at other opticians in Belgium. These frames produced between the 1950s and the 1990s proved to be of much higher quality than those produced nowadays. Besides, with every stock of old frames that N. Musty found, he was able to select those who's quality and design fit his esthetic vision for Bidules. With those, he put together his first collection, which he

presented, in a number of vintage fairs. Soon after, N. Musty was led to travel 600 km to the Jura region to find more vintage frames. The historical glasses production in Jura declined sharply in the 80 and 90s due to the growing competition from Asia and the USA, as well as the rise of eyewear fashion brands, which led to the consolidation of the eyewear industry into a handful of large players such as Luxottica. These large players then delocalized their production to Asia.

N. Musty's trips to Jura allowed him to establish contacts in the region and gradually build a network of retired eyewear professionals and closed-down factory owners. This network became a key advantage for the brand, as it gave access to large stocks of vintage glasses, which are in scarce supply. Bidules's upcycling model is thus an opportunity to "re-localize" employment in this sector. Whereas nowadays most glasses sold in Europe are shipped from Asia, 80–90% of Bidules's frames are sourced in the European union. More than 90% of the glasses are produced in the EU, including ten percent that are produced less than 30 km from the shop. The shop also creates employment for skilled Belgian workers who upcycle them.

Beyond the quality and design of its upcycled glasses, Bidules offers another added value: vintage frames come in diverse sizes (circle sizes, bridge sizes and temple sizes), unlike contemporary one-size-fits-all models. Although this complicates Bidules's stock management, it allows them to create personalized frames that fit each client's face. Moreover, this upcycling model extends the lifespan of frames by restoring an old product and bringing it up to date (Morseletto, 2020).

The cost structure of Bidules's glasses is specific to its business model. The frames only account for a small percentage of the cost since there are no big suppliers or middlemen. This allowed N. Musty to buy hundreds, and soon thousands, of frames at a time because by purchasing leftover stock, he pays only a fraction of the true production cost. As a result, Bidules has a better gross margin on the frames while compensating for the lower margin on lenses compared to conventional opticians.

This model also allows Bidules to build its own brand, unlike conventional opticians who rely on the brand capital of the eyewear they sell but do not own nor control. In addition, Bidules can stock these frames without weighing too much on its treasury, as it is only when a given frame is picked from the stock and a skilled worker spends the 20 min necessary to prepare and fit them with lenses that most of the cost is incurred.

Going against the market trend of product standardization, Bidules's business model allows them to offer a wide variety of customization of the products' style and ergonomics. This customization is done with minimal risk of unsold products and excess future stocks as the glasses are cocreated with the customer. This on-demand production makes operations more efficient, leading to smarter product use and manufacture (Morseletto, 2020). In addition, this co-creation offers Bidules the opportunity to create highly personalized products tailored to the client's face and a more engaging customer experience compared to traditional retailers. Furthermore, the brand clarifies on its website that they upcycle vintage frames, but they do not sell secondhand frames. Hence, customers cannot sell their vintage frames to Bidules, but they can bring them to Bidules and benefit from the expertise in fixing, renovating, and fitting with both sunglasses and prescription glasses tailored to their needs.

The selling price is set based on both the work to be done on frames and their characteristics, such as material (e.g. gold plated or not), manufacturing year, rarity, and purchase price, among others. Usually, prices for sunglasses (frame and lenses) vary from €109 to €189 and for prescription glasses from €109 to 289€. A two-years warranty is automatically included in the price, adding peace of mind for customers and ensuring that any issues with the frames or lenses are promptly addressed.

Bidules's distributions models

Before the official launch of Bidules, N. Musty sold his glasses at vintage fairs. This method of distribution was slow, small scale and irregular. However, it provided the founder with direct contact with prospects interested in vintage products, so he had the opportunity to practice his pitch and to receive constructive and encouraging feedback.

Distribution through retailers

With the official launch in 2014, Bidules developed a depot sale agreement with a network of fashion and skate shops targeting a young audience. This allowed the brand to distribute its glasses through retailers in Belgium, Luxembourg and France. Previously, this type of retailer only sold low quality sunglasses as goodies for a 15€–30€price range as they do not have access to the established brands/licenses in the optical market. In contrast, Bidules's glasses were sold at a 60€–120€price range. This means that the price point was below Ray-Ban, Luxottica's overwhelming market leader at the time. In addition, Bidules offered a new collection every spring.

Thanks to this distribution scheme, sales forces were increased tenfold, but the staff of these fashion and skate shops were not involved in Bidules's project and had no expertise in eyewear.

Omni-channel distribution

In 2017, having completed his MBA, N. Musty moved Bidules out of the family workshop to a coworking space dedicated to circular economy in Brussels. While maintaining a channel of distribution through retailers, Bidules also launched a digital distribution platform. This e-commerce development attracted interest and generated sales but given the high degree of personalization of the glasses it also generated a lot of work to answer clients' requests and questions, deal with returns and other after-sales issues. In addition, the more glasses N. Musty bought, the harder it was to document, photograph, and reference them in a user-friendly online store.

Despite getting rid of the retail margin, Bidules had a hard time remaining profitable with this distribution strategy while keeping the same price points. The quantities sold online were not sufficient compared to the costs involved (cataloging, communication, shipping, returns, etc.). N. Musty also missed having direct contact with customers, allowing him to present Bidules's innovative approach to eyewear and to tailor his offer to their needs. Therefore, in 2019 he decided to stop selling online but kept Bidules's website to present photos, stories, and brand information.

