

How I Built a Profitable Dropshipping Business in 14 Days (Without Spending Money on Ads)



A case study from dropshipping expert Tim Kock.

About the Author



Tim Kock is a German helpreneur who truly believes that every business journey has to start with giving.

Besides building stores, running a blog, and creating instructional videos, Tim works with young entrepreneurs who are willing to give their absolute best to achieve their goals.

Something personal

Tim consistently finds himself obsessed with one particular topic. In his teenage years he'd cut class to play video games. Later it was his passion for serving in the German military that brought him to Afghanistan.

Afterwards he became obsessed with the triathlon and gave everything to reach his ambitious goals in the sport.

Today he's working fiercely on his entrepreneurial journey. For Tim, it's the perfect combination of creativity and hard work, and armed with a deep understanding of dropshipping best practices, the perfect way to give back.

Introduction

It all began in Shopify's **dropshipping Facebook group**.

I noticed a few new entrepreneurs were struggling to get started. They were passionate about building a business and willing to give it their best, but despite it all, they just weren't making any sales.

To help get them on the right track, I started writing actionable posts that focused on core concepts like validating product ideas, building excitement for a launch, and even making the first sale.

Those posts got a lot of attention, but I never felt satisfied with the amount of value I was providing. I wanted to prove that with the right mindset and a little hard work, *anyone* could build a profitable dropshipping business.

So I built a brand new one from scratch, with a \$0 budget, and documented every single step — no secrets, and no holding back.

What you'll learn from this case study

This case study will tear down the all-too-common misconception that you need to "spend money to make money." It will show you that making sales isn't nearly as difficult as you think. And most importantly, it will prove that success is possible for *anyone*.

By the time you're done reading, there won't be a single excuse left to stop you from getting started.

- *Tim*

The Gameplan

To help build trust in the dropshipping model and inspire new entrepreneurs in a more practical way, I challenged myself to start a brand new business and earn as much money as possible — **without spending a single dollar or taking advantage of my personal network for help.**

That meant...

- No custom domain
- No paid ads
- No free products for influencers
- No selling to friends and family

I wanted to start the same way you are: no budget, and no shortcuts.

The Gameplan

I had to be aggressive and keep things simple if I wanted to achieve my goal. No time to get fancy; I only had time for real, honest work!

Here's how it shaped up:

- Day one: Finding a niche, validating it, and choosing products
- Day two: Setting up Shopify, importing products, and designing my store
- Day three - last day of trial: HUSTLE

After the plan was laid out, I started my journey.

Finding my Niche











At this point I had no idea what to sell, but I tried to avoid the following:

- Electronic-based products (potential to break)
- Food-based products (potential to spoil)
- Heavy and/or large products (expensive to ship)
- Cosmetic products (can't be sure what they're made of)
- Products with a price above \$24

The last point is related to German/EU law. Above \$24, EU shoppers are charged a 19% tax for products imported from a non-EU country.

Because I'd be dropshipping from AliExpress, I took a look at their **top selling items** and searched for products that fit the criteria listed above.

TOP SELLING This week's most popular products

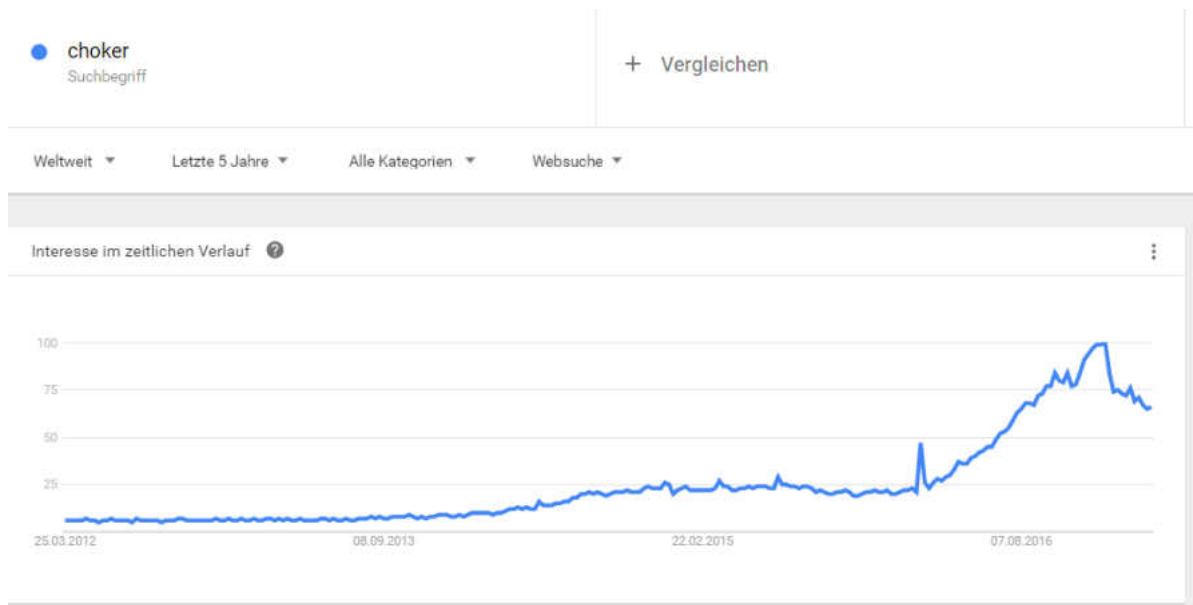
1 114643 Orders  9H tempered glass For iphone 4s 5s 5c SE 6 6s plus... US \$0.88 / bag	2 49134 Orders  Free shipping 12pcs PVC 3d Butterfly wall decor cute... US \$0.59 / lot	3 40268 Orders  S-2XL Hot sale! 1 women's sexy lace panties seam... US \$1.99 / piece	4 28911 Orders  HOT SALE! 2017 Women Messenger Bags Fashion Mini US \$13.96 / piece	5 16567 Orders  New HQ Night Driving Glasses Anti Glare Vision Drive... US \$1.96 / piece
6 14984 Orders  90' Punk New Fashion 4 Colors Leather Choker Ne... US \$0.71 / piece	7 9239 Orders  Original Xiaomi Redmi 4 Pro Prime 3GB RAM 32GB ROM M... US \$149.99 / piece	8 8802 Orders  2016 Newest Mini Car DVR Camera GT300 Camcorder US \$16.45 / piece	9 8248 Orders  Innersy 2016 Panties Mens 4Pcs/Lot Underwear Soft Bo... US \$16.99 / lot	10 6388 Orders  1pcs Portable Super Version Universal TV Remote Cont... US \$1.45 / piece

