

Father and son roll out national 'Uber for laundry' concept

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As a teenager, Nachshon Fertel co-founded a business that grew out of the piles of laundry his mother did for her family of seven in Pikesville.

His mom, Ari Fertel, spent way too many hours washing, drying and folding. She challenged her son, then a high school sophomore with a knack for technology, to reimagine the time-consuming chore. She envisioned a laundry service version of Uber. He created a [mobile app](#).

SudShare, which the teen launched four years ago with his father, an entrepreneur, now has customers in 400 cities who pay other people to wash their clothes. The service employs an army of gig-economy contractors, paid by the pound, to wash those clothes in their home laundry rooms.

"Our competition is your washer and dryer," said Mort Fertel, Nachshon Fertel's father and SudShare's CEO. "The vision is to change America's experience with laundry and to make the washer and dryer obsolete."

Why do laundry, he said, when you can "just tap the app, take the laundry bag and put it on your patio and you're done."

Like Uber, SudShare works through a scheduling app and on-demand pickup—of laundry, that is. For \$1 per pound and a \$20 minimum, customers can leave bags of clothes at their doors to be picked up, washed, dried, folded and delivered the next day.

The contractors who take on laundry jobs, called "Sudsters," can accept or decline work in their communities as they see fit. The company says it has 54,000 contractors in cities and towns across the U.S. who earn 75 cents, plus tips, on the dollar. SudShare keeps the rest.

Doing laundry has changed little since the automatic washing machine debuted in middle-class homes in the 1950s, but the Fertels believe the timing for an app-based laundry delivery service is right. Consumers use app-based services to pay others to grocery shop, deliver meals from restaurants and drive them places, and the coronavirus pandemic

accelerated those trends.

During the health crisis, people found themselves reevaluating how they spend their time, and "I don't know too many people wanting to spend it doing laundry," Mort Fertel said.

And gig workers are increasingly available. At least one in four workers were already part of the growing independent gig economy before COVID-19, with many looking to set their own hours, work from home or offset losses in other income.

During 2020, grocery and meal delivery on gig platforms soared, according to a February study on the post-pandemic economy by McKinsey Global Institute. The report also showed that amid layoffs, more than half of Uber drivers surveyed said driving had become the biggest or at least a significant source of income.

Joy Poole, a 38-year-old Middle River resident, started SudShare gig work last year after her hours at Middle River Aerostructure Systems were reduced at the start of the pandemic. She lost not only regular hours but also the overtime she counted on, and needed the extra income. Now she works at the plant by night, installing parts for Boeing 747 aircraft engines, and washes clothes for customers at home by day.

Poole's sister told her about SudShare, and it appealed to her because she always has enjoyed doing laundry for herself and her son and daughter.

"It's like a hobby, almost," she said. "Once my hours picked up at work, I couldn't stop. I became used to it and had gained relationships with customers."

The app lets customers request particular "Sudsters" and rate them. Poole said she gets a lot of requests and accepts about two jobs per day,

which vary in load size. Poole said she has customers of all ages, families, single people and even an Airbnb business.

"I definitely think it's a good idea," said Marie Yeh, an associate professor of marketing at Loyola University Maryland's Sellinger School of Business and Management. "I think it can work for the right consumer. There are going to be some consumers who aren't going to like that idea of people touching your clothes."

But she can see it appealing to others, such as busy professionals who rely on shared laundry facilities or laundromats. A key, she believes, will be finding ways to retain enough reliable contractors to meet demand.

Nachshon Fertel, one of a set of 20-year-old triplets among the family's five children, all home-schooled through eighth grade by their mom, was finishing 10th grade when his mother approached him with her laundry idea. His father saw a business opportunity and funded it.

"I've always looked for ways to help my parents, and I hated doing laundry," said Nachshon Fertel, who taught himself to build mobile apps with the help of Google and wanted to "help my parents and help the world."

He spent about a year building a test version of the app, then another year perfecting the live version, all while attending a Jewish boarding high school with his triplet brother Moshe Fertel in Norfolk, Virginia.

"We raised our children to believe that you can learn anything, and you don't have to go to school to do it," said their father. "All the information is right at your fingertips. He really got that."

By his senior year, Nachshon would attend classes in the morning and work on the business in the afternoon, earning science credits developing

the app.

SudShare started in Baltimore, with the family initially doing laundry for clients. They began signing up contractors, then repeated the process in an expansion to several East Coast cities. This year, the business took off, and the service now is offered in most urban areas in the U.S., with expected annual revenue of at least \$5 million. (The private company does not disclose specific sales figures.)

Based on Falls Road, the company has 19 employees, including family members. More than a year ago, Moshe Fertel joined as director of operations, handling customer service, hiring, training and marketing. Their triplet sister, Shira, is a bookkeeper. An older son, 24, is not involved in the business.

The family lives part time in Pikesville and part time in Salt Lake City, where a 12-year-old daughter attends a violin program.

Jennifer Cudek discovered SudShare when she was looking for someone to launder towels and bed linens for a nine-bedroom Airbnb she manages in Mount Vernon. She was looking to replace a previous commercial laundry service that hadn't been able to make deliveries on time. Though SudShare primarily serves individual residences, Cudek said its fees and promise of next-day delivery made it the best fit.

"I strip the linens and towels, bag them up and go on the app and place the order with however many bags," Cudek said. "I've been using the same 'Sudster' for about a month, who I really like."

The app is straightforward, the 22-year-old Baltimore resident said.

"I prefer using apps for that kind of stuff," she said.

The Fertels say some people may be hesitant about entrusting personal laundry to strangers. But Uber faced similar skepticism at first, too, they argue. Eventually, said Mort Fertel, the [laundry](#) app will become mainstream as well.

"Eventually, efficiency and quality wins," he said. "At the end of the day people do not want to waste hours a day washing and folding underwear when someone will do it for them."

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