

Meet AstroAgency, market leader in space-focused communications and intelligence

As part of our quick founder questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Daria Filichkina, COO at AstroAgency about creating a full service agency for the space sector, winning the Sir Arthur Clarke Award and the critical importance of developing self-awareness.

Temps de lecture : minute

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Having worked in the space sector for a few years it was clear that the industry was growing very fast, with more and more startups being created across the value chain, from satellite manufacture and launch to data analytics. More than 70 countries are now carrying out space activities with governments recognising the launch supply chain and downstream data benefits. We could see that the gap was some kind of mechanism for getting the stories of commercial space out to different target audiences, so we set up the world's first full service marketing agency. Our management team all come from the sector, so we understand the technical side, the politics and the regulations. By adding that knowledge to digital communications campaigns, we created something unique for the industry.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

We launched in 2019 as a remote business (all of the team working from home in different locations where space activity takes place) and

immediately had to find a way to turn the challenge of the pandemic into an opportunity. With so many space companies unable to manufacture components or even leave their homes, we realised that they would now have time to think about their brands and getting news, updates and plans out to attract new business or find investment. We started a weekly zoom meeting as lockdowns began that was open to anyone in the world working in space, free to join and very much informal, called the SpaceBar. Within a few weeks we had become part of the lockdown routine for many people working in the space industry or interested in learning more about it. We peaked at around 350 people joining from around the world, with astronauts dropping in and senior officials from the UK Space Agency, European Space Agency and NASA joining graduates and enthusiasts to talk about everything from diversity and inclusivity to the satellite launch market and space sustainability, through to good sci-fi reads and asteroid mining. It got our name out and raised visibility in our brand, helped us understand the challenges of businesses that we could solve but it also helped a lot of people continue to carry out business development and even find new jobs. Since lockdowns ended, SpaceBar has evolved into a YouTube show and is about to film its 70th episode.

In 2022 the invasion of Ukraine came, and this directly affected a few members of our team based in Ukraine, including myself. I had to leave the country with my son, mum and pet dog, leaving my husband and wider family behind. This again forced us to change the way we do certain things. But despite these challenges on top of the usual challenges that a startup faces, we've successfully delivered projects for around 60 clients now.

Tell us about the working culture at AstroAgency

We're a female majority company, which is unusual for a space company.

We're also focused on promotion and marketing, again, very unusual for this sector. So, we see ourselves as trailblazers who are fortunate enough to be trusted to peek behind the curtain of some of the most innovative companies in the world.

Remote work has undoubtedly influenced our communication dynamics, but I believe it has also fostered a unique and positive working culture. Despite not being in a physical office, we have successfully preserved the essence of a collaborative and creative work environment. Regardless of the distance, we are always just a message or a call away from collaborating or sharing a light-hearted moment.

We care deeply about sustainability and the importance of using satellite-sourced data to monitor planet Earth and support disaster relief efforts. This passion also covers space sustainability - protecting low Earth orbit and mitigating junk and debris in space that can not only pose a danger to the satellites we all rely on every day for communicating, navigating, financial transactions or keeping an eye on our planet, but can be a danger to the International Space Station where Astronauts have been located continually more for than twenty years carrying out experiments to support life on Earth. Last year we used our unique skillset to write the world's first Space Sustainability Roadmap for the Scottish government, industry and academia, guiding the country's net zero efforts by capturing and promoting activities relating to the development of green rocket propellant, reduced carbon spaceport infrastructure and the ability of satellites to provide information to help combat climate change or track illegal/ non-sustainable supply chains in areas like fisheries or coffee production.

How are you funded?

AstroAgency is entirely self-funded. The Founder and myself are the only directors and aside from a small directors loan to tide us over between

months 1-3, we've been self-sustaining through revenue generated from clients ever since.