Chokers! I had a good feeling about this one.

Validating my Niche - Google

Because I don't like to work solely on intuition, I started the validation process to determine if chokers had real sales potential. To start, I plugged the term "choker" into [Google Trends](#).

Then I fell instantly in love.



Even if it looks like a descending trend, there's still plenty of demand for these special necklaces!

Google Trends won't show me the monthly search volume, so I jumped over to the [Google Global Market Finder](#) to learn more.

Geographic distribution

Location	Opportunity [?]	Local Monthly Searches [?]	Recommended Bid [?]	Competition [?]
Japan		49,500	US\$0.20	
United States		202,091	US\$0.44	
English		201,000	US\$0.45	
choker		201,000	US\$0.45	
Hide additional keyword suggestions from Keyword Planner				
choker necklace		110,000	US\$0.80	
pearl choker		14,800	US\$0.47	
black choker		14,800	US\$0.69	
black choker necklace		12,100	US\$0.74	

201,000 monthly searches for a single keyword in one country is some kind of jackpot! My new store would probably have no chance to rank highly on Google due to high competition, but who cares? 14 days are too few to rank anyway.

Looking good so far, but we're not done researching yet!

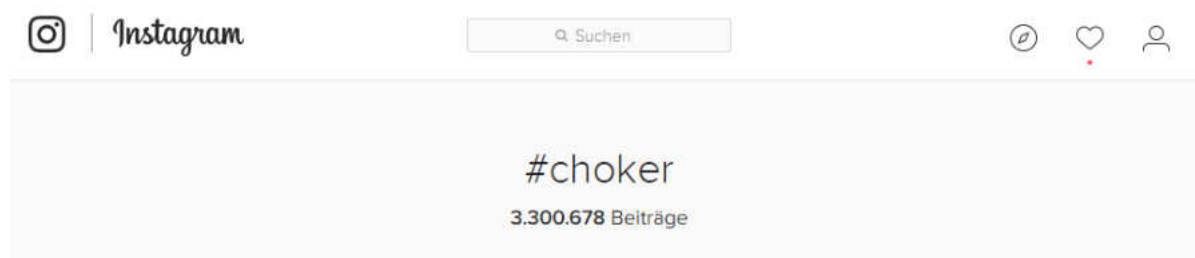
Validating my Niche - Social Media

The next step was to visit [Keyhole](#) and find out how popular chokers are on social media.



I took a look at Twitter engagement, and within just nine days, 850 tweets included #choker. Even if I assume that 50 - 60% of those were posted by stores promoting their products, I'm still very satisfied with the number.

Twitter looked great, so what's next? Instagram! I plugged the term "#choker" into the search bar.



3,300,678 posts! Awesome!

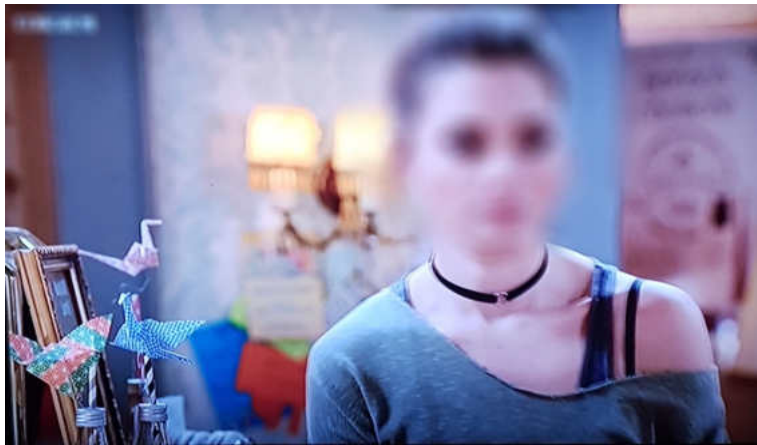
Based on these results, it seems like chokers have pretty high engagement, especially considering they're just necklaces, not some crazy world-changing product like the iPhone.

With that in mind, we can move on to the next validation step: real life.

Validating my Niche — Real Life

This step isn't always necessary, but since I was about to sell a product designed to be worn outside, I wanted to be sure it was still on-trend.

I started by watching a popular German TV show: "Gute Zeiten, Schlechte Zeiten" (Good Times, Bad Times). After about 15 minutes I saw this...



Choker!

If one of the main characters of this really popular TV show is wearing one of these necklaces, it *has* to be a current trend.

Why?

Because the companies responsible for the actors' styling and outfits are doing their homework and know which clothes and accessories are up-to-date.

With that validation step crossed off, we can confidently move forward.

