How Two Insect-loving Entrepreneurs Built a Business on Bugs

CUSTOMER STORIES WRITTEN BY ANDREA ZOELLNER

Neil Whippey and Shami Radia, the founders of Eat Grub, are on a mission to "change the way the West eats". With their successful eCommerce business, this London-based duo is promoting insects as a sustainable and nutritious source of food – one delicious snack at a time.

Hatching a Plan

A few years ago, Shami was working for a clean water charity that regularly sent him to developing countries. It was on a trip to Malawi that he witnessed locals collecting termites after a rainfall, frying them up in lime and chilli, and serving them as a tasty snack. "After doing a bit more research on nutrition and sustainability, it made a lot of sense," he says. "Then it became a marketing challenge. How do we get people in the West to change their perception of eating insects?"

Neil Whippey and Shami Radia, the founders of Eat Grub

Shami discussed his idea with Neil, an old high school friend, who was already interested in nutrition for personal health reasons. Together with the help of rising culinary star Sebastian Holmes, they devised a plan to open an insect-themed pop-up restaurant in London in 2014. To their delight, the venture was a hit and gave them the encouragement they needed to turn it into a business.

Energized by their London success, Shami and Neil set off to develop the perfect product for their audience of insect-loving foodies. However, a bit of market research around early adopters, trendsetters, and innovators revealed a new opportunity: fitness and nutrition junkies. "We've entered the market at a perfect time with a growing awareness of nutrition and a real trend right now for a high-protein diet," says Shami.
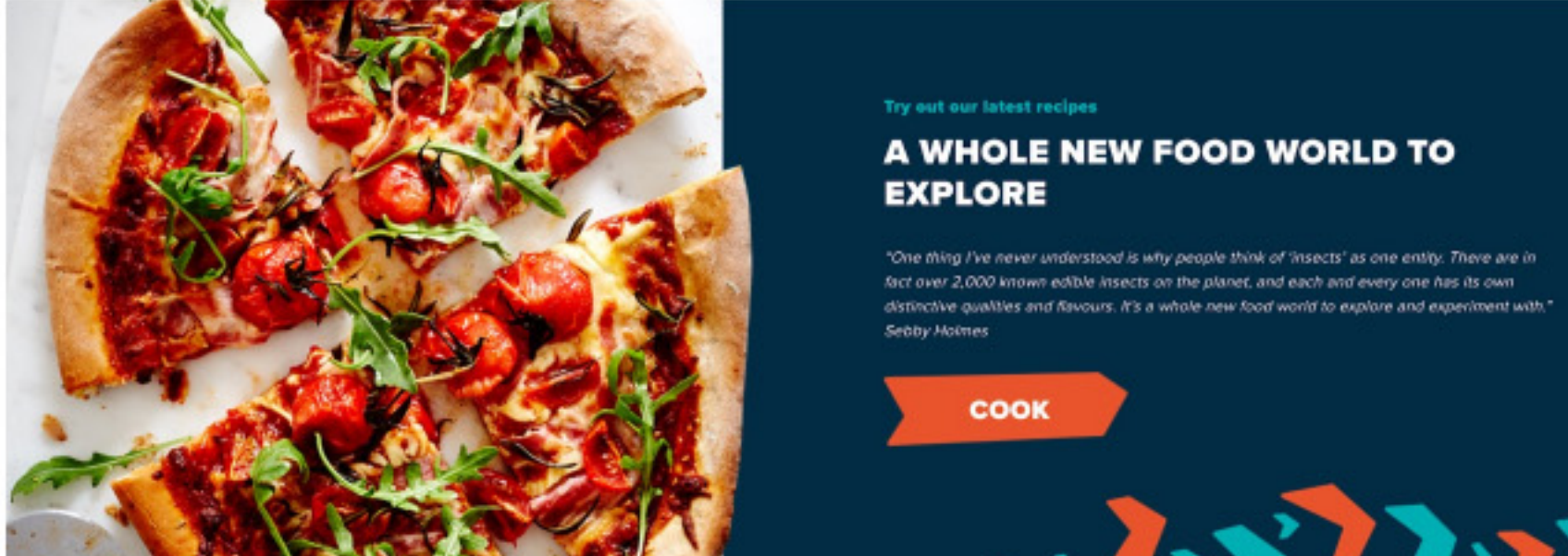
And insects genuinely are a superfood. They're high in protein, iron, calcium, zinc, omega-3 and 6, amino acids, and B12. According to Shami, it's the nutrition that gets people interested, not the sustainability, even though it's a much more environmentally-friendly option than livestock farming. "We're in this space where there is more awareness, and we're targeting that group," he says. "We're not going mass market. We need to conserve our energy and be smart and selling online allows us to do that."

