

Meet Xigxag, the startup offering a better audiobook experience

As part of our quick fire questions series - or QFQs - we spoke to Kelli Fairbrother and Mark Chaplin, cofounders of xigxag, about the need to transform audiobook experience, how the publishing industry is dramatically underserved by technology solutions, and helping the 1 in 5 who struggle with traditional reading.

Temps de lecture : minute

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What was the catalyst for launching xigxag?

Cofounders Kelli Fairbrother and Mark Chaplin are both listeners and readers. They were both listening to audiobooks in the days of books on tape and realised in 2018-19 how little the digital experience had moved on in 20 years.

At one point, Kelli was listening to Hans Rosling's *Factfulness* on the tube with no wifi. The narrator said she needed to download a pdf from a desktop website to see the brilliant infographics at the heart of the story, which was a lightbulb moment.

It seemed the entire audiobook experience hadn't really moved on since books on tape and both ebooks and audiobooks were inexplicably so far behind other modern digital media experiences.

They felt that Amazon have been dominating and neglecting digital books since digitisation, which leads to a lack of competition and innovation that drives young people from reading, keeps books inaccessible to the one in five that struggle with traditional reading, and allows 320 million physical

books to be sent to landfill every year.

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

We set out to create the most exceptional digital book experience ever imagined, with an exclusive listen-and-read format and a social platform to welcome listener-readers. We're keeping young people engaged in books and making books more accessible for the one in five who struggle with traditional reading. We're also making book consumption more sustainable, using a carbon neutral cloud platform, consuming no trees and water in production and sending nothing to landfill.

We have a market-leading mobile app with more distinctive features than all our competitors combined. For the first time, listeners can get the audiobook and ebook in one fully integrated format without paying twice. They can switch between listening and reading or read along. While they're listening, they can see the text and illustrations, lookup words, search in the book, take notes and share quotes. We're building a social platform for listeners in the app, which doesn't exist today, allowing listeners to have their own space to engage around the books - and the format - they love.

We have 36 publishers on the platform, including four of the five largest publishers on the planet, giving our customers access to over 50K books, and 95% of UK bestsellers. Our customers love us as an alternative to big tech, they love our no subscription model and they love our x-book® (audiobook and ebook in one). We're available on [Android](#) and [iOS](#).

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

As an early stage business we continue to evolve the business and react to customer demand. We continue to build the depth and breadth of our catalogue. We are both leading and listening to our customers when it comes to features we want to build and they want to use. The product continues to get better and better and we can demonstrate this in our metrics. Our social platform experience is the next big evolution of our product ambition.

We are also listening to our publisher partners and reacting to their needs. We just launched our first B2B product, called First Listen, which allows publisher partners to distribute pre-release content to journalists, reviewers, bloggers, authors and their families in audiobook format for the very first time. Unbelievably, the industry is still completely dependent on sending physical proof copies to these audiences.

We see other opportunities in publisher services, given the industry is dramatically underserved in technology solutions.

We are prioritising services that also drive value for us and our existing business.

Tell us about the working culture at xigxag

We are a fully remote team, operating between London and Cornwall, where our two co-founders are based. But we don't feel the distance in the day to day, maybe because we have such an amazing team, and

technology allows us to stay connected to one another. Human and Fun are two of our values, and we try to incorporate both into our everyday work.

Everyone on the team contributes to daily gags and the occasional funny rant on slack. We've been on team calls where some of us were crying-laughing. Finding the funny side of all the challenges startup life throws at us is a big part of what keeps us connected - and moving forward. And we all really believe in our purpose: we're all book lovers, we want digital book experiences to be better than they are today - to allow everyone to enjoy more books.

We also try to get together in person in Cornwall on a regular basis. Cornwall is such a magnificent part of the world to be based and our team 'onsites' serve as a recharge for all of us: forging our personal relationships within the team and also getting the city dwellers back to nature, the countryside, and the seaside.

How are you funded?

We've done it all - bootstrapped, friends and family, angels, a crowdfund and, most recently, our first institutional investor, the FSE Group, through their Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Investment Fund (CIOSIF).

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

The biggest challenge for us has been getting the support of the publishers, getting them to agree to our distribution model, which is quite different than anything they have seen before. Early on in the journey, we were luckily introduced to George Walkley as an investor and advisor. George is a 25-year veteran of the publishing industry, whose experience includes working at a book retail chain through its growth phase and IPO,

and setting up Hachette's digital book business.

George's support and leadership in this area has been game changing for us, ultimately signing over 30 new publishers to the platform. He helped shape our value proposition and messaging for publishers, has improved our contracts, improved our financial performance, and prompted us to launch our first B2B service for publishers, addressing an unmet need he identified with our publisher partners. His impact really underscores the power of early stage startups getting deep industry advisors on board as early as possible in the journey.

We wish we'd met him months earlier!

How does xigxag answer an unmet need?

We started xigxag as dissatisfied customers with no real options available to us in the market. Digital book experiences are so far behind other modern digital media experiences. No competitor offers a distinctive experience. Audiobooks are priced at a premium to ebooks, despite being incomplete (for example, missing illustrations) and we had to sign up to an inflexible subscription to get a good price. Colour images are found at the end of the ebook, rather than integrated into the text, because that is how the industry optimises for print books.

Cofounders Mark and Kelli have spent their careers in consumer media and technology. They knew how good digital media experiences should be, so they set out to build what they wanted in a digital book: the ability to switch between listening and reading; a no subscription model; a sleek, engaging user experience; and features that don't exist today for listeners, including the ability to see illustrations, lookup words, search in the audiobook, take notes and share quotes. And then we've built on that to build what our customers and publishers are asking for.

What's in store for the future?

Next, we're building the social platform for listeners in the app. We're just starting to build out the first set of social features, including a social recommendations engine, personalised curation, list sharing, and social engagement. This is a really exciting development for us, because there are no communities specifically focused on allowing listeners to engage around the books - and the format - they love.

And we'll continue to respond to publisher demand for services. We're currently prioritising solutions that our publishers need, but also move our B2C business forward. The publishing industry is so poorly served by its technology providers, so B2B is another massive opportunity for us, and has the potential to be a £100M business in its own right. We're excited to see where the market demand takes us!

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

Be thoughtful about who you take advice from. No one knows your business better than you. Have confidence in your own perspective and reflect on the feedback you receive before reacting to it.

Everyone who has a bit of money believes they are entitled to give you their opinion. Make sure they earn the right to advise you.

And finally, a more personal question! What's

your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

Ha - we are not really rules people. Exercise and sleep are quite important to both of us, as is spending time in nature. It's easy enough for Mark in the middle of the Cornish countryside - walking the dogs, tending his orchard, and looking after his bees. Kelli does her best in North London. When she's not working, she's busy in the garden or on her allotment plot where she grows her own fruit and veg.

Kelli Fairbrother and Mark Chaplin are cofounders of [xigxag](#).

Article by Kelli Fairbrother & Mark Chaplin