

Meet SunGod, the B Corp direct-to-consumer eyewear brand that sees things differently

As part of our quick fire questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Zoe Watkiss, cofounder of SunGod about crowdfunding, lifetime guarantees, doing things differently and getting people to See Better.

Temps de lecture : minute

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My husband Ali and I met at Manchester University. Post-uni, we were both working in London, Ali in architecture and me in marketing at L'Oreal. Ali was feeling uninspired (this was 2008 and nothing was getting built in London!) and I was feeling overworked... between us we were in real need of a change!

We were always looking for ways to spend more time outdoors, whether that was in the mountains, on bikes or just on two feet. We had started a Winter bobble hat company called Hats for the Hill on the side of our day jobs, which was great fun but highly seasonal! We started looking at ways we could make this year round and our attention turned to the summer season and eyewear. It became very clear, very quickly, that the market was only offering expensive designer sunglasses that came with huge mark-ups, or cheap £10 knock-offs that broke in a few wears. We believed we could create something better - a brand that offered more - and so we took matters into our own hands and SunGod was born!

We wanted to create a brand with the customer at its heart. Through cutting out the middleman and going direct to consumer, we were able to

offer durable, lifetime guarantee-backed custom sunglasses and ski goggles, all for a fairer price for our customer.

Tell me about the business - what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

SunGod has grown into one of the world's leading performance eyewear brands, and is a *certified B Corp*. We're driven by our mission to See Better; through our lenses, through our actions, and through doing business better. To see a better future, we're building a business that's better for our customers, with better performing products, that are better for the planet. From our market-leading lens materials, to our Carbon Neutral products; from our charity partnerships, to our Lifetime Guarantee; we've chosen to do things differently....

From Day 1, we've adopted a direct-to-consumer approach - this gives us more control over our relationships with customers and our supply chain, and helps us to deliver an unrivalled customer experience. As part of this, all our products are covered by our Lifetime Guarantee, which aims to keep gear in play instead of throwing it away. To date, we've repaired over 6,000 pairs of sunglasses and goggles free of charge.

We're a community-built brand, fuelled by a global tribe of the world's best athletes, ambassadors and charities, who test our products at the very highest level. These include the INEOS Grenadiers (winners of 7 of the last 11 editions of the Tour de France), England Rugby, McLaren F1 Team, and Surfers Against Sewage, to name a few. With them, our mission is multiplied, and together we aim to See Better.

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

After 6 months of working with manufacturers and product testing, we launched a crowdfunding campaign in 2013, with a target to sell 400 pairs of sunglasses. Within one month we had sold nearly 4,000 pairs and from this we were able to fund our first production run with the money from the pre-orders! Looking back on it, we probably wouldn't have been able to go into production if we'd only sold 400, but it was a record for the platform at a time where crowdfunding was a new and exciting way for brands to test the market. It also gave us a hugely engaged, loyal and global customer base from day one, many of whom are still customers today!

It was just the two of us from then until 2015 when we took on our first employee, and so we had to work smart and be super focussed on what we were working on. In the first few years, Ali used his architecture skills to lead on product design and operations, and I used my marketing and commercial background as a grounding to drive the business. Beyond that, it was a lot of trial and error and hard graft... particularly in the early days when we were building and shipping all the products ourselves! Now, we have a team of over 20 split between offices in London and Verbier.

How are you funded?

We've been funded by our crowd since Day 1.

We launched a product crowdfunding campaign on Indiegogo in 2013, with a target to sell 350 pairs of SunGods. We were taken aback by the response, and we instead sold 3,500 pairs, with over 2,000 backers, generating over £80,000 in pre-orders. We then ran a Kickstarter

campaign in 2016 to launch ski goggles into our range (£134K, 1431 backers, 2000 pairs).

This was followed up with Crowdcube in 2020. Until this point we were completely self-funded with re-invested profits, but we were getting to a point where we felt restricted and unable to say yes to bigger opportunities coming our way. We raised £1.5M from our community (1,004 investors) in just 24 hours. Since this raise we've tripled our revenue and increased our valuation by 166%.

