

SIDE KICKS: SUSTAINABLE FOOD INNOVATION FROM WASTE

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Abstract

This report outlines the internationalization strategy for Side Kicks, a sustainable food startup transforming food waste into nutritious snacks. The brand currently focuses on producing chips from dehydrated potato peels, with future plans to diversify into other fruit and vegetable by-products. This document highlights Side Kicks' communication, operational, and resource strategies, evaluates internal and external factors through a SWOT analysis, and proposes solutions to mitigate risks. It concludes with a business model canvas tailored to global expansion and long-term impact.

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INTRODUCTION

Food waste is one of the most pressing sustainability challenges of our time. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), approximately one-third of all food produced globally is wasted (FAO, 2013). Side Kicks was founded to tackle this issue by upcycling edible by-products from the agri-food sector into healthy, flavorful snacks.

Operating from Romania, the startup benefits from the founder's European training in food identity, meat and dairy processing, and entrepreneurial experience in organic agriculture. The flagship product is a crispy, nutrient-rich chip made from dehydrated potato peels — a high-volume waste stream from the food industry. The company aims to expand its market reach internationally, leveraging sustainability, innovation, and storytelling as core drivers of brand value.

This paper provides a structured roadmap for global growth with emphasis on product development, communication strategies, and business model evolution.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The foundation of the Side Kicks product line lies in innovative food upcycling and sustainable processing. The materials used for product development are primarily derived from post-production food waste, particularly potato peels sourced from certified vegetable processors.

These peels are collected under hygienic conditions and are screened to ensure they meet food safety standards. Complementary ingredients, such as spices, herbs, and natural flavor enhancers, are carefully selected from local organic suppliers to preserve the health-focused nature of the product.

Packaging plays a critical role not just in preserving the product, but also in communicating the brand's values. Compostable and biodegradable food-grade sachets are used, equipped with QR codes that lead consumers to a transparent breakdown of sourcing, nutritional data, and environmental impact. These interactive packaging elements support traceability and brand engagement.

Product development is grounded in scientific food processing methods. The peels are washed, sliced, and processed using low-temperature dehydration and air-drying to retain nutrients while achieving crisp texture. Various prototypes were tested with adjustments in drying time,

seasoning blends, and slice thickness to optimize sensory qualities. Consumer testing involved diverse participant groups to assess palatability, packaging design, and sustainability perception.

The founder's educational experience in France played a pivotal role in building expertise. Training programs at CETA and Espoir Jus de Fruits equipped the team with essential knowledge on hygiene practices,

labeling regulations, and scalable food production techniques. Practical exposure in dairy, juice, and meat processing helped translate concepts into actionable systems for Side Kicks' operations.

Communication planning was conducted using SWOT analysis frameworks (Gurel & Tat, 2017), competitor benchmarking, and collaborative design sessions. Resources were assessed through templates that measured staff readiness, material sourcing, communication capacity, and potential risk areas. Internationalization simulation exercises, including mock trade fairs and export document preparation, were also completed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

SWOT Analysis

The SWOT analysis reveals the internal and external conditions influencing Side Kicks' international expansion. Among its strengths is the clear environmental value proposition: using waste to create nutritious snacks that cater to both health-conscious and eco-aware consumers. Operationally, the use of low-cost, readily available raw materials such as potato peels gives the company a competitive edge. Further, the founder's interdisciplinary training and the lean, agile structure allow for responsive decision-making and low overhead.

However, weaknesses include an incomplete visual identity, limited capacity for large-scale production, and insufficient experience with export regulations. These are compounded by financial constraints and a heavy reliance on freelancers for branding and communications.

Opportunities in the external environment are promising. The rise of circular economy principles and plant-based diets, supported by EU grants and global sustainability programs, create fertile ground for Side Kicks to thrive. Participation in trade shows, co-marketing with like-minded brands, and digital-first customer engagement strategies further enhance growth potential.

Threats include regulatory compliance challenges, particularly related to food labeling and packaging in various jurisdictions. Consumer perception also poses a risk, as "peel-based" products may require educational marketing to overcome skepticism. Lastly, the startup must navigate inflation, competition, and global logistics disruptions.

Strategies to Overcome Weaknesses and Threats

Following the SWOT analysis, it is essential to address the identified internal weaknesses and external threats that could hinder Side Kicks' international growth. The

THE BUSINESS MODEL CANVAS - SIDE KICKS "CONVERTING TRASH INTO TASTY"



strategies outlined below aim to provide structured, actionable solutions to ensure the company remains resilient and competitive.