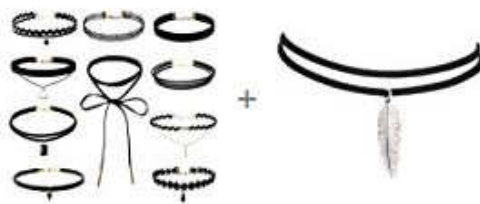
Validating my Niche — Amazon

I searched for the best-selling chokers on Amazon and selected the one with the most reviews, pictured below:



165 reviews with a 4-star rating seems good to me! I jumped straight into the reviews and searched for some common issues and/or frequently mentioned highlights. I took a close look but couldn't find anything I could do better or apply to my business, so I moved on.

I then investigated the "frequently bought together" products in the best seller's product page.



Hm...Nice feather choker there!

One of my favourite validation steps is...making money! If I was able to sell a single feather choker (or any other choker) I knew I could make more sales in the future.

Validating my Niche — Earning a Sale

I jumped over to that feather choker's product page and looked at its price and reviews.

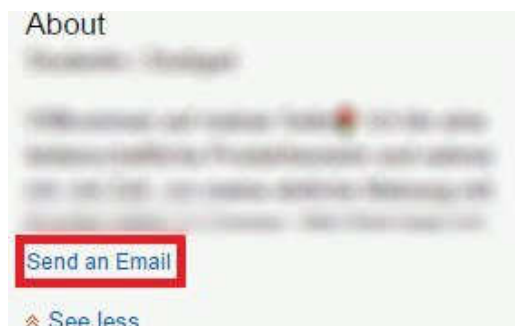


2.16 € (~\$2.30) and a 4-star rating seemed pretty good to me!

Like I said before, I want to make money with this choker as my final validation step. But how?

Get ready for an #amazonhack.

I jumped into the reviews section for this item and clicked on a reviewer's username. Some are willing to provide their email address so anyone can contact them.



Jackpot!

I chose someone who posted a review of this choker and asked for her permission to use the photo she uploaded. My goal was to use this picture to create a listing on eBay (you can use any selling platform) and manually dropship it directly to my buyer.

I marked up my price to 5.00 € and created a listing on eBay, some Facebook groups, and two German selling apps called "Shpock" and "Kleiderkreisel" — again, I'm sure there are lots of other apps in your area that let you do the same.



Success! A modest 2.84 € profit, but remember we're still validating.

After only 3 hours, someone fell in love with the choker and bought it. Nice!

The above image shows the completed transaction. With that sale, I had finally validated my product and felt ready to set up my store.

Why you Shouldn't Worry about the Big Guys

Since I was dropshipping chokers (nothing extremely creative) I knew right from the start that there were probably hundreds of Amazon sellers doing exactly the same. A quick search showed me I was right.

Before we continue, I need to mention something...


At this point a lot of new entrepreneurs start to struggle. They begin thinking way too much about their potential competition instead of their future customer. Let me ask one thing...

Do you know anyone who's made a positive, meaningful connection with a massive, multi-billion dollar marketplace? Unlikely. If anything, they'll bring up how affordable they can be, or how it's almost impossible to not find a product there.

Big players can't build real, personal relationships with their customers — and they won't even try. They're not interested in making \$100,000 if they have to send direct messages on Instagram to earn it. It's not worth their time. The return on investment (ROI) would be way too low.

They have bigger fish to fry.

But I'm guessing that \$100,000 sounds pretty good to you, right?



Stop worrying about competing with big players and start focusing on things you can do better, namely:

- Building real relationships
- Creating niche relevant content
- Being exclusive
- Being different

There are a lot of people who will never buy from big players just because they're too mainstream and would rather support small businesses like yours.

And even if you don't want to put your trust in those people, please keep in mind that **not everyone out there compares prices!**

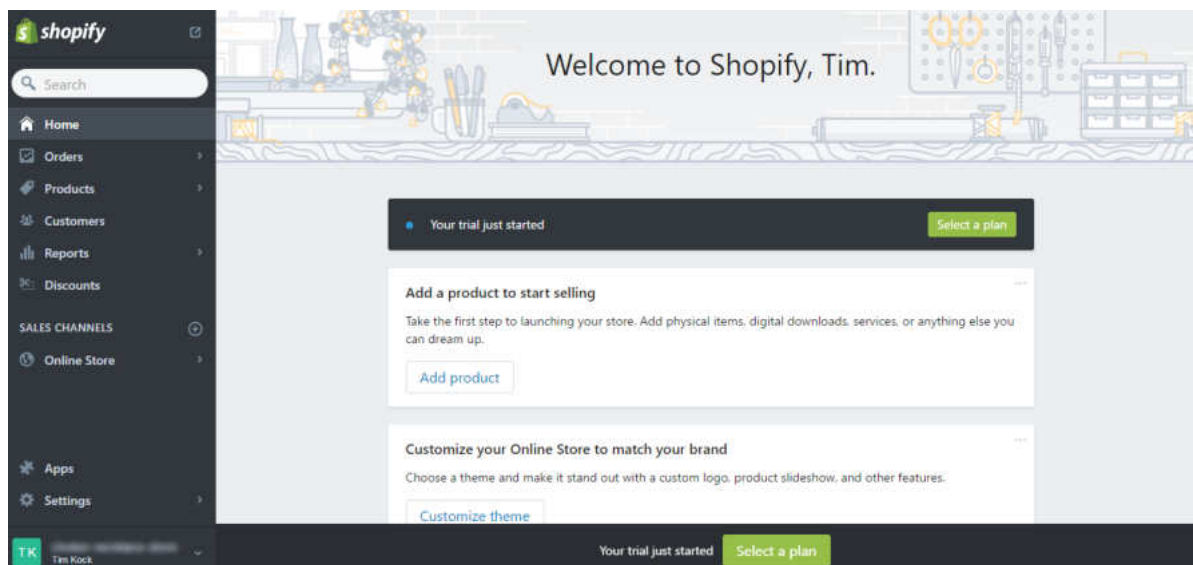
If you *still* don't believe me, just keep reading. I'll prove you wrong!