The Business of Bugs

When Eat Grub first launched their online store, they chose WooCommerce because it was an affordable and accessible option for two budding entrepreneurs. Shami felt WordPress with WooCommerce was a straightforward platform for people like him who didn't code but understood how everything fit together.

While he admits early versions of their website were done on a shoestring budget, years of good content and savvy SEO optimization laid a solid foundation for Eat Grub's online presence. With such an unusual product, the messaging and content on their shop played a considerable role in increasing sales. With WordPress, it was easy to publish recipes and new blog posts educating customers on the world of cooking with bugs.

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After raising seed investment in 2017, they decided to redesign their site to bring the gastronomical and nutrition aspects of their business under one cohesive brand. Even with the opportunity for a fresh start, Neil and Shami decided to stay with WooCommerce. "We spent time deciding whether we wanted to use WooCommerce, Shopify, or design our bespoke website," he says. "In the end, given that we wanted to continue doing the blog and the recipes, we felt like WordPress and WooCommerce were still the best fit for us."
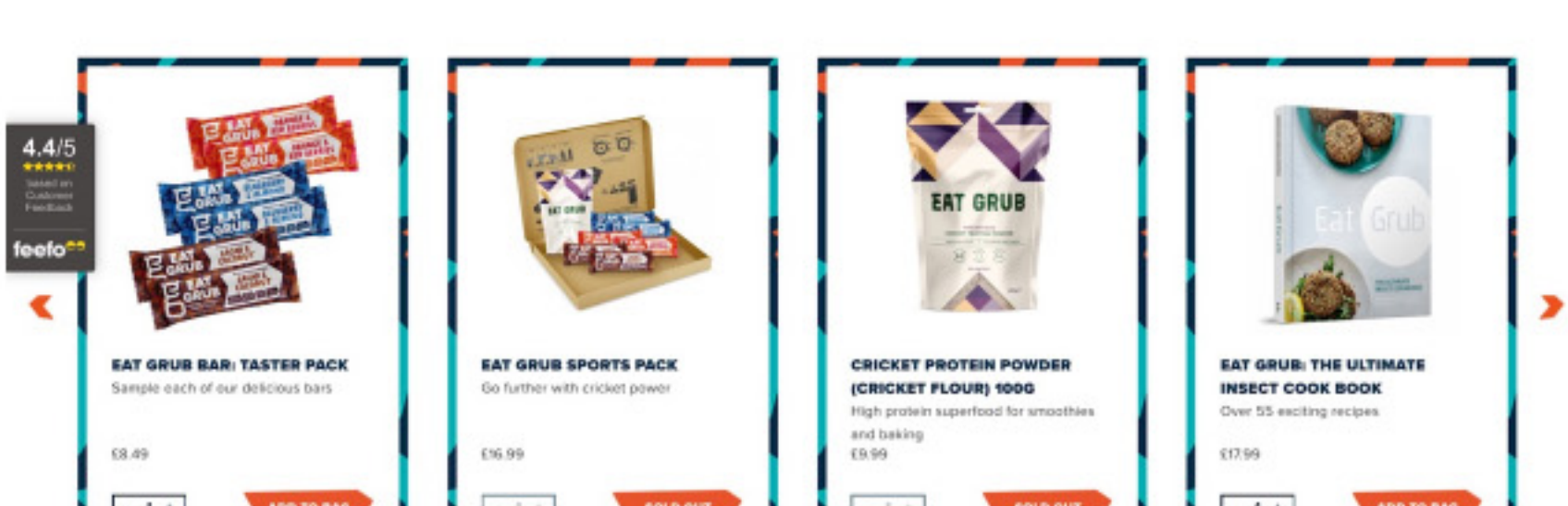
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The new design focused on the customer journey and crafting a user experience that would lead to more conversions. Eat Grub sells the ingredients for cooking, salty snacks, energy bars, and taster packs, allowing customers to have more choice about how they enter the market. By letting people self-identify as a foodie or as an adventurer, the products are filtered for a smoother shopping experience.
