

# Embracing the curls: How The Wild Curl is making hair care more inclusive

Beauty marketing campaigns would have you believe that everyone covets straight, smooth hair, but that simply isn't the case. The Wild Curl has been created specifically for curly hair, a market the brand believes has been neglected for too long.

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The first time the idea for The Wild Curl came to Vanessa was when she was discussing her dreams over drinks in Finland, where she called home in her early life. Vanessa and her cousin discussed the possibility of starting their own businesses to do something they love. That's when she first vocalised her interest in the long-overlooked curly hair care market.

"My mum, even though a very typical Finn with blonde fine hair, learned how to care for my afro hair despite the lack of product offering for it," said Vanessa. "To detangle and brush my hair, she often used olive oil from the kitchen as the available conditioners in the shops did not offer enough slip to be efficient for tight curls.

"Later, during my university years, I started learning more about my hair structure and how to care and style it properly. The era of social media was just booming and, luckily, I found an influencer with a similar hair texture to mine to follow for tips and hacks. She was mixing carrier oils – like avocado and coconut oil – for nourishing and moisturising benefits with essential oils for

therapeutic perks. This immediately reminded me of my mum's detangling hacks, and I gave it a go.

"After spending over €100 on natural oils and several messy applications later, I gave up. Despite seeing very good results, I was outraged that messy DIY products were the only way we could take care of our hair. "

## A new business mindset

After graduating, Vanessa decided to take matters into her own hands. She believed it was time for the curly hair care market to be included and supported in the wider beauty industry. From this fierce passion, The Wild Curl was born. At the end of 2017, the brand launched its first products: ready to use vegan hair oils for easy application. And - you guessed it - the reaction was electric.

"We have been blown away by the amazing reviews and responses to our products," said Vanessa. "Many have loved the fact that we cater products from wavy to afro hair that are natural and vegan and - most importantly - deliver results many could just dream of."

It was important to Vanessa that The Wild Curl kept sustainability at the heart of everything it does. All of the brand products are natural and vegan, its packaging is recyclable and the hair oils have glass packaging. Maintaining this standard isn't without its challenges, especially for a small business.

"Sometimes it's hard to find natural alternatives that perform equally or better than their synthetic counterparts," said Vanessa. "Consumers are used to the amazing shine and slip that silicones can create and the luxurious foam shampoos that sulphates provide, without really understanding the long-term damage it may cause to your hair. Our job is to find innovative, yet low-cost alternatives that provide a better solution in both the short and long term."

## Investing time and money

In The Wild Curl's infancy, everything was done by hand. This included making the products, inventory, and fulfilling orders. The goal was to make The Wild Curl products accessible for everyone, everywhere, and for this, the brand needed to scale. Soon after seeing initial traction, Vanessa outsourced manufacturing and fulfilment with an initial £50,000 of founders investment, creating more time for her and her cofounder to concentrate on growth and product development.

In the middle of the pandemic when most people were grappling to stay in employment, Vanessa and her cofounder both quit their jobs to dedicate their time to The Wild Curl. So far, they have achieved more than £120,000 in revenue and are growing at an average rate of 20% month-on-month. The Wild Curl is listed on Amazon Prime in five countries and with multiple retailers across Europe.

To accelerate growth even further, Vanessa launched their first fundraising round for The Wild Curl through Crowdcube. The round soon surpassed its £60,000 target, raising over £95,000 in total. Despite this impressive achievement, Vanessa admits fundraising has been a struggle overall.

“This has been my first time fundraising and the painful truth hit me harder than ever – almost all investors are white and male,” she said. “More than 90% of angel investors in the UK are male, and 93% of them are white. This is a big challenge.

“It became obvious to me that the lack of diversity among investors causes enormous biases on who receives investment and therefore in the brands and products that get launched successfully to the market.

*“Less than 1% of venture capital investment in the UK went to black-led businesses over the last 10 years. This is shocking.”*

“It’s especially shocking when we are talking about access to early-stage capital, where the investors mainly invest in the founders and the idea. This was a huge blockage. Talking about the challenges of curly hair care and the huge opportunity of the market with a white male investor – which, for me, has always been indisputable – is a hard sell. They just cannot relate.”

VCs use their personal and professional networks to make contact with founders. If you are not well-connected to these networks or are unable to traverse them successfully, it can be difficult to reach capital.

“Black female entrepreneurs are the least successful at fundraising, receiving 0.02% of funding overall,” says Vanessa. “The majority of the time I feel like I am swimming against the odds and I find myself questioning, “Am I good enough?”

“Thankfully, there are still people who are open-minded enough to support good ideas and passionate founders. To date, we have achieved £75,000 of funding with more than 221 investors from 23 different countries, some of whom are extremely renowned in the industry. Investors include Inés Ures, former CMO at Deliveroo, and Lopo Champalimaud, founder of Treatwell and partner at Felix Capital & Verlinvest. To them, I am extremely grateful.”

## A bright future

Despite the challenges that Covid-19 has presented to The Wild Curl, the business has managed to grow. The brand’s most popular product is its Weightless Wavy Hair Oil and in the last quarter, the Anti-Frizz Microfibre Hair Turban sold out within 20 days of launch. Revenue targets were not just met, but thwarted, with 238% growth year-on-year.

“The way we have been able to change people’s lives for the better is incredible,” said Vanessa. “Some customers have recovered their long lost curl pattern or even reversed hair loss from heat damage or reaction to hard chemical substances. At the moment, we have close to a five-star rating from over 250 customer reviews. We wouldn’t be where we are today without our tight community.”

While reflection is important, so too is looking ahead to the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. The Wild Curl has big plans for 2021, concentrating efforts on product development with a new range of conditioner as the frontrunner.

“This year, we will also be rebranding The Wild Curl,” said Vanessa. “As much we love our initial branding, we believe that a fresh look will help us to be clearer about our mission. We are here to support the beauty of natural hair with natural, vegan and clean formulas. This will be reflected in everything we do, from the tone of voice all the way to packaging.

“In our past experiences working at Farfetch and Treatwell, we have lived very close to brands that communicate their vision to customers and employees, and have seen the power this has to help increase market share and overall KPIs. We feel this is a very important area for us to work on thanks to the additional funding we achieved during the campaign.

“In the years to come, our goal is to become a number one global destination for sustainable and affordable curly hair care. We are here to fight for equal hair care for everyone, everywhere! ”

*Vanessa Martins is cofounder of The Wild Curl.*

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