Setting up Shopify

Now that I had validated my niche, it was time to build my Shopify store.

As I always say, don't get fancy!

I didn't spend money a new theme or custom webdesign. I just registered for my [14-day free trial](#) and spent a few minutes setting up.

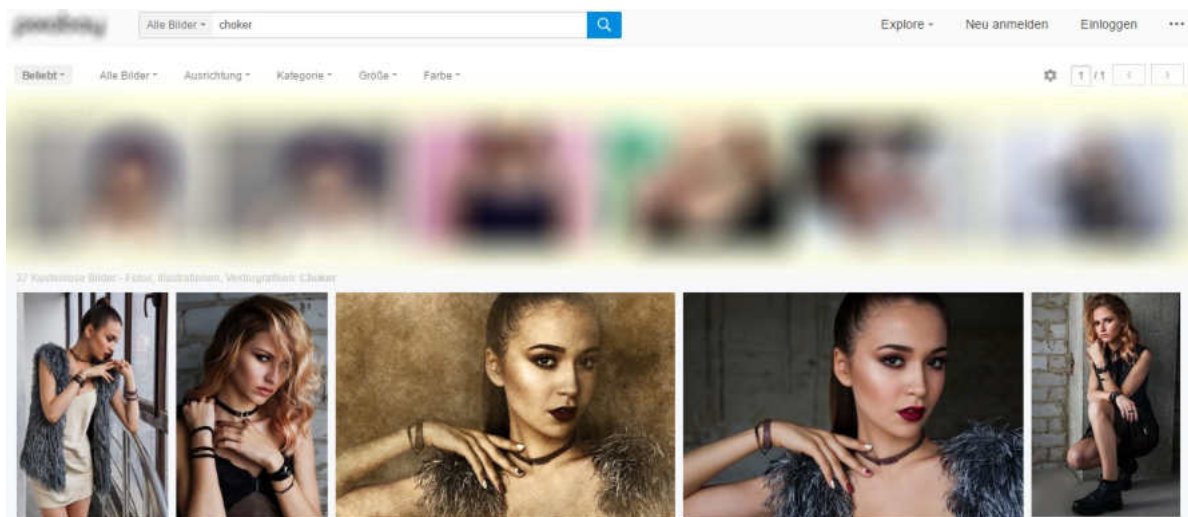


Thanks for having me, Shopify.

Here's how I configured my store:

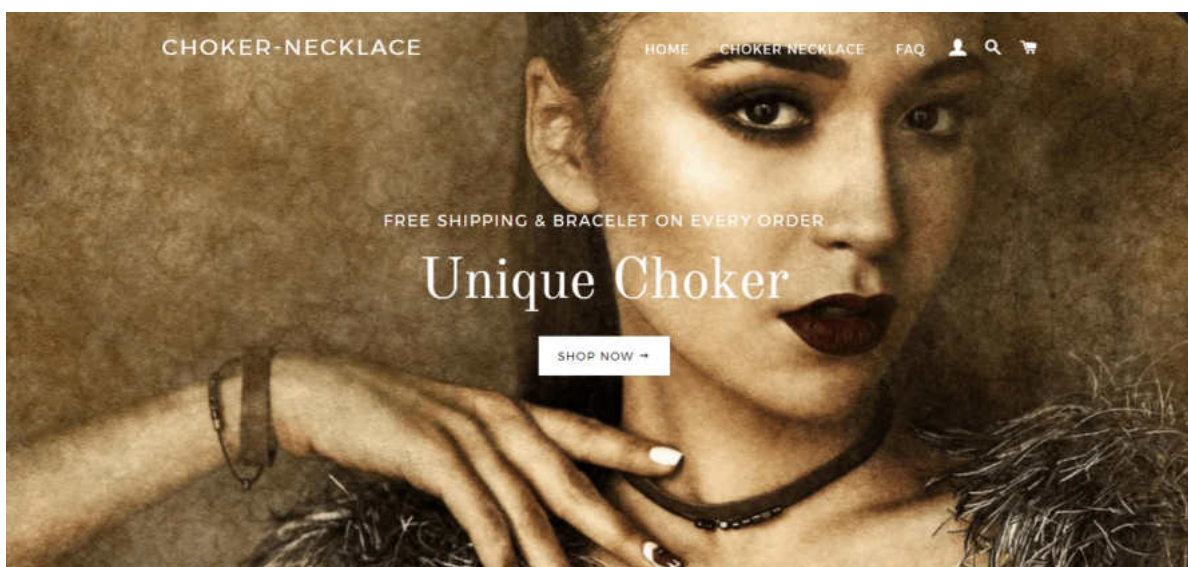
- **Theme:** Brooklyn
- **Shipping:** All countries free
- **Payment gateway:** If you're in the US, Puerto Rico, Canada, UK, Ireland, or Australia, use Shopify Payments. If you're anywhere else, use PayPal.
- **Pages:** Contact us, [privacy policy](#), [refund policy](#), [terms of service](#)
- **Free shipping page:** Used to explain the long shipping times

Because I think a hero image always looks solid, I visited a [royalty free image gallery](#) and searched for "choker." Given the product's popularity it didn't take much time to find a beautiful header image for my store.



Can you guess which one I chose?

I uploaded the image below to [tinypng.com](#) in order to compress it from 1.2 MB to 453.9 KB (faster loading times — especially on mobile) and then uploaded it within the Shopify Theme Editor.





Looked great to me!

Nothing fancy, just a solid store that doesn't bother you right from the start with promotional pop-ups. I know this stuff works, but remember, I only had a few days to build a real business and make some money out of it with zero investment.

