

Have a green Christmas: Interview with Jason Ash, YoungPlanet

From roast turkey and mountains of leftovers to the unwanted gifts that gather dust and eventually end up in landfill, Christmas is an ecological nightmare. By trying out the sharing economy, we can celebrate more mindfully without any extra cost.

Every Christmas, the amount of waste produced in the UK increases by 30 percent - including around 365,000 km of wrapping paper. Pioneer of the sharing economy, YoungPlanet, is an app that enables parents to put unused children's toys and more to good use with new families for free. *Maddyness* spoke to cofounder Jason Ash about how we can consume more consciously at Christmas and bringing his own kids up to be mindful of waste.

[Maddyness] Explain what YoungPlanet is and how it came about in your own words. Did either of you have pre-existing expertise in this area?

[Jason] YoungPlanet is an app that finds new homes for unused or no longer used toys and children's items that would otherwise end up in landfill. The app

provides a 'cashless' marketplace platform based on a sharing economy model. Parents can list or request the items for free - from books and clothes to toys and all sorts of baby and parenting equipment.

Our main focus has always been on reducing landfill and helping parents to become more environmentally conscious, without having to splurge on expensive brands. The people that use YoungPlanet tend to be parents that are mindful of the impact of raising a child on both the environment and the wallet.

Essentially, it's about making the right choice the easier choice.

Our prior experience is relatively mixed. My wife and cofounder, Emma, enjoyed high profile roles in PR and marketing, having worked for LVMH. She later became a director at Stella & Dot. I come from a private equity background and was Managing Director of cidemaker Orchard Pig. I've also worked in marketing and finance roles at Unilever, Mars and Cadbury.

Although our roles involved elements of sustainability, it wasn't the main focus and this influenced our decision to set up YoungPlanet - we wanted to use our skills for 'good'. Our combined experience has helped us to develop YoungPlanet, and has been helpful when it comes to marketing, promoting and scaling our brand. My experience in finance has also helped us navigate funding rounds.

The main drive behind starting YoungPlanet was that we'd reached a point where we wanted to create a brand that would help society, and ultimately make it easier for others to help their communities.

What are other eco options when it comes to toys? Why did you choose to go down the 'sharing economy' route?

As with all industries, there can be a lot of greenwashing when it comes to

finding products that claim to do good for the planet. You usually find that eco-friendly toys often come with a higher price tag, so for parents it's not a case of wanting or not wanting to do the right thing: it comes down to whether they can afford to. That's what doesn't sit right with us: there shouldn't be a financial barrier to wanting to do good. The bare truth of the matter is that the impact of designing, manufacturing and selling something new versus using something that already exists is considerable.

The sharing economy model seemed to be the no-brainer because if you have children you are acutely aware of how much stuff they have that they just don't use or no longer use because they've moved on and grown out of (physically, emotionally etc). The statistics state that more than a quarter of parents admit to throwing away toys that are in perfect working order and that children on average own around 200 toys but play with just 12 of them.

It seems wasteful to throw away things that another family or child might need, use and enjoy.

There are second-hand sites where you can sell these toys but we wanted to create a platform where people know that they can both give and get things for free; and a community that can relax in the knowledge that they're contributing positively to the environment by using us.

Do you think we need to become more conscious consumers at Christmas?

Yes, there's an improvement to be made, definitely. Overconsumption is at its highest at Christmas, due to all the gifts that we're buying for our family and friends - not to mention the packaging. Buying for the sake of buying is common at this time of year, and people often end up with gifts that they don't really want or need. Implementing small changes such as sourcing secondhand and donating gifts that we don't want are all small changes that can have a big impact.

This is where an app like YoungPlanet can really help. If there are children's items people receive that they don't really want or need, they can showcase them on the app to help lots of families

who will have a genuine interest in the items. So nothing needs to be wasted or thrown away.

Sadly, with the impact of the pandemic and the lockdown, an extravagant Christmas will be off the cards for many families. So we're hoping that our app will be able to help the families who might find Christmas even tougher this year.

What are the most popular items on your platform ahead of Christmas?

The most popular smaller items tend to be toys and the like - we've had everything from dolls houses to Scooby-Doo vans! The larger things tend to go quickly, and we've had countless prams and cots and car seats for example. The fastest moving items have been balance bikes - they are often something that's wanted or people are interested in trying but can't quite justify buying, and they are free on YoungPlanet (but they go very quickly!)

Have you found it difficult to be eco-friendly parents? What are some particular difficulties you've noticed, and do you use any 'green hacks' around the house?

We have always embraced and gratefully received hand-me-downs in our household so our boys just accept that presents don't necessarily come in packaging and that clothes have been worn by someone else. They are very conscious of waste and know that the answer to getting rid of something is not to bin it. They know there is a new home for everything, even if it is broken, you dispose of it responsibly if you are unable to fix it! Their acceptance of this has helped us to be more eco-friendly as a family.

In terms of difficulties, like many, we would like our council to recycle more of the plastics than they do so we avidly try to buy our groceries using our own containers and choose items that come in less packaging but this is not always easy to do.

At home, we consciously keep the thermostat low and tell the boys to wear more jumpers or hunker down with a hot water bottle which is very old school!! One of the ongoing battles however is that our children need constant reminders about turning the lights off in their bedrooms... but they compensate by not flushing the toilet as much as we would like them to ☐

Other green hacks around the house include all kitchen cloths being fabric so they can be washed and reused, clothes are air dried and we have always been reusers of wrapping paper.

What do you think an eco-friendly future for toys looks like?

Making toy-swapping the go-to option is a priority for us because it benefits everyone. People can save money and they declutter without feeling guilty about their items going into landfill. There is also a great deal of satisfaction to be had in seeing something that was not being used doing what it's supposed to do with another family - the simple joy of giving is often overlooked, and because we are free to use it makes it easier to do.

We also hope that plastic toys will be gradually phased out and replaced with materials that are easier to recycle, such as wood. Already, three of the largest toy manufacturers have stated their plans to phase out plastic gradually, so we look forward to seeing these changes implemented. That said, plastic toys that can be re-used can last a long time - so it's all about choices and staying focused on reducing wastefulness.

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