

Skincare against skin cancer: Interview with Billy Boulos, LifeJacket

Almost two men die of skin cancer for every one woman – a statistic that's forecast to double over the next 20 years. Maddyness interviewed Billy Boulos, cofounder of LifeJacket, the skincare brand trying to get men to take life outside, while taking UV protection seriously.

Before I spoke to Billy Boulos, one of three cofounders of LifeJacket – the brand offering men high performance skin protection – I knew we were all supposed to be wearing sunscreen everyday. But I didn't know why. Neither did I know how much more likely men are to experience the occasionally horrific side-effects of this lack of education. I spoke to Billy about how seeing healthy friends develop cancer encouraged him to start an impact-driven business; the decision to be a brand by men, for men; and navigating the struggles of entrepreneurship with old friends.

[Maddyness] Your background is in investment banking and marketing. How

come you decided to take the startup plunge?

[Billy] Straight after university, I tried my hand at entrepreneurship. There was a bad market crash and it was impossible for grads to get jobs so I thought I'd try something on my own. I studied French, and when you study a language you have to do a year abroad. And there was no easy way for British or European students when travelling to find accommodation. I tried to set up a business that took away that problem – for the 10,000 students in the UK who were going abroad to France.

We put a small amount of money in and we got it back, but it was never going to set the world on fire. We couldn't get universities to endorse us; we had the demand in terms of the accommodation, but we didn't have the students. We shut it down, but it was an amazing learning experience.

By that time, two years on, the world was a bit better. I had quite unique experience as someone who'd tried something entrepreneurial. So I found a new job quite easily, and I was two or three years older than the other grads. I felt a bit wiser!

I moved into what I wanted to do, which was investment banking. For some reason I just saw the attraction in knowing what was going to be in the *Financial Times* in a month's time, being in front of board rooms, and knowing what they thought about the strategy of their business. I found it so interesting – especially the technical side.

But after eight years I thought, I've done this now. Once you've done five or six transactions, they're pretty much all the same. And everything's about spreadsheets and presentations. I wanted to go back to real business – which is always what's interested me. I joined a big drinks company and did a finance role, a strategy role and a marketing role. I left after another eight years, as the Chief Commercial Officer.

I was in my late thirties, and the reason I left was because I had five or six friends who had different forms of cancer. I'm an outdoors, healthy, active person – and that's who I have around me – and just to see healthy young fit guys getting different forms of cancer was quite a shock to me. I wasn't particularly passionate about alcohol – health and fitness, business and marketing, that's what ticked my boxes when you lack back over my career. I decided to use my skills to do something that makes a difference.

I found out when visiting one of my best friends, who's now my business partner, that almost two men die of skin cancer for one woman. I thought: why not try and find a solution for that?

Obviously, LifeJacket is a purpose-driven business. Is it a B Corp?

We're applying, but the paperwork and the application itself is incredibly onerous – as it should be in fairness. Because we're so young, it's a lot easier because we can start to shape the business the way B Corp wants you to think. You can start to implement philosophies that align from the beginning, rather than trying to retrofit later.

How come you wanted to become a B-corp? I'd like to hear your views, as a former investor, about purpose-led business.

I have a house, I don't need a car, I have all I need. I don't need anymore. When I was young I was maybe a bit immature and was spending and consuming; you get married, and settle, and realise you don't need anything else. I just thought now is the time – I have a level of comfort where I have a responsibility to do something that makes a difference. If I'm going to create a business it needs to have a purpose, but it also needs to be sustainable financially – so I do think the two work together... Capitalism and charity do work really well together.

Getting down to your specific purpose, what do you want to achieve? Could you

define it in exact terms for me, and tell me about the science behind it?

As founders, we want a halt to the increase in male skin cancer. Almost two men die of skin cancer for every one woman, and that's forecast to double over the next 20 years. If you look at female skin cancer, it goes up, but if you look at male skin cancer, it's a steeper curve and you start to get this disparity. We want to see that curve flatten or decline.

That's going to come about through two things: prevention and detection. And that's where men are really bad, and why we believe there's this disparity. At the core, it's about education.

Women have been educated for 20 years by Vogue that the sun causes ageing, damage, sometimes skin cancer. All women's products cater for that - whereas men don't have that.

The reason men are more likely to die of skin cancer is that a) if they see something on their skin, typically they ignore it and let it linger. Often it gives rise to something that is then detected too late - which is too deep, or has spread. Women are much better at checking themselves and doing something about it.