I then added a few apps, some of which are free or come with a free trial:

- [Oberlo](#) to connect my store to AliExpress (up to 50 orders/month free)
- [Affiliatly](#) to track business generated from influencers (30-day free trial)
- [Easy Contact Form](#) in case my visitors had questions (free)

Finding and Importing Products

To find products what type of chokers were most popular, I headed back to the [Global Market Finder](#) to do another search. After clicking on *"Show additional keyword suggestions from Keyword Planner"* I found a bunch of product opportunities for my store.

Here are some of the more popular searches:

- Pearl choker
- Black choker
- Rhinestone choker
- Gold choker
- Neck choker
- Velvet choker
- Lace choker

I then searched [AliExpress.com](#) for "choker" and sorted them by these credentials:

- Free Shipping
- ★★★★★☆ & Up
- Orders
- Feedback Score > 2500
- Positive Feedback > 90 %

I also looked at real customer reviews within the product page. If the products looked good in review photos, I added them to my Oberlo Import List. You can do this from within the Oberlo app in Shopify, but the [Chrome extension](#) makes it much easier.

Writing Product Descriptions




After I imported a few products (including the Amazon best-seller we saw earlier) it was time to write some **niche-appropriate product descriptions**.

This part is important!

For low-priced products like chokers, long, technical product descriptions are usually a waste of time. I wanted to create an engaging (and extremely short) description for my product.

Here's what I came up with:

This one is special. Just like you. The perfect fit? You have to figure it out...

 Share  Tweet  Pin it

Simple. Just the way I like it.

If you're using AliExpress DO NOT leave the product descriptions as-is when pushing products to your store. Make them unique and fitting for your niche.

Again, this is important. Don't rush it!

Pricing my Products

Because I was trying to make the most amount of money in the least amount of time, I chose to price my products at a premium in order to earn more money from every customer.

Here's a breakdown of my pricing calculation:

- PayPal transaction fee (1.9% + 0.35€)
- PayPal currency changing fee (2% USD - EUR)
- Tax (19% in Germany)
- Affiliate commission (15%)
- Discounts (10%)
- Free giveaway (bonus bracelet at a \$0.66 purchase price)

I ended up pricing the 10-choker set we found on Amazon at \$29.99. After deducting all my costs, fees, and discounts, I would earn \$11.63 in net profit on each sale.

Remember, this set was selling on Amazon for around \$10. If I were able to sell it for almost \$20 more, it should prove to you that cost isn't the only thing people think about when shopping online.

After I was done calculating prices for every choker I was selling (I highly recommend doing this manually even though Oberlo's global price multiplier seems so easy) I was ready for the next step: Marketing.

Free Marketing: Influencers

Because I saw so much social media engagement around chokers during our validation stage, I figured there *had* to be an influencer on social media who'd be willing to work with me. If I were able to get at least one to promote my store, chances would be high that I'd get some traffic.

But because I couldn't spend the money on sample products for them, I had to find someone who was willing to promote my store for free.

Before we jump into how I got an influencer to do that, let's talk about one way to find them.

Social Research

To start, I searched Twitter and Instagram for #choker and looked for images and posts with a high number of likes, retweets, and comments.

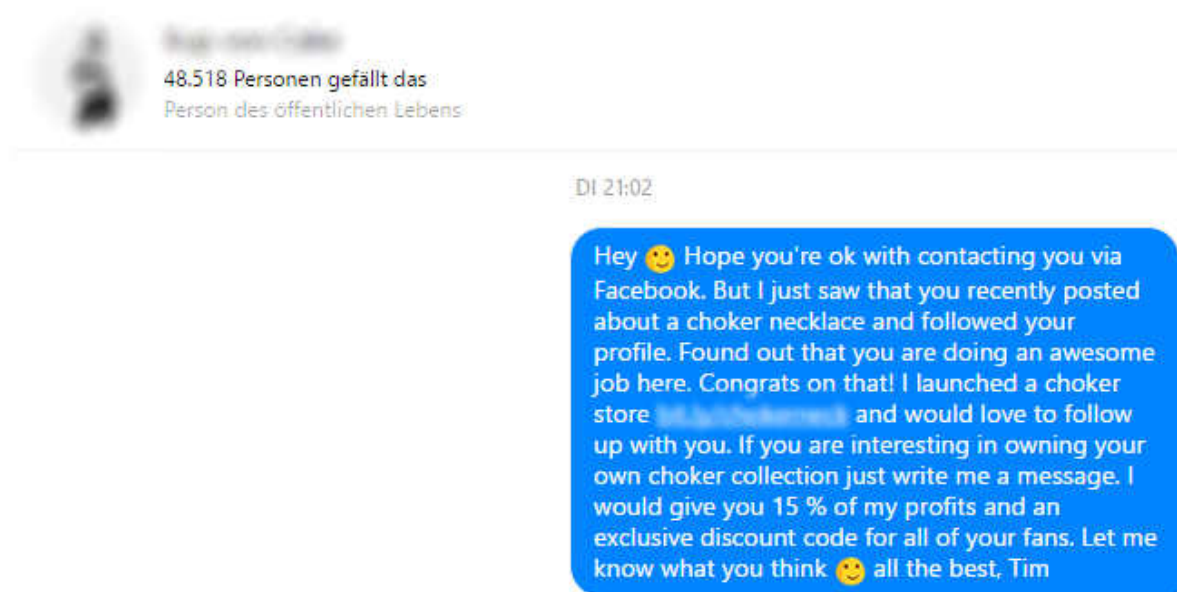
After about one hour I had a list of 23 influencers who could possibly promote the store.

I reached out and... nothing happened.

