

UNCAGED Innovations, the company producing sustainable leather from grains

As part of our quick founder questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Stephanie Downs, Co-Founder and CEO of UNCAGED Innovations about animal-free leather, sustainability, and eco-anxiety.

Temps de lecture : minute

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What was the catalyst for launching UNCAGED?

UNCAGED brings together two decades of entrepreneurial experience – first in digital marketing and then co-founding Good Dot, India’s largest plant-based meat alternative company – and my love of animals. One of the pivotal moments in my career was in 2008 when I held a central position at the animal rights NGO, PETA. It was during this time that I found myself at the negotiating table with Tesla which led to Elon Musk’s blanket adoption of animal-free leather interiors.

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

UNCAGED Innovations is the world’s first biomaterial company to produce

sustainable leather from grains at scale. Our process skips the cow by fusing plant collagen with other bio-based elements to create fibrillar networks, replacing the animal collagen required for traditional leather. Our end product uses 95% less greenhouse gases, 93% less water and 72% less energy than traditional animal leather, and, unlike other leather alternatives, our material produces zero-waste and is toxin-free, as no tanning is required.

We are currently developing prototypes for automotive businesses like Jaguar Land Rover, and for some of the largest luxury fashion brands, but my ultimate goal is to transform every industry that relies on animal leather.

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

UNCAGED was founded in late 2020 and has already evolved from an idea to full scale production. After spending two years in the lab with my co-founder *Dr Xiaokun Wang* researching how to replicate the characteristics and aesthetic of leather, we developed our proprietary bio-based material with patented BioFuze technology. Since then, we have partnered with top automotive brands, and already have prototypes from the world's leading fashion houses.

Tell us about the working culture at UNCAGED

The thread that links everyone in the UNCAGED team together

is creativity and compassion. As a small team based in multiple locations, it's so important that everyone shares the same values, so I've really prioritised finding smart, but also good people who share an innovative, entrepreneurial spirit.

How are you funded?

Over a year ago, we closed our pre-Seed funding of \$2M from InMotion Ventures – Jaguar Land Rover's investment arm, VegInvest, Stray Dog Capital, Alwyn Capital, Hack Capital, and GlassWalls Syndicate. We are currently raising a Seed round to fund more aggressive growth now that we are producing at scale.

How does UNCAGED answer an unmet need?

The leather industry devastates the environment, from greenhouse gases emitted in cattle production, water and land usage, and the tanning process itself. UN figures show that commercial cattle farming is responsible for 14.5% of greenhouse gas emissions, and the dated manufacturing process means that whilst it takes years to produce a single hide, over half of this is wasted in scraps. The tanning process uses highly toxic chemicals, putting both workers and entire water systems at risk.

Our competitors that use mushroom and bacterial cellulous solutions still require the tanning process, which uses significant amounts of water and dyes, and solutions using cactus and other fruits use high levels of plastic.

After years of research, we have perfected a 100% bio-based material that successfully mimics the quality of leather without requiring tanning, making it both biodegradable and toxic-free. We meet the widespread global need for a scalable and sustainable leather alternative that does not compromise on quality – or damage the planet.

What's in store for the future?

2024 is about launching our sustainable leather alternative to the marketplace with our first fashion brand partners who we are already having some super exciting conversations with. The fashion industry, while trying to improve, is a major contributor to the climate crisis and being able to provide alternatives that are truly sustainable solutions can help the industry take a (big!) step in the right direction. We are also targeting to complete an equity seed round and produce the interiors for a concept car with one of our automotive partners.

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

Hiring is a critical aspect of building a successful business and it is something that founders need to approach with careful consideration and get right. Something I would strongly emphasise is the importance of hiring slowly. In the dynamic world of entrepreneurship, the needs of a business can change and evolve quickly, so it is important to hire the right people at the right time in accordance with what the business needs. Also, by taking time to carefully evaluate potential employees, founders can create a more cohesive and effective team with the right expertise and personalities that fit into the overall vision for their company.

Some entrepreneurs related to climate tech admit to be struggling with eco anxiety. Is it an issue affecting you, and do you have any advice on how to deal with it?

I think anyone working in sustainability experiences some level of eco-anxiety - otherwise they wouldn't embark on the challenging journey of championing environmental causes. However, it is important to approach this sentiment constructively and focus on the individual role you are playing in helping the problem at hand. I have learnt that understanding we each play a small part in a much bigger solution, and focusing on properly playing that small part rather than becoming overwhelmed by the bigger problem, helps to deal with these fears.

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

My daily routine changes as every week brings new challenges and tasks, but I do have certain rules and principles that guide my actions. I try to do everything with integrity, take care of those around me, and not step on competitors along the way. Competing is inevitable in any field, but doing so ethically is crucial as healthy competition encourages growth and innovation.

Stephanie Downs is the Co-Founder and CEO of *UNCAGED Innovations*.
