

With help from ASU and a viral TikTok, an entrepreneur soars

By Mary Beth Faller, ASU News
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Nearly five years ago, Ruben Trujillo saw his entrepreneurial dream slipping away as he wondered how he would pay his rent.

Now, Trujillo's business, [Café Emporos](#), is featured on a national TV commercial, and he's speaking to business classes at Arizona State University about his success.

His venture has grown thanks to hard work, strong support from the [J. Orin Edson Entrepreneurship and Innovation Institute at ASU](#) and a viral TikTok video.

Trujillo is part of an ongoing advertising campaign by TikTok that highlights how the social media video platform can boost small businesses.

"I'm still a very small business, but this is a really big deal," he said.

About Café Emporos

The name: Trujillo loves to travel, and "emporos" is the Greek word for a merchant who travels.

The product: [Café Emporos](#) sells "Cafégrams" for \$10, with a choice of medium-roast coffee, dark-roast coffee or Earl Grey tea. Wedding favors and bulk orders ("Thanks for bean here," among other options) are 50 for \$100. Customers can also order just the single-use drip filters.

Trujillo, who lives in Goodyear, Arizona, founded Café Emporos in 2015 — but his dream began in 2010, when he was teaching English in South Korea. He loved going to coffee shops so much that he became a barista in a small specialty coffee shop.

“When I came back to America, I wanted to open up a coffee shop, but I didn't realize how difficult it was to start a business or to run a business,” he said.

Then he connected with the Innovation Hub in Goodyear, which offered the ASU Startup School workshop and access to ASU's support for entrepreneurs. He pivoted his business model to selling single-serve coffee filters and coffee.

“I was still a little bit lost though because my original passion was that coffee shop. So it took me awhile to kind of gracefully let that go,” he said.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, he lost the ability to sell at farmers markets and became a full-time caregiver for his grandmother while teaching English remotely.

On Oct. 5, he lost his teaching job.

“That was holding everything together, paying my rent. And I truly felt like a failure. I did the pitches. I had all these meetings, all these mentors. And I felt like I had wasted it,” he said.

Over the previous months, he had made a few TikTok videos to promote Café Emporos. But he had a new idea, and on Nov. 5, he decided to post a TikTok promoting personalized “coffee-grams” for loved ones, later rebranded as Cafégrams.

“All of this stuff that I had learned from Venture Devils and ASU, the mentorship, the innovation hub, everything kind of came to those 59 seconds,” he said.

The next day, the video had 300 “likes” but no sales. Then a comment suggested he switch to a business account so he could add a sales link. He changed the settings and then got in his car.

Each sale triggered a “ka-ching” sound through his car's Bluetooth.

“My car turned into this slot machine that I was driving. It was going ‘ka-ching,’ ‘ka-ching,’ ‘ka-ching.’”

“And I'm just like crying in my car because I had five sales in October, and I didn't know what I was going to do.”

He sold 300 orders during the car ride. The next day, he reposted the video and allowed people to share it. Within two weeks, he had 1,200 orders and \$25,000 in sales.

The journey: “Your personal life will bleed into your business life and when that happens, it takes you out mentally, if not financially. This is why our mentors say you have to have a system in place for when things happen.”

The advice: Trujillo advises entrepreneurs to tap into free community resources like ASU's Edson Entrepreneurship and Innovation Institute and to embrace feedback, even when it's negative. “We all want to win money in the pitch competitions, but the gold is from the feedback that you get from the judges,” he said.

On going viral: “My suggestion to people is, post on social media but you have to make sure that your business can stand on its own two feet without it as well.”

People were ordering the Cafégrams as holiday greetings, and companies were uploading their logos to send them to clients.

“And it didn't come without stress, because now I had to fulfill these orders,” he said.

In 2021, his viral moment faded, sales slowed and he became a caregiver again after his mother was diagnosed with breast cancer.

But his ASU mentors supported him.

“Even though I was going through my personal stuff, they were trying to push me toward accomplishing these goals in my business,” he said.

“I realized how important it is to have a sustainable business model.”

The mentors encouraged him to add a bundle option instead of relying on single \$10 orders. He introduced \$100 bundles and started getting \$500 and \$800 orders from brides for wedding favors.

Openness to coaching

Part of Trujillo's hard work in growing his venture is his openness to coaching, according to Kristin Slice, director of community entrepreneurship for the J. Orin Edson Entrepreneurship and Innovation Institute at ASU.

“He's able to hear from all these founders and take what he needs and also say, ‘That's your journey but I need something different,’” she said.

Trujillo took advantage of a wide range of support services from ASU, all of which are free. Besides Startup School, mentorship and the Venture Devil pitch competitions, he also won a grant from Peoria Forward even though he lives in Goodyear, thanks to ASU's commitment to making its resources inclusive.

“The reality is that you should be able to access many resources as long as it's about giving back,” Slice said.

“Ruben was an active mentor in Peoria. He attended events, he helped with high schoolers. He did so much to engage in that community.”

Café Emporos is still a one-employee company that Trujillo runs from his house. Slice said that even though many people think success means appearing on “Shark Tank” or getting gigantic infusions of investment money, “you can be way more profitable and way more flexible in scale without those things.”

“I give credit to ASU that we are a place where you can be an entrepreneur that has deep impact in lots of different places and spaces,” she said.

Nationwide fame

Last year, a media outlet featured Trujillo's TikTok success, and soon after, a TikTok representative reached out, wanting to feature Café Emporos in a national campaign.

"They chose five businesses out of a thousand, and there's 7 million businesses on TikTok. So when I was thinking of the numbers, I was like, this is a really big deal," he said.

In February, a crew of 12 people from TikTok arrived at Trujillo's house in Goodyear to make the commercial.

"I had to notify my neighbors because they were going to block off the streets," he said.

During the filming, Trujillo had to take a moment to compose himself. The TikTok cameras were set up on the exact spot in his house where he prayed during his lowest moments in 2020.

"To go from when I was alone and I didn't know what to do, to now having TikTok in my house, I'm like, how is this even possible?"

People started sending him photos of his face featured in the TikTok promotions — at a bus stop in Washington, D.C., and in a full-page ad in the New York Post.

"It's a really surreal thing going from October 2020 to being on national TV," said Trujillo, who's shared his journey and advice with ASU business students and at entrepreneurial events.

"I'm definitely grateful for all the support that I've received through ASU and through the mentorships and through Goodyear. And through TikTok."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Ruben Trujillo runs his venture, Café Emporos, out of his Goodyear, Arizona, home. He's part of a nationwide promotion of small businesses by the social media video platform TikTok. Trujillo had a lot of support from the the J. Orin Edson Entrepreneurship + Innovation Institute at ASU before his TikTok video went viral in 2020. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Ruben Trujillo's business, Café Emporos, sells "Cafégrams" — personalized single-use coffee packets. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

"TikTok took us from \$10
to \$25,000 in a week"

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tiktokeconomicimpact.com

 **TikTok**

Ruben Trujillo is featured in a nationwide promotional campaign by TikTok, including on this bus stop ad in Washington, D.C. Courtesy photo