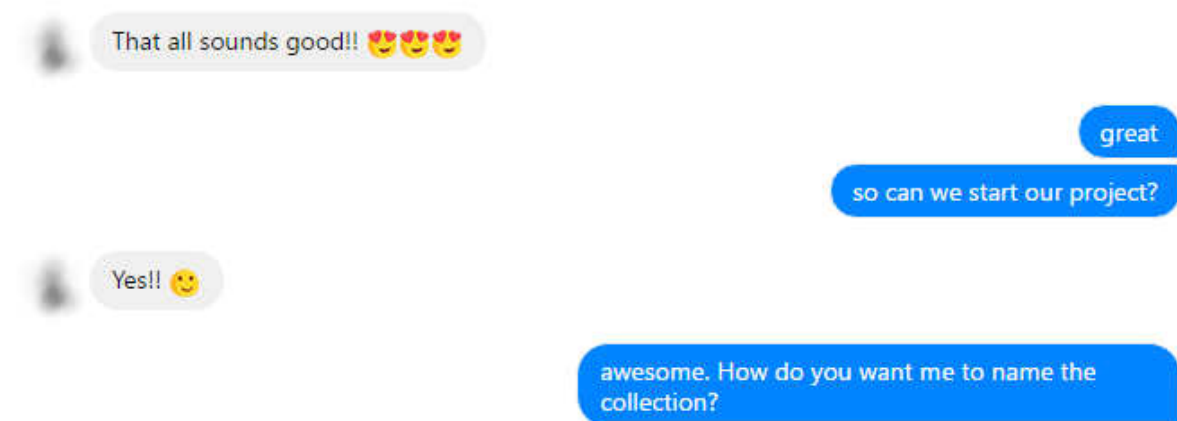
Almost everyone read my message but no one took 10 seconds to reply.

Bummer.

Instead of getting upset, I chose to take a break, relax, and refocus. I thought about what I was missing and added Google and Facebook users to my influencer search. I thought Facebook was the least likely to garner any attention for my store, but nevertheless I reached out to a young woman with 48,518 fans...



And after a few hours I got the answer I was hoping for.



As you probably noticed, I gave her something that doesn't cost any money: her own collection of chokers! Can you imagine how excited she was?

Giving is key!

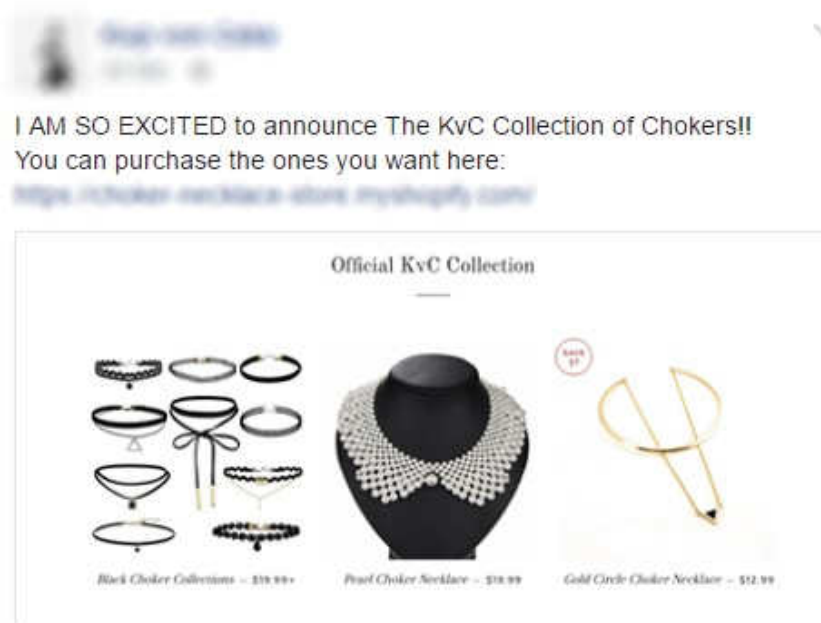
Here's a tip: If you want people to really work with you, just *give*. The outcome is just a logical result of showing kindness — more kindness!

In this example I gave her something no one else likely ever had. She's probably received a lot of free stuff in exchange for promoting products, but never her own collection.

If you want engaging people to work with you, always give them more than they'd ever expect.

After working out the details of our partnership, it was time for some sleep.

I woke up the next morning and saw this:



Awesome!

Free Marketing: Instagram

Because the main challenge of this case study was to *make* money without *spending* money, I couldn't go my usual route of spending a few dollars on Facebook and Google Ads.

So what's the easiest way to reach people these days?

Social media

I started on Instagram and searched (again) for #choker. I looked through the results and wrote about 50 - 60 direct messages to the people who uploaded them.

März 24, 10:01 PM

Hey, just saw that you recently used #choker 😊 I reach out to you because I launched a choker necklace store and would love to hear your Feedback from someone like you? In return I would give you a 15% discount if you want to 😊 if you are interested just Check Type 📌 bit.ly/chokerneck 📌 into your Browser. Instagram are not allowing to use clickable links :/ all the best, Tim 😊

And even if I totally messed this message up, I still got about 10 replies.

Here's just one of them:

März 26, 12:54 AM

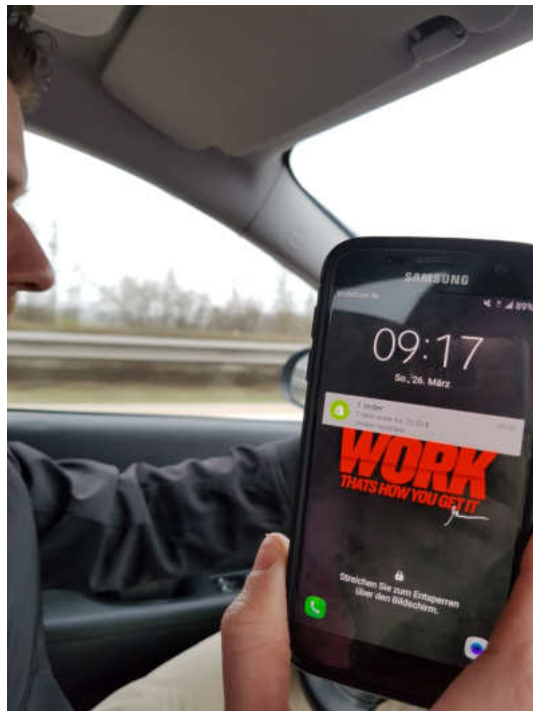
Hi, Tim! Thank you for the offer, and sorry for the late answer! I checked out your store and I am interested. 😊 Although, I would have a question. I would like to know how much the shipping price is. I don't know where your store is located, but I live in Hungary, and I'm a little worried about the shipping price. But otherwise I'm highly interested in buying at you. Thanks a lot,

Zsóka 😊

Good thing I offer free worldwide shipping!