In November 2022, we launched the 2022 Vision Raise, to accelerate our growth and fuel the next stage of SunGod's journey. We aimed to raise £1M, and had an investment cap of £3M. Over 10,000 people pre-registered to gain early access to the raise, which offered our community the chance to own a piece of SunGod's future, from just £25. So, we were expecting things to move fast, but nothing could have prepared us for the overwhelming response we received! The response from our community was nothing short of incredible. We smashed our £1M target and went on to reach our cap of £3M and close the round in just 79 minutes, at 200% overfunded with over 1,000 new investors.

We've worked hard to build a really strong community of customers, ambassadors and athletes who we know are highly engaged, but seeing these people put their money into our 2022 Vision Raise means so much more. It's proof that our community genuinely believes in what we're doing: our mission, our products, and our way of doing business. We can't wait to put their investment to good use - the hard work continues and the next exciting chapter starts now.

What has been your biggest challenge so far

and how have you overcome this?

A low point has to be back in the early years when our fulfilment partner walked out on us the week before Christmas, in the face of being overloaded with orders. Each pair of SunGods is built by hand to order, so when we were left without a fulfilment team, with thousands of Christmas orders to build, it was a pretty terrifying situation. We had to rope in all the friends and family we could, to sit in a Big Yellow storage container and build orders over Christmas. Definitely not the most festive experience... But one we learnt from. It taught us that our relationships with suppliers and fulfilment teams are absolutely vital - they need to be bought into our mission just as much as our own employees.

How does SunGod answer an unmet need?

When founding the business, we were frustrated by what the existing eyewear market had to offer; either expensive designer sunglasses that came with huge mark-ups, or cheap £10 knock-offs that broke in a few wears. We thought we could do something better, so we took matters into our own hands.

We wanted to create a direct-to-consumer, digital-led eyewear brand that would cut out the middleman, and allow us to offer high-quality, fairly priced sunglasses and ski goggles straight to our customers. By saving money on bricks and mortar and third-party distributors, we were able to offer durable, lifetime guarantee-backed custom products, all for a fairer price for our customer.

A decade later, we're really proud of what SunGod has become: a global brand built on innovation and community.



What's in store for the future?

We've got a detailed plan for what we'll do with our recent investment. Partnerships play a key role; the investment will allow us to work with even bigger and better partners, to put SunGod in front of new, highly engaged audiences, and work with more World Champion athletes and teams to further enhance our products and prove their performance on the world stage.

We also plan to expand overseas, with a particular focus on the US. As a British brand, our focus so far has been on establishing ourselves in our home market, and we're excited to look beyond and explore new markets. We also have plans to launch the SunGod Foundation, which will allow us to maximise the impact of our charitable giving.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

Take the time to pause and reflect. When you're passionate about building a brand with meaning and always striving to be better, this brings with it the challenge of knowing when to take a step back and press pause. I think striving for that balance is a continual work in progress, and something I've really had to work on!

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

With two small children and a fast-growing business, life is hectic and my daily routine is massively varied. Luckily we have a very flexible approach to work here - we don't have set office hours, and the team are encouraged to make their job work around their life, not the other way around. I get to benefit from this just as much as the rest of the team! It's pretty normal for mine and Ali's daily routine to involve changing nappies, meeting with investors, catching up with the team on projects, and doing the school run - all in one morning...

At the moment, one rule we're trying to live by is knowing when to say no. We're putting a lot of focus on figuring out what we're not going to do, as much as what we are going to do, to help us avoid distractions. We have a bright, young, ambitious team brimming with ideas, and as the brand grows, more and more opportunities are coming our way. These are both incredible assets, but we're collectively trying to press pause and reflect on our ideas more, to figure out where the value lies. As a small team, we can't do everything at once - learning what'll have the biggest impact (and when) is key to success.

Zoe Watkiss is the cofounder of SunGod.

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