

MAKING WAVES IN BUSINESS

A FEATURE ON OU ENTREPRENEURS

There are so many entrepreneurial OUs independently paving their way to success in their chosen industry by designing, launching and running their own businesses. In this issue we celebrate a few success stories and hope to inspire others to take the plunge by showcasing some amazing companies driven by OUs following their passions.

Claret Showroom

We interviewed Claire Spencer-Churchill and Alex Lyles (both J 96), owners of Claret Showroom, a fashion brand distribution agency (covering Europe) and founders of Splash Paris, a premium resort wear trade show. The feature offers an insight into Alex and Claire's business relationship, friendship and above all life at the helm of a fashion agency.

Firstly, let's take it back to your days at Uppingham; what are your fondest memories of the School?

Alex – I want to say the beautiful buildings, expansive playing fields and exceptional facilities but in fact it was the evenings of laughing until I cried with friends in my house. Claire and I actually had rooms across the corridor from each other. We turned our desks to face into the corridor and propped our doors open so we could chat during prep. We persuaded Mr Broughton it was a Feng Shui-based move and was good for the mind! Funny that our desks are now even closer.

What one thing did you learn at School that you think has been invaluable in your success so far?

Alex – Not so much something I learnt, but gained, was confidence. Uppingham was like an un-pop-able bubble. Life after school is far from that of course, but I benefited from an underlying 'can-do' mind-set which has helped a lot.

Have you always been involved with fashion?

Alex – I have, but for me, it's more the thrill of running a company than the fashion itself. Although I can't complain, it's very useful having a showroom of clothes to borrow from when I need to!

What planted the seed for Claret Showroom? And how long was it from ideas and concept to opening the doors?

Claire – Claret Showroom was launched with two brands and grew to eight over three years. The tables turned when we won a contract to have the EU distribution rights to a large Australian brand, Zimmermann. From here the business snowballed and over the following two years we grew this to 10 brands and opened a pop-up showroom in Paris during Fashion Week. We now have 15 brands and a permanent showroom in Paris. We work as distributors across Europe and the Middle East with a warehouse outside London and a bonded facility in Holland. In 2016 we launched Splash Paris which is Europe's only Luxury Resortwear Tradeshow. There are 18 of us in the team and Alex and I are entering our 12th year of running it.

What have been your greatest and toughest moments setting up the business?

Claire – Thankfully we were fairly young and naïve when we launched Claret Showroom so were blissfully unaware as to the challenges we were going to face along the way. Maintaining such a great friendship with Alex and launching Splash have been personal highlights.

Do you have any links with other OUs in the fashion industry?

Claire – Laura May (née Woolley) (J 94) who ran Chloe in Asia and Becks Sainthill (Fd 96) who works for Ronnie Newhouse are both friends.

Alex – My husband's uncle, Nick Fryer (M 76), set up Gun Hill Clothing. They have boutiques in East Anglia and their own brand too. Also Tom Glover (VD 93) of Peregrine Clothing. It's interesting comparing notes and a nice way to keep in touch.

What skill-set do you think you need to become an entrepreneur?

Claire – Decisiveness, willpower and persistence as well as a great partner. Alex and I have been so lucky to have each other. Without Uppingham that would never have happened.

What do you enjoy most about working for yourselves?

Claire – The exciting challenges it surprises us with, both good and bad. Opportunities come much more frequently than if you were in a set role and I love the variation that brings. You often look back at the end of the year and think 'who'd have thought that would have happened!'

Can you give us a run-down of a typical day at Claret Showroom?

Claire – Every day is different. Our world is very cyclical so, depending on the time of year, we can be thick in selling seasonal collection; organising our trade show, Splash Paris; speaking with new brands to potentially represent them; setting projections; navigating our way through some currency trading or helping brands streamline their distribution process.

If you could give one piece of advice to your 'School self' what would it be?

Claire – When you first enter the work place, be humble, hard-working and learn everything you can.

Alex – Get as much work experience under your belt during the holidays as you can find time for. Your CV will stand out to employers if you can show you are a grafter and you will learn skills that no school can teach. One less Ibiza holiday next summer will be worth it!

To read all of Claire and Alex's interview responses, please visit the news page of the OU website.



- entrepreneur -

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NOUN

A person who sets up a business or businesses, taking on financial risks in the hope of profit.

Lylie's

www.lylies.com

The UN estimates that nearly 50m tonnes of electronic waste will be generated around the world in 2018. Electronic mining – the process of extracting gold, silver, copper and other materials from discarded electronics is growing in response to the ever-expanding landfill sites bursting with old phones, tablets, computers, etc.

Lylie's founder, **Eliza 'Lylie' Walter (J 09)**, launched the brand in October 2017 and she is currently the only jeweller in the UK sourcing such material for her collections. Since the launch, her business has gone from strength-to-strength, already being awarded a hallmark by the London Assay Office.

On the subject of salvaging metals she said: "The potential in the e-mining industry is huge, a tonne of circuit boards contains 30 times more gold than the same weight of ore. Aside from this, the extraction process has far lower environmental impact and social costs than traditional mining techniques." That said, extraction is slow and in order to make it environmentally friendly and financially viable, large quantities of waste must be mined simultaneously.