Making my First (Real) Sale

I was driving on the German Autobahn and noticed a small vibration. It was my phone! I took it out of my pocket and saw this:




Look closely...



Ka-ching!

I made \$25.50 in revenue and \$15.29 in net profit. Awesome — my strategy seemed to work!

Order details		Online Store	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> FULFILLED			
 Black Choker Collections 10 Pieces SKU : 2675626-10pcs		\$29.99 × 1	\$29.99
Note <input type="text" value="Add a note to this order..."/> <input type="button" value="Save"/>		Discount: \$10.00	-\$4.49
		Subtotal	\$25.50
		Shipping	
		International Shipping	\$0.00
		0.188 kg	
		Tax	\$0.00
		Total	\$25.50
		Paid by customer	\$25.50

As I suspected it was the girl from Hungary!

But more interestingly, and my ultimate proof that anyone can compete against a big player, was the product she chose — **the \$10 choker set we found on Amazon!** Even with her discount she paid around \$15 more than she would have on Amazon.

Is this ethically wrong? No!

Like I said before: If you do things a big player can't (or won't) then you'll be able to "compete" against them. But in fact it's not really competing — it's just making sales!

But what did I give her that she couldn't get from Amazon?

A real relationship! She was able to take a look at my vacation pictures and some other stuff on my personal Instagram account. For her I was "Tim" and not some faceless business.

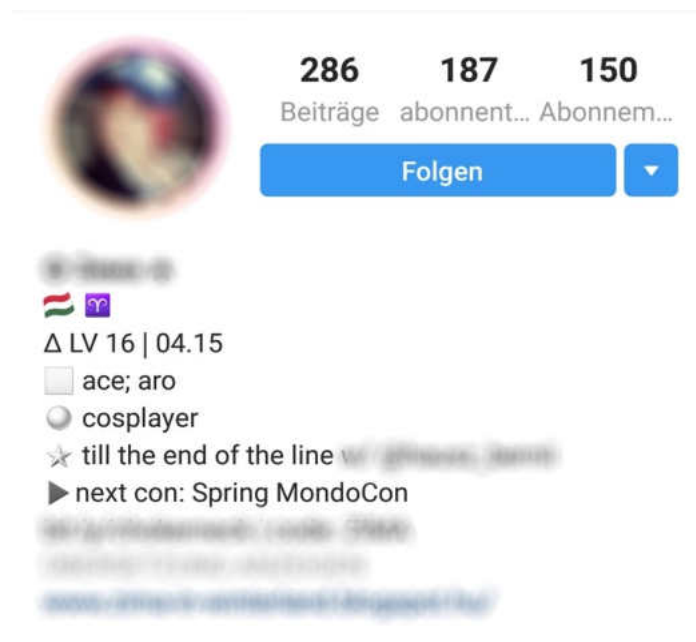
Post-sale Research

Every time I work with clients or build a store for myself, I take one very important step after making my first sale: Learning about the customer! The goal here is to find out what their passions are. Through that, I might be able to find a more focused niche to target.

One of the great things about social media is that people love to share their passions. It's like a goldmine for marketers!

I visited the Instagram profile of my first customer and read her bio.

Here's what I found:

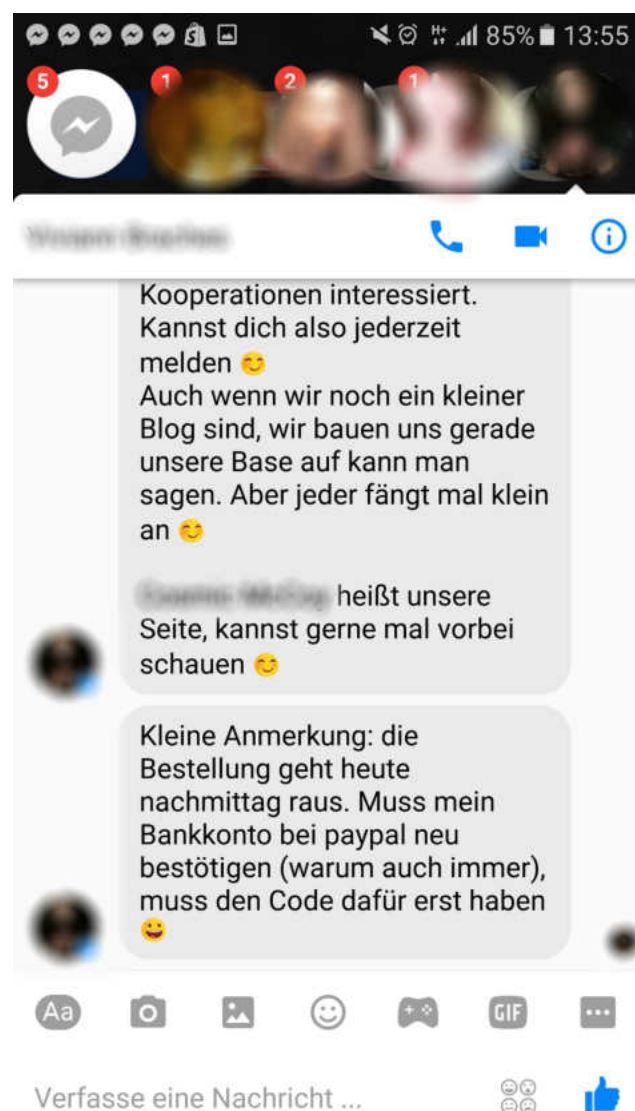


Cosplayer. Jackpot!