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

The invasion of Ukraine hit us hard. We had just landed some prestigious client projects and my business partner was planning some time off as his wife, a Ukrainian, was about to give birth. Suddenly everything changed and rather than planning exciting campaigns he was forced to think about how to keep his in-laws safe, while the Ukrainian team members had to choose whether to risk their lives by staying or someone travelling across the country to escape into an uncertain future, leaving families behind. I had just moved into a new house in Dnipro, Ukraine and suddenly I was driving through different countries with my 1 year old, my mother and her pet terrier to Edinburgh, where AstroAgency is headquartered.

Last month I was awarded with the Sir Arthur Clarke Award from the British Interplanetary Society in recognition of my dedication to the sector and our clients, despite my life being turned upside down. When I was thanked on stage in Liverpool, my acceptance speech made the point that it was not just me supporting the sector, but also the sector supporting me. The truth is, work was my one remaining 'normal' thing and it was almost like escapism to focus on the company and our clients once I had ensured my family were safe. Within a few months of the invasion we had hit the fifty client mark and grown the business to 25 people, whilst raising around £35,000 for Ukrainian causes, including 50 orphans who had escaped to Edinburgh with a charity called Dnipro Kids.

The invasion stole so much from me and my husband, who didn't see his son for 6 months. The one thing I could control was AstroAgency and I wasn't prepared to let it steal that from me too.

How does AstroAgency answer an unmet need?

The perception of space in the public - including government officials, investors, and jobseekers - is deep space missions, NASA and astronauts. In reality, commercial space is all about small businesses using innovation and technology to provide services in space that support our lives on Earth. As its still such a young commercial sector, most companies have limited resource and must focus all their efforts on complex product development. They don't have the funding or even the time for marketing or explaining to the world why they are building satellites or launch vehicles or software platforms for analysing data that can help track wildfires, endangered species, deforestation or coastal erosion.

AstroAgency provides commercial space companies and the government agencies that support with a team of people who understand their industry and the importance of their work to create a voice to share their news and future plans. This not only helps them find suppliers, customers, or investment, but helps to showcase the opportunities for other non-space businesses with relevant competencies to transition into the sector and find a new revenue stream, or jobseekers with the skills needed in the space sector to find an inspiring career.

What's in store for the future?

World expansion, of course! Space is global and now that we've proved ourselves, we must take our proposition to other global markets. We recently won contracts with the Australian government, as well as space-focused government departments in Bahrain and the UAE. We'll be part of a UK delegation going to Dubai for COP28 and then early next year have plans to spend time in Asia, understanding the opportunities there.

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

It would be the importance of developing self-awareness. This is crucial for several reasons:

Firstly, being honest with yourself is essential in entrepreneurship. It's easy to get caught up in the excitement of your ideas and lose sight of reality. However, self-awareness allows you to critically evaluate your strengths and weaknesses, leading to more informed decisions and strategies. Recognising your limitations is not a sign of weakness but of strength.

I personally feel that understanding my limitations led me to having support I need. I have a trusted business partner who has a completely different complimentary skillset. Startups are difficult, and you never know what the world will throw at your personal life next. So, when you have a business partner, and ideally a strong family unit around you (parents, spouse, children, whoever it may be) then you're never going to face these challenges alone.

Secondly, building on your strengths is just as important as identifying your weaknesses. Knowing what you excel at provides a foundation for your business's growth. It enables you to focus your energy where you are most effective. But always be ready to embrace imposter syndrome with passion and hard work.

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

When you work for a young company that supports such a wide range of

international space companies (and governmental agencies) doing the most innovative things imaginable, you're kept on your toes! The only thing I know each day is that I'll be busy! Whether its supporting client work, building new business proposals, implementing new operations processes for my team, presenting on stage at a space conference or checking our company accounting software to make sure our finances are on track. No day is the same in space, there's always so much happening!

My rule to live by is don't set too many rules, as business, like life, is unpredictable. Be ready to grab the opportunities for growth (personal or business) as they can come along when least expected. Appreciate what I have and try not to complain.

Daria Filichkina is COO at *AstroAgency*.

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