

from graduate to founder: aelo swiss academy alumni who launched their own ventures

Every founder story gets a rinse before it reaches a stage. The garage becomes a legend, the first customer becomes a prophecy, and three years of eating discount pasta becomes "a period of intense focus". The alumni wall at AELO Swiss Academy tells a less choreographed version. It features people who incorporated late, pivoted early, priced badly at first, and occasionally cried in stairwells. It is, in other words, the honest cut.

What follows is a walk along that wall: five graduates, five ventures, and the patterns hiding underneath the noise. Some of these businesses are glamorous. None of them are what the founders pitched in their final module, which is arguably the most useful thing about them.

The overnight success, minus the overnight part

There is a persistent myth that entrepreneurship is a personality type, something you either have at birth or download from a TED talk at 2 a.m. The people who pass through AELO Swiss Academy tend to describe it differently. They talk about plumbing. Cash flow. Pricing. How to read a contract without a lawyer whispering in your ear. How to have the awkward conversation with a customer who has not paid you in 45 days and still expects you to smile at their Christmas party.

That is the part nobody puts on posters, and it is the part the academy drills hardest. The modules on market analysis are fine. The mock pitch sessions, where mentors are contractually obligated to be rude, are better. But the exercise that alumni mention most often, years later, is the one where you have to kill your own idea on paper before anyone else gets the chance to do it in public.

Five graduates took that exercise seriously enough to survive what came after. Here are their stories.

Five stories from one building

Miriam and the nineteen subscribers

Miriam came out of the hospitality track with a business plan so tidy it could have hung in a frame. Her idea: a meal-prep subscription for mountain athletes, called Alpine Fuel, delivering calorie-dense, lactose-free, altitude-friendly meals to trail runners and ski tourers across the region.

The plan survived eight months. The business did not. At peak, Alpine Fuel had nineteen subscribers, several of whom turned out to be the kind of people who burn four thousand calories a day and also insist on cooking everything themselves from raw ingredients they foraged personally. Miriam's target market, she discovered, did not want her food. They wanted her recipe cards.

The pivot arrived as an email. An office manager at a pharma company in Basel asked whether she could cater a lab away-day for sixty people. She could, and she did, and the invoice cleared in eleven days, which in her experience was suspiciously fast. Corporate catering was less romantic than feeding ultramarathoners, but it paid. Today her operation handles roughly sixty lunch deliveries a day and employs a team of eleven. Her summary of the journey is the best piece of market research advice the academy has on file: the market votes faster than your business plan, and it does not tell you before it votes.

Jonas, who consulted his way to a product

Jonas studied logistics and noticed that small freight forwarders ran their scheduling on a chaotic mix of whiteboards, phone calls, and one [flight training](#) WhatsApp group per driver. Everyone knew it was broken. Nobody wanted to buy enterprise software to fix it, because enterprise software prices start with an extra zero and a sales visit.

His workaround was unglamorous and, in hindsight, brilliant. He sold himself as a consultant first, at day rates, doing manual scheduling cleanups for forwarders. Nights and weekends, he built a small scheduling tool based on exactly what he was doing by hand. When a client asked if the tool could handle their full week, he charged them a modest monthly fee instead of a day rate. Three consulting clients converted to subscriptions. By the time he walked into the commercial register office to incorporate, he already had eleven paying customers.

He also undercharged by about a third for the first year, which he only learned when a client, over a beer, told him his rates were "embarrassingly reasonable". He fixed that at renewal. His lesson travels well: services fund products, and customers will write your roadmap for free if you sit close enough to listen.

Priya and Luca, co-founders by accident

Priya and Luca met in the same cohort and did not like each other at first, a fact they now tell at every networking event because it makes the story better. The original dispute was about the coffee machine, specifically whether decaf should be a permanent option or a punishment. The argument revealed something more useful than coffee preferences: Priya had spent years selling to retail buyers, and Luca had grown up running operations in his family's printing plant. She knew how to get meetings. He knew how to get things manufactured.

Their venture is a brokerage for compostable packaging, connecting Swiss chocolatiers and cosmetics brands with suppliers who can actually deliver what their marketing claims. Their first client was a Bern chocolate maker who wanted a box that would not outlive the chocolate inside it. That sounds simple. It was not. Compostable materials cost somewhere between 20 and 40 percent more than conventional ones, and shelf life questions get genuinely technical when your product contains cocoa butter. Priya and Luca survived by selling honesty: here is what the material can do, here is what it cannot, here is the honest price.

Margins are thin and the work is unglamorous, but the client list keeps growing. Their advice on co-founders has become academy folklore: test the chemistry before the notary, because the coffee machine argument was, in its way, the real due diligence.

Anouk and the eighteen-month day job

Anouk runs a small label making watch straps, and for the first eighteen months she ran it from an office chair, during lunch breaks and evenings, while holding a procurement job she describes as "profitable and soul-smooth". She sold at fairs in Basel and through an online store, and she learned the hard lesson every consumer brand learns: at 89 francs a strap, free shipping is not a marketing strategy, it is a slow leak. She moved to a flat shipping rate and watched her margins exhale.