To begin scaling my business and earning more sales, I had to find a place where cosplayers gathered. First stop, Facebook groups!

I joined the biggest group I could find and posted about my store — but not in a promotional way! I asked the group for honest and brutal feedback on my store. In exchange, they'd receive a 15% discount on all chokers.

And that's when my Facebook inbox exploded.



It was tough to keep track of everything!

At the end of the next day, my Shopify backend looked like this:

<input type="checkbox"/>	#1010	Mar 27, 10:04pm		Paid	Fulfilled	\$25.50
<input type="checkbox"/>	#1009	Mar 27, 9:46pm		Paid	Fulfilled	\$25.50
<input type="checkbox"/>	#1008	Mar 27, 8:07pm		Paid	Fulfilled	\$25.50
<input type="checkbox"/>	#1007	Mar 27, 7:20pm		Paid	Fulfilled	\$6.40
<input type="checkbox"/>	#1006	Mar 27, 4:36pm		Paid	Fulfilled	\$6.40
<input type="checkbox"/>	#1005	Mar 27, 3:57pm		Paid	Fulfilled	\$6.40
<input type="checkbox"/>	#1004	Mar 27, 1:00pm		Paid	Fulfilled	\$12.00

This one day in particular earned me \$107.70 in revenue (~\$62 in net profit). Awesome! I fulfilled the orders with Oberlo and thanked everyone with a personal Facebook message.

If I hadn't reviewed the Instagram profile of my first customer I probably would have never learned about the cosplay scene and their love of chokers.

The lesson here is simple: Try to find out where your first customers came from, why they bought from you, and what their passions are.

Doing this research is just the beginning

The part where you earn real money is when you take action on everything you learned.

Don't try to reach everybody. You'll never fail by excluding people. Be as specific as possible! Narrowing my niche from "*choker*" to "*cosplay choker*" is a great example of this.

Lastly, always (always!) ask for a shoutout as soon as your customer receives their order. Many of their friends could be interested in the same niche and looking for similar products.

Closing Shop & Final Tally

All good things must come to an end

Even if I were able to scale this business and make good money out of it, I've got too much on the go right now and don't have time to work on it.

But this case study was more of an experiment anyway, and considering that, it was a massive success!

Here's my financial report at the end of my [14-day free trial of Shopify](#):

Sales	View report
Gross sales	\$231.88
Discounts	-\$40.29
Returns	\$0.00
Net sales	\$191.59
Shipping	\$0.00
Taxes	\$0.00
Total sales	\$191.59

\$191.59 — isn't that great?

All these sales were made in just three days and came from Instagram direct messaging (3 orders) and the cosplay Facebook group (8 orders). Unfortunately, the free influencer marketing I received didn't work this time.

What Would I do Next?

If I challenged myself to make even more money with this business (still with no investment), I'd have two obvious options:

1. Sell the store
2. Grow my business

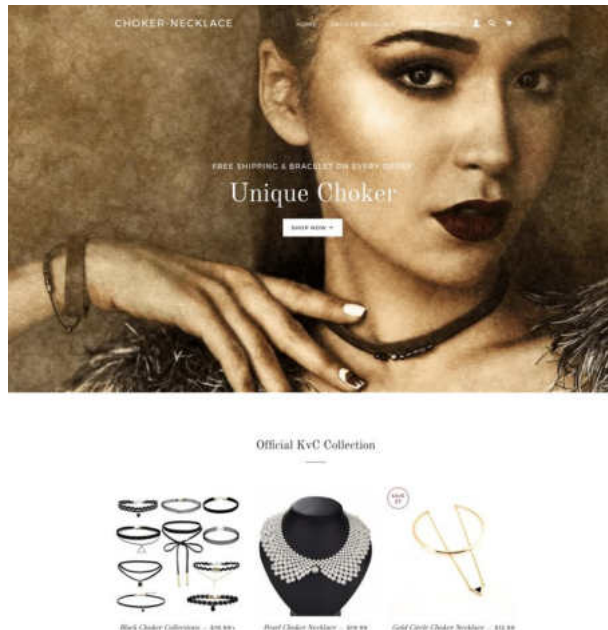
The first option is pretty easy as there are plenty of websites that let you buy and sell businesses. But for the second option, I could imagine taking the following action:

- Dig *really* deep into the cosplay niche
- Send more direct messages
- Create business social media accounts
- As mentioned previously, ask for shoutouts when orders arrive
- Add a blog to my store and do interviews with bloggers and cosplayers
- Start **analyzing traffic with Google Analytics** to optimize the user experience

And that's just scratching the surface. There are many more opportunities with this kind of business!

Conclusion

Maybe you've noticed that I've blurred out parts of my images that show my business name or the URL of my store. Now it's time to show you:



Click the image for a larger view

Nothing fancy; just a store with some real, honest work behind it. I really loved this experiment and will definitely create more content like this in the future. But besides being fun for me, I really hope this was helpful to you.

I really want you to have success with your business and I truly believe that this is possible for everyone. The most important step is to stop dreaming about overnight success and instead, be willing to put the work in!

There is absolutely no reason why you can't become successful. As you begin your journey, just remember one thing:

Don't. Get. Fancy.