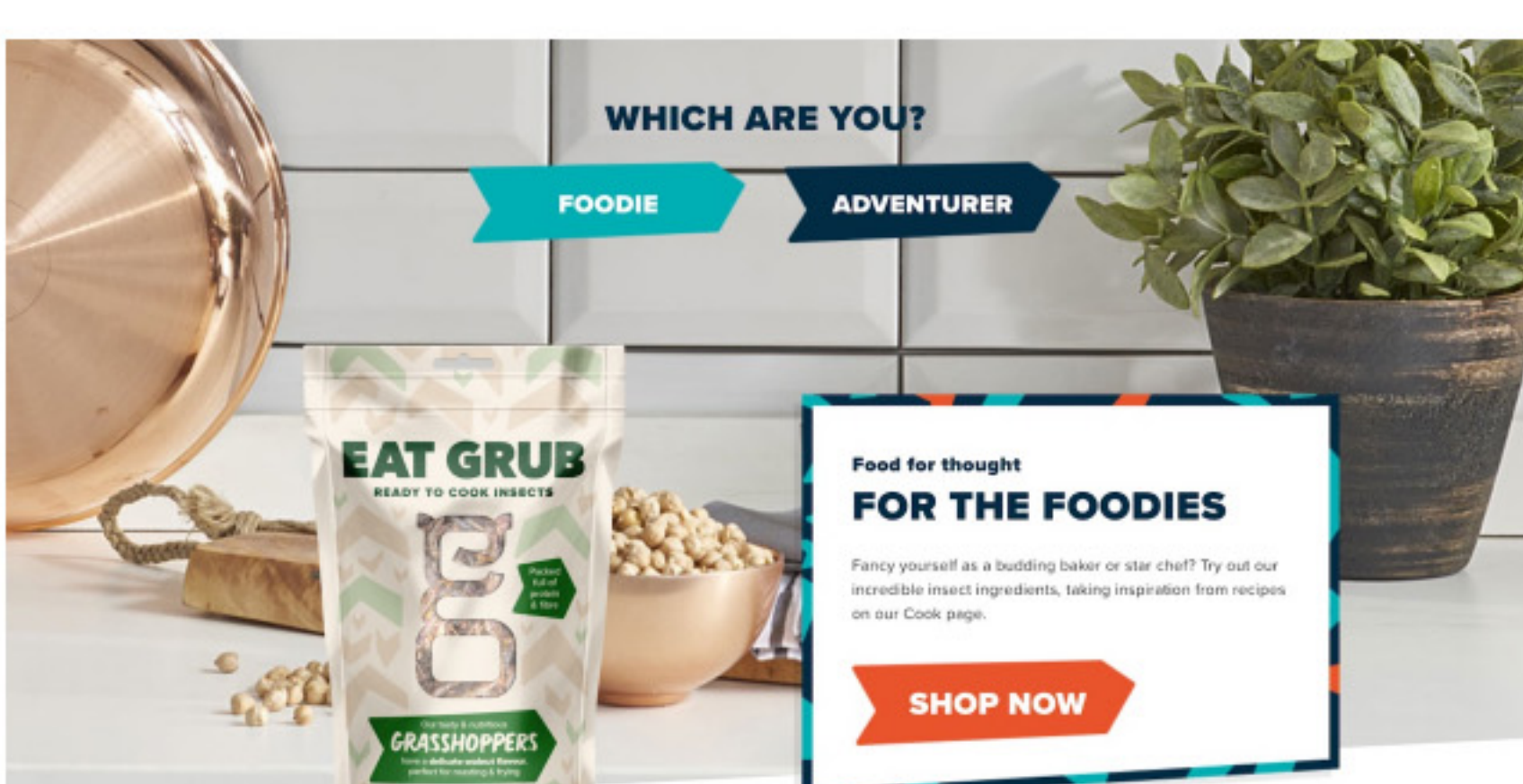
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This new approach has also informed their digital marketing strategy. By using lookalike audiences on Facebook, Shami and Neil are growing their customer base and are excited to try more display ads and pay-per-click advertisement. However, organic traffic still accounts for the bulk of their online traffic thanks to their cookbook and blog. Because of the healthy traffic that comes to their site, creating a beautiful and conversion-optimized WooCommerce shop is the focus of their online business.

The Eat Grub website uses many popular WooCommerce extensions and WordPress plugins to increase sales. They use bulk discounts, abandoned cart re-engagement emails with offers, and WordPress optimization tools like Smush and Yoast SEO. Shami is also a big believer in the power of customer reviews. "We use Feefo ratings because reviews inspire confidence, especially with something like edible insects," he says. "Next, we're looking into subscriptions, and we know there is a WooCommerce extension that will help us do that."

From Gateway Grub to Retail Presence

Through growing their business, Eat Grub has found a solid product-market fit. Their goods offer curious customers a gradual introduction to eating bugs from cricket protein – the so-called gateway grub, to cooking with dried worms. As their product evolved, their WooCommerce shop has become more sophisticated and allowed them to a/b test, keep track of results, analyze the data, and act quickly. "Testing is just made easier by WordPress and WooCommerce," says Shami.