The day job was not a distraction. It was her angel investor. It paid the rent while she made mistakes cheaply, learned wholesale terms from the buyer's side of the table, and waited until wholesale orders crossed about 300 units a month before resigning. She is unusually candid about this: not every founder needs to burn the boats. Some founders should keep one boat, moored, with a salary on it, until the new vessel demonstrably floats.

Theo, who never left the bakery

Theo is the alumni wall's quiet contradiction. He did not start a startup, raise funding, or move to a coworking space. He went back to his family's bakery and modernized it. Wholesale customers had ordered by phone for decades, and by fax well into an era when most people assumed faxes were a historical reenactment. Theo built a dead-simple online order form, added a basic route planner for deliveries, and gave his clients one week to adapt. All of them did.

Then he raised the price of a Gipfeli by 20 centimes. Nobody rioted. Revenue went up.

Is a digitized family bakery a founder story? The academy thinks so, and so do the banks. Theo has no pitch deck, but he has pricing power, loyal wholesale accounts, and a business that survived its founder's father. His contribution to the alumni wall is one sentence: boring is a moat.

The pattern in the carpet

Five very different ventures, and yet the overlaps are hard to miss once you lay the stories side by side.

| Venture | Sector | First real customer | Lesson in five words |

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| Corporate catering (pivoted) | Food service | Pharma away-day in Basel | The market votes first |

| Freight scheduling tool | Logistics software | A forwarder in Olten | Consult first, code second |

| Compostable packaging brokerage | Sustainable packaging | A Bern chocolatier | Sell honesty, not hype |

| Watch strap label | Consumer goods | A fair stall in Basel | Day jobs fund dreams |

| Family bakery, digitized | Food wholesale | The bakery's own clients | Boring is a moat |

Underneath the table sit five habits the academy now teaches on purpose, because the alumni kept demonstrating them by accident.

- They all sold something small before building something big, whether that was a day of consulting, a single catering gig, or a hundred straps sold from a folding table.
- None of them incorporated before at least one stranger agreed to pay them, which kept fixed costs near zero while the idea was still wet clay.
- Every one of them niched down harder than felt comfortable, from "packaging" to "compostable packaging for chocolate and cosmetics", from "food" to "lunches for Basel offices".
- They knew their numbers cold: contribution margin per strap, cost per delivery, the exact point where a subscription becomes profitable.
- They used the alumni network for boring things, like finding an accountant, a notary, and an introduction to a first buyer, rather than for applause.

That last habit deserves its own sentence. Networks are mostly marketed as sources of inspiration. In practice, the alumni who went somewhere used theirs like a phone book with opinions.



Paperwork, the Swiss national sport

No account of founding in Switzerland is complete without a respectful nod to the paperwork, which is not a hurdle here so much as a competitive discipline with regional leagues. The commercial register awaits. A limited company, the GmbH, asks for 20,000 francs in share capital. The AG, the full-stock variety, wants 100,000, of which at least half must be paid in before you can so much as print letterhead. Cross the 100,000-franc turnover threshold and VAT registration stops being optional, at a standard rate of 8.1 percent. Register as self-employed and the pension system, AHV, would like a word about contributions calibrated to your income.

The alumni have collective wisdom on all of it, and it rhymes. Book the notary the way you would book a popular restaurant, in advance and without drama. Hire an accountant before you believe you need one, because the cheapest hour of professional advice is the one that stops you improvising your tax position. And learn the local payment culture early: invoices on 30-day terms are standard, some large customers stretch further, and no amount of polite email accelerates a corporate accounts payable department. Jonas's solution is a masterpiece of calm persistence: he sends a friendly reminder on day 31, every time, as predictable as a train timetable. It works more often than it should.

What they would tell you over a coffee

Ask the five of them what a current student should do in the first ninety days after graduating, and the answers converge with suspicious speed. They disagree about everything else, including decaf, but on this they sound like a committee that actually https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/ met.

1. Find one customer who will pay real money, even if the product embarrasses you, because a paying stranger teaches more than a hundred compliments from friends.
2. Set your price higher than feels comfortable, then raise it again the first time a client accepts without blinking, which Anouk calls the cheapest market research available.
3. Write down what you will not do this year, and laminate it, because scope creep arrives dressed as opportunity and leaves dressed as burnout.
4. Put an accountant and a notary on speed dial before the money gets complicated, not after, since Swiss paperwork rewards the early and punishes the creative.

5. Keep the day job if it funds the mission, and quit only when the numbers, not the enthusiasm, tell you to walk.

Notice what is missing from that list. There is no advice about passion, no instruction to follow dreams, no mention of disrupting anything. The alumni reserve such language for panel discussions, where it is harmless, like fireworks.

The part nobody puts on a poster