Then there's prevention - protecting yourself from the damage of UV. Whenever you're outside at any point in the year, women wear makeup generally and the foundation contains titanium dioxide, the same product that's in sunscreen. A lot of moisturiser contains SPF. Men don't really have that.

Where we as a brand can help is on the prevention side. We make clothing and skincare that protect all year round.

Why is it that you need to wear SPF every day?

Most cancers, it's just tough luck if you get them. But skin cancer, 85% is caused by ultraviolet light, which we're exposed to every single day. You can protect yourself and it's accumulative, so it's never too late. Most of the damage is done in your twenties. Light is going into the skin; it's changing the shape of the DNA underneath your skin, ultimately causing mutation and giving rise to skin cancers.

95% of UV light that reaches us on Earth is UV A, which goes down deep into the skin. The level doesn't change from January to December. It's constant; it even comes through windows. We're constantly being bombarded with UV A light, and you can protect yourself. UV B light is the strong one that you burn from in the summer – and that does peak when the sun is at its strongest. UV A is the silent killer, if you like, but you need to protect yourself from both.

In Australia, people are born knowing this, but in the UK we think 'I don't need to protect my skin because I'm not going to Spain'. But it's as simple as putting a moisturiser with SPF on in the morning.

Did you ever think about being unisex?

The reason we started the brand: if you close your eyes and think about the semiotics of sun protection, it's a woman on a beach in a white bikini, white sand, blue sea, blue sky, with maybe one of those inflatable beach boy and a baby. That's sunscreen.

When you go to the supermarket, or when you read anything a journalist writes, it is 100% targeted at women. I just thought the world needs a product that's talking to men, in a way that they can understand.

The biggest challenge we had – and it took us three years to make – was to get products that we thought men would use. If our mission is to stop men getting skin cancer, we have to make products that men will want to use. So many are heavy, greasy, rich, thick – and that's what's putting men off.

To formulate something chemically that did an uncompromising job on protection, but was also something palatable, was tough. But we wouldn't compromise, because obviously then our mission would fail at the first hurdle.

The thing we're most pleased about is people who discover and use our product, and love it and the brand.

Could you tell me a bit about your brand ambassadors?

Our mission as the founders is to stop men getting skin cancer – but thinking about yourself as a consumer isn't particularly aspirational. There's nothing emotional about it. And I don't think fear is a good enough motivator for consumers.

The brand mission is to take life outside. We want to be the Patagonia of men's skincare. We want guys to go outside and do amazing things, but protect themselves. So add skin protection to your kit bag – make sure it's something you think about.

We just think having ambassadors who are aspirational men who do stuff outside will help us encourage others to do the same. So all of our ambassadors, we don't pay them anything: we contacted them, but they fell in love with the brand and the product, and they all use it.

We speak to them about product development and get their views on what we're doing, because they are heavy users of our products. It's important that it works for them – a lot of them are professional athletes. Finding guys who have a profile helps us educate and share our message.

Patagonia is obviously big on sustainability. Is that something that's come into consideration for you with your skincare products?

It's a big element of the B Corp application, so we started thinking about it really early on. There's a balance when you're a startup between trying to be as sustainable as possible when it is fundamentally much more expensive for a brand owner to be sustainable. I really believe that the onus is on the

packaging companies to come up with solutions.

All of our packaging is recyclable; all of our cardboard is recycled. The one area of weakness we have is our tubes, which are recyclable but not made from recycled materials. Our next production run will have tubes made from recycled materials.

It's hard for small brands, because we want to be sustainable, but it is so much more expensive. And we need our product to be as affordable as possible; there's no point our products being £100 each, because then we won't achieve our mission.

What's it like having three cofounders? Have you split your roles at all?

We naturally migrate into silos. I'm happy with that, because it means I can put my head down and do my job – and I know and trust that the others are doing theirs. But Jono wants to know everything that's going on. So that's a bit of a cultural challenge!

At Y Combinator, they never accept single founder businesses. It's always important to me to have cofounders, and it's so great to be able to sound ideas off the others. Rob's very technical; he's the chemist. Jono's very operational and analytical, so he deals with the supply chain, customer service, manufacturing. And I do more strategy and marketing. It's very complementary. We've all been friends for around 30 years.

Probably the main reason I started this is because Jono was my best friend and best man and got colon cancer in his thirties, so he was probably the prompt for the whole thing. It's hard, but we have a lot of fun working together!

Discover LifeJacket

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