

Go green with Sneaker LAB



By [Evan-Lee Courie](#)

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With a global movement towards consciousness and sustainability becoming more apparent, more brands are looking to biotech as a solution. But one South African brand is already harnessing the power of biotech to create an environmentally friendly sneaker care product. Sneaker LAB's range is reportedly the only sneaker care product range in the world to be Green TAG certified and biotech driven.

We chat to Jo Farah, founder of Sneaker LAB, to find out more about his journey of this unique business...



Jo Farah, founder of Sneaker LAB © Myles Dicky

■ Can you tell us a bit about Sneaker LAB?

Sneaker LAB is a sneaker care product range that is the only sneaker care product range in the world to be Green TAG certified, making it environmentally friendly and biotech driven.

The products are water-based, readily biodegradable, and the packaging is suitable for recycling. The business also

operates internationally, in 60 countries, with an experiential brand store in Braamfontein Johannesburg; as well as downtown Los Angeles in the USA.

Our unique sneaker care and protection formulas utilise bacteria and enzymes to hyper-escalate nature's natural cleaning process. The biotechnology functions on a molecular level and continues to work long after application.

We constantly strive toward becoming more environmentally friendly – not only in our products but as a business as a whole.

■ ***When, how and why did you get started?***

I was mentored and influenced by my father, who started a business in his 20s that grew into an international IT company. It was natural for me to follow in his entrepreneurship footsteps, and I had developed a love for sneakers and streetwear culture in my youth.

After returning to South Africa from the USA in 2008, I went into business with two friends who owned a streetwear store in Cape Town. We founded a guerrilla marketing agency, producing ads for the likes of Adidas, New Balance and Puma. But I had always wanted to build my own brand that would complement my interest in sneakers, create jobs and be profitable.

When the idea of Sneaker LAB was born, there was no branded sneaker cleaning product in the retail space. I knew sneaker culture was growing and that big brands like Nike and Puma were creating demand.

I had a gut feeling there would be a need for a sneaker cleaning brand. I started with a small order for my retail partners at The Foschini Group to test the market. The stock sold out in two days, and that was all the proof I needed.

■ ***What is the core function of Sneaker LAB?***

Sneaker LAB takes a passion for sneaker culture and matches it with science, creating a natural cleaning solution that works.

The advanced environmentally friendly products promise to clean, care and protect your sneakers. Sneaker LAB is a proudly South African brand taking on a fresh approach to shoe care and is inspired by minimalist street culture and the people who create it.

Sneaker LAB is built on a Green philosophy. Our products are Green TAG certified, one of the worlds most trusted ecolabels. The 100% biodegradable solutions and recyclable packaging have been independently tested and Green Tag

certified.

“ Sneaker LAB has taken a cue from nature and harnessed the same beneficial bacteria that is used to biodegrade organic waste to create our cleaning formula. This biotechnology cleans at a microscopic level, continuing to work long after application, leaving your sneakers cleaner for longer. ”

■ **What are some of the obstacles you've had to overcome since starting out?**

As an entrepreneur, you face many challenges when launching a startup.

For instance, being a young business means there's always a competing brand which is bigger than you, with more money than you. And especially in the beginning when it's just you in the business, there's never enough time to get everything done.

One of the bigger challenges we have faced was when some of our international competitors tried to copy our product. Fortunately, our strong marketing and communications plan helped to ensure we had the brand equity that made their attempts unsuccessful.

■ **What advice would you give to other aspiring entrepreneurs?**

As an entrepreneur, you can't be the best in every facet of the business, you need key people to ensure business growth. You also need to have a clear vision about what it is you are setting out to achieve and why.

Plan properly and be realistic, and never underestimate the importance of networking.

And finally, you have to have staying power. It's going to be hard work, and you need to be persistent.

■ **What has been your proudest achievements thus far? One of my biggest achievements has been opening the Sneaker LAB store in downtown Los Angeles, one of the world's largest hubs of streetwear.**

■ **What does the future of entrepreneurship look like to you?**

Today, we are able to communicate products, services and ideas instantly through technology and the internet. Technology has empowered us to connect ideas, with the knowledge and funding to make them a reality. But with this ability to fast track businesses, we need to be more conscious of the future entrepreneurs create. Our focus needs to shift from one of purely making profit to one of acting in a socially responsible way – creating businesses that are good for the future of all.

In short, the future of entrepreneurship is fast, competitive and socially responsible.

■ **There's a global movement towards consciousness and sustainability. What are your views on this? Globally consumers are becoming more environmentally conscious and are looking for sustainable ways of living. The fashion industry is seeing a surge in the demand for upcycled and recycled products. From the start of Sneaker LAB, sustainability has been non-negotiable. I wanted the brand to be environmentally friendly, but with better results than anything currently available in the market. I took a great deal of time to research the biodegradable environmentally friendly cleaning solutions.**

Today, sustainability is our chief differentiator. Sustainability should be a big drive for any brand. I believe that if brands aren't sustainable and socially responsible, their business will suffer in the long run.

■ **In your opinion, what are the ways brands can innovate when entering the business of green?**

Do your homework! Make sure that what you are putting into the world is truly environmentally friendly and sustainable. There is a blurry line between what brands communicate as green and what is actually good for the environment.



Jo Farah, founder of Sneaker LAB © Myles Dicky

There is a definite opportunity to find innovative ways and ideas that are truly green. It takes a lot of research to constantly stay abreast of the latest technology and trends. However, if you are an early adopter and innovator you will have a distinct advantage over your competition.

■ ***Tell us about your biggest struggles as an entrepreneur, as well as some major highlights.***

As a startup entrepreneur, I often questioned my decisions, wondering if I had made mistakes. It was hard work and perseverance that made Sneaker LAB a success, and especially in the early days, I realised I had to believe in myself and my product.

We took a different approach when we launched Sneaker LAB, and it involved partnering with people who believed in what we were doing. We chose to rather go with smaller distributors who bought into our brand ethos.

As Sneaker LAB grew, we eventually moved to bigger partners that could support our scale. In stores, we realised the most value would be gained from working with the staff and we invested in in-store training to ensure store staff bought into the brand and were selling it to customers.

A big highlight was receiving our first order. It was a phenomenal moment. I, personally, hand-packed the first 500 bottles that were heading to Sportscene because at that stage it was just myself and one other employee. It looked monumental to have a table covered in boxes. Today, we produce millions of units for the South African market every year and supply product to over 60 countries.

■ ***Why would you encourage someone to become an entrepreneur?***

Young, aspiring entrepreneurs with an entrepreneurial mindset should channel time and energy into developing their business ideas into something tangible and workable that could generate good long-term financial returns.

“ Entrepreneurs hold the power to create real change in our country, through creating jobs and youth upliftment and solve the problems faced by the country with innovative solutions. ”

■ ***Where would you like to see Sneaker LAB in the next five years***

We plan to open more brand experience retail spaces around the world. We have expanded our range into products for hat care, denim care with other verticals in the pipeline. Our aim is to be the number 1 shoe care brand in the world.

ABOUT EVAN-LEE COURIE

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