Lylie's talents certainly aren't restricted to paving the way to a more environmentally-friendly approach to jewellery design, she creates bespoke pieces for clients ensuring that her materials, metals or stones, are sourced from recycled antique pieces.



Photo credit –
Christian Cargill
(LH 06)

She hopes in the future that it becomes normal for a customer, when considering the purchase of fine jewellery, to send unworn pieces as well as broken bits to be exchanged for credit against a new piece.

Lylie's advice for anyone wishing to join the jewellery industry:

- Be pushy. If you need to email that supplier for the fifth day in a row, do it.
- Find something to de-stress. For me it is running and long baths.
- Support from mentors has been invaluable and absolutely key to the ongoing positive evolution of the business.



Ember Snacks

www.embersnacks.com

In September 2017, hungry brothers **Jack (Fgh 02)** and **Harry (Hf 04)** **Mayhew** took a leap of faith and quit their respective jobs in the food and beverage industry to launch Ember. A combined love for quality food and competitive sports brought biltong, a popular South African meat snack, to the brothers' attention. For regular triathlon racers, air-dried slices of silverside beef came across as a tempting source of protein and a satisfying alternative to the sugar-heavy products which saturated the healthy snacking supermarket aisles.

Having spotted a gap in the market, the British-sourced biltong brand successfully secured retail listings in Waitrose, Sainsbury's and Ocado within its first 11 months. Already capturing the pub industry and ambitious to maximize its online sales, Ember is currently undergoing its second investment raise which is off to a flying start.



MediaDevil

www.mediadevil.com

In 2009, **Callum Bush (WB 99)** founded MediaDevil – an innovative company producing high quality, handcrafted accessories for phones, tablets and laptops – and in 2011 Vince Cable awarded the company the UK Department of Trade & Investment's 2011 Business Innovation Award.

One of Callum's key objectives was recently realised, with the majority of the MediaDevil products now produced, finished or personalised at its headquarters in Wimbledon.

As the business has grown and developed, production for other brands has become a key part of operations, and the company makes a range of goods for a number of internationally known British and French luxury fashion brands. It also manufactures and drop-ships screen protector films and personalised phone cases for a UK high street retailer.

Having focused the business on product quality and customer experience in the past nine years, for 2019, Callum has turned his attention to market-leading innovation, and recently announced an exclusive rights partnership with the world's leading (British) manufacturer of the super-material, graphene, which is expected to revolutionise the materials industry. The agreement covers the technology accessory and audio product sectors and is being promoted by the UK Department of International Trade. The first product, a set of earphones that introduces premium-level audio at a mass-market price, will be released during Winter 2018/19. Further products will follow in 2019.



MEDIADEVIL
LONDON

Countrybike

www.countrybike.co.uk

Tim (LH 87) and **Suzy Seddon (Fd 90)** are behind a brand-new mobile app-based bike hire business which operates at venues across Kent and East Sussex called Countrybike. Their goal is to make bike hire more accessible to people in the countryside whilst supporting local rural businesses, getting more people into cycling and encouraging more visitors to the area.

So far, their bikes are available at 10 venues ranging from local tourist attractions like castles, through to farm shops and village pubs located close to off-road cycle routes. Tim and Suzy are great advocates for the benefits of cycling for all the family, with time spent away from screens and exercising in the open air promoting improvements to health and wellbeing.

The business has received great coverage in the local press and BBC radio channels for Kent and Sussex. Countrybike is now set to expand further with many more venues wanting to host the bikes locally and beyond. If you know of any places crying out for bike hire, Tim and Suzy would love to hear from you, email hello@countrybike.co.uk.



Ethical Angel



www.ethicalangel.com

In September, **Alexander Fahie (F 02)** and his team launched Ethical Angel – a social enterprise with a mission to redefine 'business as usual', by connecting businesses, employees and the charitable causes that matter to them. It has won praise from the United Nations Association UK, amongst others, for providing a mechanism that embeds purpose within a business through the social engagement of their employees.

It's a tough time for the UK's 165,000 charities where an increase in demand for their services has not been matched by private and public funding. Alex says, "Ethical Angel's initiative is not just beneficial for the charity, but hugely so for participating businesses as well. Beyond the advantages of positive marketing, it cultivates an environment that offers employees an emotionally rewarding experience. Connecting staff members to charitable work gives them a greater understanding of societal problems (and how to solve them); it develops skills; and, most importantly, nurtures a feel-good factor in the workplace."

All of which have been proven to result in higher staff retention and productivity." Ethical Angel shows businesses the return on their social investment, through data-rich reporting.

Charles Bowman (WD 75), the 690th Lord Mayor of London, has a common passion for the philanthropic services businesses have to offer and has met Alex and endorsed the initiative, appreciating the value of incorporating charitable work into business.

For more information email alexander@ethicalangel.com.



Alex Fahie (F 02) with Charles Bowman (WD 75)

If you have set up your own business and would like to tell the OU community about it, please drop us a line on ou@uppingham.co.uk.