Overcoming Internal Weaknesses

a. **Incomplete Visual Identity.** To strengthen brand presence, Side Kicks can collaborate with university design departments or engage emerging freelance designers through startup competitions or partnerships. Establishing comprehensive brand guidelines will also ensure consistency across platforms.

b. **Limited Capacity for Large-Scale Production.** To manage production scale-up, Side Kicks can enter into agreements with co-manufacturing units or utilize shared commercial kitchens. This phased approach allows testing of demand before investing in proprietary infrastructure.

c. **Insufficient Experience with Export Regulations.** Building expertise in international trade can be achieved by participating in EU-funded programs, working with specialized consultants, and utilizing resources such as the Enterprise Europe Network. These efforts will provide necessary knowledge and networks for smooth market entry.

d. **Financial Constraints.** To address limited funding, Side Kicks should apply for sustainability-oriented grants, launch crowdfunding campaigns, and participate in startup pitch events. A lean business model that emphasizes cost control and small-scale testing can also extend financial runway.

e. **Dependence on Freelancers for Branding and Communications.** While freelancers provide flexibility, Side Kicks should consider hiring a part-time communications specialist or marketing intern. Establishing internal content processes and templates can improve efficiency and brand consistency.

Overcoming External Threats

a. **Regulatory Compliance Challenges.** To navigate diverse food labeling and safety regulations, Side Kicks should engage food compliance consultants familiar with key European and international markets. Initial focus should be placed on markets with favorable regulations for upcycled products.

b. **Consumer Perception of Peel-Based Products.** Educating consumers through transparent, engaging storytelling is crucial. This includes sharing the product's nutritional benefits, environmental impact, and sourcing practices. Collaborating with eco-conscious

influencers and chefs can enhance credibility and appeal.

c. **Inflation and Cost Volatility.** Mitigation strategies include securing fixed-rate contracts with suppliers, sourcing locally to reduce import costs, and adopting a dynamic pricing model. Offering value-based product tiers can help maintain customer accessibility during inflationary periods.

d. **Competitive Market Environment.** Side Kicks can differentiate itself by emphasizing its environmental mission, unique ingredient sourcing, and traceable production methods. Targeting specific niche segments (e.g., zero-waste, vegan, health-conscious consumers) will help in standing out from generic snack brands.

e. **Global Logistics Disruptions.** To reduce dependency on complex international supply chains, Side Kicks can initially prioritize regional markets and direct-to-consumer (D2C) e-commerce. Diversifying logistics providers and maintaining safety stock will help absorb potential disruptions.

The detailed resource analysis illustrates a comprehensive strategy for international growth. Human resources, though limited, can be effectively expanded through targeted hiring. Material requirements remain accessible but require supplier diversification for consistency. Equipment needs are significant but manageable through phased upgrades.

Communication costs, the largest line item, reflect the strategic emphasis on localized content and omnichannel engagement. Event participation will boost brand credibility and create valuable networking opportunities, particularly when accessed via startup clusters or shared pavilions.

Consumer feedback supports the feasibility of the product. Taste tests suggest high acceptability, especially when paired with effective storytelling about food waste reduction. Branding trials indicate strong resonance with eco-conscious millennials and Gen Z consumers.

Recommendations

To strengthen Side Kicks' readiness for international expansion, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Develop a multilingual brand identity toolkit, including packaging, digital content, and

compliance templates, to facilitate smoother entry into non- English-speaking markets.

2. Form partnerships with sustainability incubators and government-supported programs to access funding, mentorship, and co-exhibition opportunities at international trade fairs.

3. Establish a phased marketing strategy that begins with high-potential EU markets like France and Germany, and gradually expands

based on distributor feedback and customer engagement metrics.

4. Invest in automation tools for dehydration and packaging to increase production capacity while maintaining quality.

5. Leverage ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) reporting practices in communication strategies to appeal to value-driven investors and retailers.

CONCLUSIONS

Side Kicks offers an innovative solution to two converging global concerns: food waste and the demand for nutritious, transparent snack products. Its circular economy foundation and practical approach to product development give it a distinct advantage in both European and global markets. Challenges such as limited resources and regulatory complexity are significant but surmountable with strategic partnerships, structured investment, and proactive planning.

This report confirms that with careful execution; Side Kicks is positioned to evolve from a local experiment into a sustainable international brand. We would like to express our deepest gratitude to Erasmus Mundus project and the Master Food Identity Program for making this journey possible. We are particularly grateful to the Department of Economic Sciences for their guidance through the different courses, in particular to Professor Dr. Felix Arion and colleagues for their constant encouragement and constructive

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