Brick-and-mortar shop

In spring 2018, Bidules did a 180 degree turn in terms of distribution by opening a brick-and-mortar shop in a former art gallery in the center of Brussels, easily accessible by public transport. This was made possible thanks to a 12.000€ subsidy from the Brussels region to support the creation of a circular economy business as well as a successful 15.000€ crowdfunding campaign. The crowdfunding, run on KissKissBankBank, saw over 100 customers prepay for a pair of glasses at a discounted price, and it included some branded goodies. In terms of sourcing, this switch to a less flexible distribution model (more fixed cost, full-time employee, …) was made possible by the purchase of 20 thousand glass frames of French and German brands from the 70s to the 90s belonging to a former Belgian wholesaler. This provided Bidules with a reliable source of "raw material" ready to be upcycled for several years.

At this stage, Bidules hired a certified optometrist and set up an eye-test room facility in the new shop. This allowed for a diversification of Bidules's product range by adding vision

glasses. This diversification not only opened up an important new market; it also made Bidules's demand less seasonal as correction glasses are bought throughout the year. Furthermore, having a stock of frames, direct contact with customers, state-of-the-art equipment as well as trained staff all in the same location made Bidules's upscaling process much shorter and more responsive. Previously, Bidules had to provide its retailers with a fixed number of glasses for a new collection every season. These glasses were produced months in advance, with no guarantee that they would be sold. However, with the shop, Bidules modifies this approach. Now, they display a collection of restored frames that clients can try on. These frames are then fitted with the sun or corrective lenses selected by the client with the assistance of the staff. It is only when the restored frames of a specific model have been sold that new exemplars are picked up from the stock, restored, and fitted with the lenses that fit the client's needs. This approach not only allows Bidules to return to co-creating with its clients and producing on-demand, two key characteristics of its previous business model, but it is also more cost-effective and transparent, as clients can see the whole upcycling process firsthand, creating a unique customer experience in the eyewear sector.

Online and offline communication

As a digital native, N. Musty naturally turned to social media for his communication and to develop a brand community. When the production and distribution were punctuated by seasonal collections, for every collection, Bidules organized a photoshoot with young photographers and aspiring models. This provided the communication material for a look book released with the new collection and the content for social media. In addition, Bidules also experimented with other forms of visual communication. In 2015, they partnered with Maxence Dedry, a professional photographer who asked strangers on the street if they would pose with a pair of Bidules. These photos were then shown as an exhibition and published on social media.

By the time the store was launched, Bidules had reached 5,000 followers on Instagram and 3,000 on Facebook. This online brand community was instrumental in the successful fundraising campaign that provided the starting fund for the store. However, from the start, it was the direct contact with customers and the ensuing word-of-mouth that made Bidules's most effective communication channel. Indeed, the new yet vintage upcycling business model described above takes time and effort to communicate. It cannot be reduced to a tweet-size text or communicated solely visually. This step of telling the brand story was crucially missing in the retail and e-commerce distribution models that were ultimately discontinued.

The brick-and-mortar store, on the other hand, proved to be the ideal setting to communicate this brand story. Having all the steps of the process from the stock of frames to the finished products under one roof allows customers to witness the entire process. Furthermore, the shop operates as a cashless business. Besides the convenience, it also creates a lot fewer security concerns. This means that clients can freely roam around the store, including behind the counter, thus creating a more convivial shopping experience. Facing around 185 frames in the shop, the customer, who often has a purchase intention, is invited to select models he or she likes without trying them out. By doing this, the aim is to give place to the customer and understand his or her desire. Then, the staff go into the stockroom to suggest frames that are not on display to the customer. This semi-personalized experience, through a customized service, allows the staff to communicate in a didactic way about eyewear. It also creates a transparent process for the customer, contrasting with the opacity of the sourcing, production process, and pricing of the rest of the optical sector.

Brand communication also relies on the staff. This represents a managerial challenge for N. Musty. The brand story as well as models' specific information must be collected, stored,

structured and passed on within the team. Effective internal communication in this small, atypical structure is the essence of good customer communication. The managerial challenge is also to recruit, train and retain employees passionate about optics who share Bidules's vision and provide additional support to the sales effort, thus creating the desired customer experience.

Bidules's original business model also provides a lot of content for communication: the trips to buy vintage frames, the glasses restoration and customization, the exploration of a forgone era of European manufacture, the large variety of styles encountered, … With a brick-and-mortar shop located in a former art gallery at disposition, Bidules was able to organize various events (concerts, exhibitions, parties, etc.) for members of its brand community. All this content can then be used to build Bidules's brand capital as an authentic brand based on expertise and passion. However, communicating this kind of history of the industry, passion for the product, and technical skills remains a challenge. Bidules keeps experimenting with new ways of communication while trying to increase word-of-mouth.

Conclusion

Through the years, N. Musty was able to grow the business. From a part-time income for himself in 2014, Bidules grew to a two-person team in 2018, three in 2019, four in 2021 and five full-time salaries (founder included) in 2024.

The public's response to Bidules's storytelling is quite positive as well. This is apparent in the numerous positive feedback the team receives on a daily basis. It is also apparent in the Google Reviews the shop gathered. For the 2018–2024 period, the average review is 4.9 out of five. "Concept" is the most often used word in the open-ended reviews (13 occurrences out of 65 reviews for that same period).

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