

Fight through the minefield of 'green' and buy better with Canopey

As part of a series about Virgin StartUp's Collective Impact programme, Maddyness spoke to Thomas Panton, CEO and Hugo Douglas-Deane, CMO of Canopey.

Temps de lecture : minute

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[Thomas] After the better half of a decade campaigning for Greenpeace and onboarding tens of thousands of people into the climate movement, I started my first company working on cleaning up the events industry.

Hugo Douglas-Deane and I were doing cleanup at the end of a music festival, and we were stood a sea of plastic waste in this field, angry that not enough was being done to stop the world filling with junk. We knew we needed to do something.

[Hugo] Exactly, forget Jeff Bezos starting Amazon in a garage - Canopey was founded in a field!

Can you share your elevator pitch?

[Hugo] We know that fast fashion retailers and cheap plastic products are wrecking our planet and choking our waterways. The future is under threat and greenwashing is poisoning our purchases. People want to buy better, but it's a minefield out there - we need a better way.

Meet Canopey: The Home For Buying Better™. Canopey is the only

platform to completely streamline the sustainable shopping journey: trustworthy, verified products, learning and education, and accurate ways to track your impact over time. All under one roof.

Come in from the rain and join us under the Canopey!

Can you tell our readers about your engagement with Virgin StartUp?

[Thomas] We had a great experience on the Virgin StartUp Collective Impact accelerator last summer, getting tailored support from their expert team of business growth experts. The programme is a non-profit that focuses on impact-driven startups, so naturally it appealed to us.

We loved worked closely with *Sutin Yang* in particular. Sutin is Head of Scaleups there, and has a varied background in investment, banking and startups herself. We're so please to have worked with her through the programme and to be able to keep in touch as it really shows her belief in what we're building.

Tell us about the working culture?

[Hugo] We're a tight-knit team of passionate individuals from a real variety of backgrounds. And we've been so fortunate to have many people contact us to help out and get involved, because they truly believe in our mission and everything we're doing.

[Thomas] This is one of the most exciting things about working in the sustainability space - we have a worthy mission and are ultimately creating a very positive impact on the world. Everyone who works with us under the Canopey should have a passion for the environment and a desire to create and celebrate positive change in the world.

[Hugo] It's also important for us that the work we do should simplify complicated issues in fun ways, and remove barriers to make better choices more equitable for all. Sustainability can be complex, so we have a real sense of duty as the experts to help people navigate better choices.

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

[Thomas] Last year really kicked off some really tough economic conditions for everyone. We've had the conflict in Ukraine, petrol and gas prices skyrocket, and climate change-related effects on food. Don't even get me started on how hard it was to fundraise during all of that!

But through all that it's important to keep the long-term picture in view: climate change is accelerating, so the importance of more sustainable and ethical living is ever increasing. This really is the beginning of some very positive and exciting changes.

[Hugo] We've definitely had to adapt our messaging and focus on how sustainable choices can save money, and remind people to be better not best - small changes and swaps all add up over time to big impacts.

What's in store for the future?

[Thomas] We're very excited to be coming out of beta and 'officially launching' the Canopey.com platform with loads of new improvements and features in September.

We have a number of exciting campaigns planned, including some really powerful work with Uncommon Creative Studio, one of the leading creative agencies in the world and absolute experts when it comes to bold, disruptive advertising.

[Hugo] Christmas is fast approaching so it's a busy period for us, and we'll also be kicking off our Seed investment round which we'll be closing in Q1 2024. We're already having those conversations with commitments from some very big names which we can't yet publicly announce, so do get in touch if you're interested in backing the home for buying better.

Can you talk about why you put purpose at the centre of building your business?

[Thomas] A strong sense of purpose is really built into Canopey's DNA, in fact it's written into our official company documents. Our backgrounds in big government organisations, global NGOs and large financial institutions really gave us a perspective of what action is taking place in response to climate change – and what is lacking.

We came together in direct response to this, and to hearing from so many people they didn't know how to incorporate a sense of purpose into their day to day life. We knew creating our own startup would have the power to change the world, rather than wait for it to happen elsewhere.

What barriers have you faced in realising your entrepreneurial ambitions?

[Thomas] One thing I talk a lot about is the challenges of coming from a low income background. Without those established connections, you have to work that much harder, and I fundamentally believe it's vital to talk about these things openly. It does make everything we've achieved so far – including the confidence of hundreds of investors – that much more rewarding. If you're from a minority ethnic background, identify as a woman, or struggle with challenges around neurodiversity, these odds are even further stacked against you.

[Hugo] I think there is a huge amount of talent out there that isn't getting recognised because those people don't have extrovert personalities. Thomas and I are lucky enough to be confident speakers and are comfortable pitching and speaking at events. But if that's not your style it can be very challenging to raise investment and get into those channels.

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

[Thomas] Speak to lots of people about your idea. Feedback is everything – you can think it's the best idea in the world but it might make absolutely no sense to others. Ultimately, even if you're building something that's so innovative that your future customers haven't even thought about it, you absolutely must have confidence knowing what you're building is for them, solves something for them, or makes their lives easier!

[Hugo] Try and give yourself space for creativity. Small tasks stack up so I find it helpful to always be thinking about what thing on my to do list will lead to the biggest growth for the company. This approach can give your mind the room to think, without getting bogged down in the details.

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

[Thomas] We have begun building some more structure into our routines as a team, checking in several times a week with clear agendas being an absolutely essential example!

Personally, as a Muslim having the structure of prayer makes a world of difference for me. It is something that resets me and allows me to come back fresh-minded and confident I'm supported by a higher power. I think

for those that aren't religious, that can be as simple as meditating or taking a walk away from your screen.

In terms of rules I'm living by, the most important one for me is hearing what my partner tells me. Not just numbly listening, but really taking the time to understand those words. Being a founder is a strain on the people closest to you most of all, so making sure that I am attentive and can listen is by the most important rule I have right now.

[Hugo] A lot of my work is concerned with marketing the company, but this being startup land I'm involved in all sorts and therefore two days are never the same.

I wake up, water the plants, and cycle to work. It's a great way to wake up the mind and body, and growing things is so rewarding. My girlfriend and I are currently growing tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, radishes and lots of herbs.

There are lots of parallels between gardening and running a business. It can be very seasonal. It's a long-term commitment. There are those bigger projects here and there which take a lot of work. But most of all it requires small consistent actions everyday, and before you know it, you have something that's taken on a life of its own.

Thomas Panton is CEO and Hugo Douglas-Deane is CMO at *Canopey*.

Virgin StartUp is the not-for-profit home of entrepreneurship at the Virgin Group, helping early-stage founders start, fund and scale the businesses they're passionate. Its *Collective Impact programme* is an investment-readiness accelerator specifically for UK startups that want to have a positive impact in the world and are raising investment for the first time. In 2022, 24 founders completed the seven-week programme and raised £4M.

Article by Thomas Panton & Hugo Douglas-Deane