

Meet Kuroa, for low-impact, planet-friendly and stylish products for the home

As part of our quick fire questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Mike Stevens, cofounder and CEO of Kuroa about confronting the climate crisis in the textile industry, bringing more sustainable products into the home and how a network can help you face the million little challenges faced by founders.

Temps de lecture : minute

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The textile industry is a major contributor to the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, freshwater depletion, pollution, and workforce poverty. Inspired by eco-friendly clothing brands, at *Kuroa*, our focus is home textiles. Our products excel in style, utility, longevity, and sustainable practices from sourcing to after-sales care.

What was the catalyst for launching the product?

I've worked in sustainable food products for 20 years, first at Innocent Drinks, then cofounding the 'good-for-you' confectionery brand Peppersmith. It's been really rewarding to have contributed to an ongoing trend of more sustainable, healthy and responsible food brands.

After selling Peppersmith in 2018, I was introduced to the textile industry and was shocked by the lack of focus on sustainability and innovation. Some exciting change is starting to happen in the clothing world led by brands like Patagonia and Pangaia, but in home textiles, brands have

been a lot slower to evolve. I saw both the need and opportunity to change that.

Teaming up with textile designer and sustainability expert Charlotte Rakowski, we have set out on a mission to bring products into your home that look great, do their job exceptionally well and are responsibly made, sold and used.

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

Our products are 100% Tencel bedding bundles. Tencel is a fantastic material for bedding as it's soft as silk, naturally regulates your body temperature, is extremely breathable and also hypoallergenic. In addition to these functional benefits, Tencel is also sourced from certified sustainable, managed Eucalyptus trees, and is produced using non-toxic and circular (no waste) production. To ensure expert craftsmanship and responsible practices, our bedding is made in Portugal.

It's also the details that make us special, our labels are made from recycled cotton, our buttons are reclaimed wood from the Portuguese furniture trade, the elastic in the fitted sheets is recycled, our thread is 100% cotton (no polyester) and our packaging is made from waste offcuts.

To begin with, we are a direct-to-consumer brand but we know not everyone wants to buy bedding this way, so we are already planning how we might do bricks and mortar retail and 3rd party marketplaces

How has the business evolved since its launch?

We're early-stage and learning more all the time, whether it's what messages we share in our marketing which resonate the most to what materials we are going to use in future ranges. The harder we work, the more we learn, and the more we learn the more opportunities we can see.

What is your favourite thing about being a founder?

Being able to meet and collaborate with other founders and entrepreneurs who are as passionate about solving the problems in this space, as I am. It can be lonely being a founder at times, however, founders tend to gravitate towards other founders for support, advice and solidarity, but also because it's fun to share your ideas with the like-minded - Birds of a feather and all that!

Which founders or businesses do you see as being the most inspirational?

The founders I admire the most are the ones that are trying to solve the biggest problems or are willing to share their experiences to help others. Two great examples in my network are Dhruv Boruah, who is pioneering automated hydrogen-powered submarines for sustainable cargo and energy transportation. And Dan Murray-Serter, who unfailingly shares updates on the progress of his brand Heights, providing inspiration and information to others who want to build their own businesses.

Which other figures in your life inspire you?

Anybody who is happy to carve out their own path and is not afraid to step off the well-trodden track. George Bernard Shaw said “The reasonable man adapts himself to the world; the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore, all progress depends on the unreasonable man.”

Whether you are an artist, musician, care worker or entrepreneur, as long as you try to bring good to the world, I think it's a good maxim.

What are the things you're really good at as a leader?

The delicate balance of encouraging people to step out of their comfort zone while also giving them confidence that they will succeed.

What has been your biggest business fail?

At Peppersmith, we were guilty of spreading ourselves too thinly and introducing a sub-range that complicated things at our end and confused our customers. Two brands have two different personalities and key messages and require twice the work. Too much, too young. We canned the second brand after 12 months, much the wiser.

Which areas do you need to improve on?

So much. I am far from perfect and a lifelong learner. I am ashamed to say that sometimes I am guilty of talking when I should be listening. This normally happens when I get excited about the conversation, and my mouth starts getting in the way of my brain.

What's in store for the future of the business?

We are right at the beginning of our journey; however we have big plans for the next few years and beyond. We already have a bathroom range in the pipeline, and we are working with some exciting partners to bring better, more sustainable materials and products into the home.

What advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

If you are thinking about becoming a founder, my strong advice is to go work in a startup first. Whether you are a seasoned professional or just starting your career, it doesn't matter - the advice is the same. A startup environment is unique and unlike any established business. Seeing it first-hand helps you learn and understand if it's right for you before taking the plunge. I took this approach, joining Innocent when it was a super scrappy startup.

If you are already a founder, ensure you have a support network of other founders. They will help you with the million little challenges on your plate and also offer support and solidarity. Being a founder can be hard and lonely, so surrounding yourself with people who understand and can help makes a huge difference.

And finally, a more personal question! We like to ask everyone we interview about their daily routine and the rules they live by. Is it up at 4am for yoga, or something a little

more traditional?

We enjoy talking about daily routines at Kuroa and, in particular, how they mesh with your chronotype. For example, my co-founder Charlotte is a lark and will be up with the sun thinking about what we will create next. Whereas I am much more of an Owl, meaning early mornings are more for administration and the basics like getting the kids to school, and it's later in the day when I tend to have more energy and ideas.

Mike Stevens is cofounder and CEO of *Kuroa*.

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