

The wonderful world of data

Controversy generated by documentaries like The Great Hack has us fearing what tech giants are doing with our data in the shadows. Is there a way we can take back control and use our information for our benefit?

Maddyness spoke to Oliver Southgate about public opinion on the data and advertising question, the responsibilities of Big Tech and the GDPR revolution. Oliver is the cofounder of [Get My Slice](#), the new free app that matches you with relevant brands and earns you money for engaging with them.

[Maddyness] Tell us how Get My Slice came about in your own words. Did you have expertise and experience in the field you chose?

[Oliver] We launched in July of this year, following 18 months of hard work to bring this app to market. It was initially quite a challenge as we were all just emerging out of lockdown, but since then we have seen phenomenal growth in our membership.

This is exciting for us as we are designed to help make the internet work harder for the individual. There are lots of cashback and offer websites out there. But they can be quite a lot of effort, building time consuming profiles or

trawling through loads of deals before you find an offer that's right for you.

Having worked in the media and tech industry for years, I found myself becoming increasingly jaded on how consumer data was bought and sold for big bucks with no awareness from the consumer themselves. The value of consumer data was increasing and increasing yet the actual owner of this data seemed to be oblivious and certainly wasn't sharing in this value or benefitting from it.

So I decided to set about rebalancing this, I saw an opportunity to harness all the activity you already do online to make the internet work better for you. But more than that I wanted you, the end user, to take full benefit. Get My Slice ensures you get a Slice of the action. When a brand pays us for the introduction to you, we pay you.

I sense a scepticism of tech giants such as Google, who I know are currently embroiled in a row about anti-competitive practice with the US government. What issues do you take with the search engine/ social media ad model status quo?

Since the beginning of the mid-late 2000s the ad-tech used by tech giants has evolved at a rapid scale, moving away from basic keyword bidding algorithms or demographic targeting capabilities into an AI driven model where the outcomes are optimised by machines.

These AI platforms are designed to optimise three things:

1. Acquiring new users to their platform at scale
2. Keeping users glued to their screens for as long as possible (attention)
3. Generating as much revenue as possible from each user

These machines require lots of data to do their job effectively. This is why the big tech companies are no longer search engines or social networks, but large scale data surveillance companies, always on the hunt for more sources of data to feed the algorithms and produce the desired outcomes.

When I think about AI/tech in general, I tend to think about it in 3 distinct ways.

1. What are the benefits for me?
2. What are the benefits for the company who owns the AI/tech?
3. What are the societal benefits/effects?

When I apply this to the ad-tech in use by the current big search and social platforms I see that they may have started off with the best intentions, however now, the machines are optimising solely for the benefit of the companies to which they belong.

From where you're standing, what is public opinion on data and data protection? Are people scared, unaware of a hidden problem, or not too bothered?

We tend to go through waves with the likes of Facebook coming under increased scrutiny due to the latest infringement on people's privacy. There tends to be an uproar and increased awareness of how individual data is being used, then it tends to die back down until the next newsworthy issue. The reality for many is they are too locked in into a lot of these platforms and can't imagine life without them...

The tide is turning, and I think regulations will evolve as privacy and the effects of data collection practices and uses continues to be an increasing issue.

How are you managing the financials of starting up Get My Slice?

Everything in an established business is a full-time job, however when you are starting a business it all has to be done by yourself, there is always the three-way tug-of-war between fundraising, sales and product development and you can't do all three effectively.

From a financial perspective, we worked through a very detailed plan and found the support of some early investors who helped us build the product to a basic MVP (Minimum Viable Product). Fortunately I had some savings in the bank which I used to support myself. During the early days, we identified some skills and knowledge gaps in the team and started to go out and meet with people that were direct contacts or friends of friends. During this period we

found people were really receptive to the idea, so much so that people were offering us advice, helping in delivering work for us and ultimately some of them joining us permanently on an equity only basis.

We officially launched the business in August and have grown to over 10k users and are starting to see revenue in the business, which is great, as 80% of our revenue goes directly to our members, the potential economic impact for our members is a positive one, which makes a change from the existing role of big tech.

We are currently seeking further investment to scale the business to profitability in the UK and then to follow with a global roll out that aims to position the business as the dominant player in the personal and behavioural data market, with the key benefit of being a consumer business rather than a tech company.

What have been the biggest professional challenges during lockdown? (and have there been unexpected rays of sunshine?)

One of the biggest challenges I've found is not being able to meet people and see people – from the day to day working with my team to investor meetings. Zoom calls are great and have been a lifesaver for business but there is something about seeing people in the flesh, shaking their hand and looking them in the eye which I miss.

The upside to lockdown has been spending more time with my one-year-old daughter; it's such a great age and getting to see her develop and discover the world has been exciting. Oh and the walking, during lockdown we walked and walked, which is a great stress reliever and something we've tried to continue.

Have you had to pivot at any point? Pre-COVID or because of it?

I honestly think everyone has had to make a pivot of some kind. My local pubs and cafes all started selling fruit and vegetables. Our pivot consisted of dealing with the whole media and advertising industry going into survival mode. Brands that had agreed to support us on our launch suddenly went quiet and halted their agreements with us, meaning we had to rethink our strategy creating a fight or flight moment. Did we wait it out and stay core to the initial product or did we adapt the product to fit the change in the market?

It was a tough decision to make; our original business focused solely on lead generation, the matchmaking between what consumers want and the brands that want to find them. Our pivot required helping with the sale, which not only required a different sales approach but also required lots of changes to the product.

What did happen though is that we were able to launch the business as a positive change in the world at a time when data was a growing concern and people had more time on their hands to try new things. We managed to secure TV advertising deals that were it not for COVID, would have meant we would have paid lots of money for it, suddenly we were like a magnet for people wanting to help us succeed. Our pivot was a positive one.

You mention GDPR was really revolutionary for you. What exactly did

this mean for the consumer, and are there any changes in society/economy currently happening that you think will help you?

We actually exist because GDPR and the Data Protection Act made it law that user data belongs to the user. In essence we make it easy for members to download and benefit from their data. Data sharing is 'opt-in' meaning our members are prepared to share the data in order to release monetary value. This is made explicitly clear through the app install and all our communications. At all times this data belongs to our members, and they have the right to revoke access to it at any time. We never share individual behavioural data with anyone.

Do you envisage a world where all consumers are in direct control of their data? Is this possible!?

Yes, one day I do believe consumers will be able to control their own data, but that is many years away and requires regulation. In the meantime, it's up to companies like ours to pick up the baton and take charge. Extracting value from the data is phase one for the business.

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

Surround yourself with people that will give you the truth and help find holes in the business as well as guiding you forwards. I always think about ways in which the business will fail so that I have a plan to adapt.

And finally, we're asking everyone we interview about their daily routine and the rules they live by. Is it up at 4am for

yoga or something more traditional?

I would love to be up at 4am starting the day with yoga. Unfortunately if I am up at 4am then it's likely because my daughter is teething and needs some love!

Generally the day starts with a little bit of family time followed by some replies to the many messages that have appeared. Breakfast and coffee start the engines and allow me to start planning the day ahead.

Come 6 o'clock it's dinner, bathtime and bed for my daughter (secretly wish I could also do the same). Then dinner, cleaning up the house and likely some Netflix show I'm currently addicted to before bed.

I've started using zen-mode on my phone before bed which prevents me from using the phone and find this helps me unwind a lot easier.

Discover Get My Slice

Article by OLIVER SOUTHGATE