

Toys containing mercury and poisonous diet pills: Interview with Vicky Brock, CEO Vistalworks

Swathes of the goods stocked by third-party sellers on online marketplaces are actually illicit. Can tech help consumers understand how at risk they are, and avoid being scammed?

To find out, *Maddyness* spoke to Vicky Brock, cofounder and CEO of Vistalworks, a startup that keeps online shoppers safe from harm. Vicky talks about the impact of COVID and Brexit on cybercrime; what launching five businesses has taught her; and her experience on the NCSC Cyber Accelerator, powered by Wayra UK.

[*Maddyness*] Could you tell me about your background leading up to Vistalworks?

[Vicky] This is my fifth startup. I was kind of a test tube entrepreneur, but I went to a crappy school in Norfolk, and nobody in my family has been involved in business or entrepreneurship, so for a long time I didn't recognise the signs.

When I went to university in London, I was really broke in a very expensive city.

That's when I started my first 'hustle' – charging my fellow students to type up their essays on a computer. It was probably one of my more profitable businesses!

I've always been very opportunity-driven and I hate the idea of other people telling me what to do.

Basically, I'm an entrepreneur by necessity and compulsion. It really is the only thing I know how to do.

I'm very good at spotting what's over the horizon and joining dots together, and getting things going by connecting with the people around me.

How did you get into battling cybercrime specifically?

I had an unceremonious departure from one of my companies. It was one of the most successful startups I've done – a top European tech startup, named by *Forbes* as one to watch, multi award-winning. However, within about 18 months of this, I'd been fired by my board and I had a year where I wasn't allowed to start another company.

That was really awful for a serial entrepreneur; it was like a year of imposed exile in the wilderness! Eventually I found my next team – cofounders who energised and excited me. But we didn't have the idea. It was the wrong way round, but in so many ways it was the right way round.

Image: Some of Vistalworks' software.

We aligned on values, ambition and appetite for risk. Then, we saw an amazing Scottish government innovation challenge. It was this public competition for technology that could help reduce consumer demand for illicitly traded goods online.

They said that policy and enforcement agencies tend to focus on the supply chain, but that they wanted to do something different. They wanted to see if

they could encourage people to do the right thing, with technology to help them.

We put in a proposal and we won the competition. We worked with the police, training centres and HMRC for three months to come up with a prototype. It worked – and we formed Vistalworks off the back of it.

Now, we're two years in and working with other government, stakeholders, and enforcement agencies. From the start, we were able to really orientate our skills, focus and business around the problem and the stakeholder needs.

We've kind of become a cybersecurity business because that's where our customers have led us, as opposed to that being where our investors pointed us. That's a really important difference.

Now you're working with The NCSC Cyber Accelerator. Overall, across all five of your startups, have incubators and accelerators played a big part in your progress?

Accelerators and incubators have played a part in some of the businesses, particularly the two most successful ones – depending on your measure of success. They played a part in the ones that attracted investor interest and won lots of shiny awards.

The NCSC Cyber Accelerator programme is far and away the best programme I've been on, and there are several reasons for that. It has truly been orientated around us as founders: our needs, our level of experience and what we're trying to do with the business. They haven't been intimidated that we've experienced challenges; they haven't been intimidated by me going: "Actually, I'm not raising money for another twelve months, so I'm not going to do a pitch deck."

Sometimes people think I'm being a prima donna when I say that but, as a founder, the thing you have the least of is not money. It's time.

Honestly, you can raise money, but you will never get time back.

Wayra gives you all the love and nurturing and support that you need, but the team don't try to shoehorn you into something that fits their objectives.

Where are you with Vistalworks at the moment; what kind of things are you accomplishing?

We've got two important commercial offerings in the market: intelligence software, which we are now selling to government enforcement agencies and consumer protection bodies across Europe, and a series of citizen check-before-you-buy tools.

The tools are free for consumers. However, they tend to be supported either by enforcement agencies and consumer protection bodies or by industry bodies that are trying to, for example, ensure that people buy safe chemical products or safe pesticides, safe refrigerants, things like that.

We are live in the market; we have a great sales pipeline; and lots of interest across Europe.

Obviously, there's the challenge of Brexit, so we set up a separate company in Estonia – which has been up and running for about a year – in order to service all of our EU clients.

We're intending to do a Series A by the end of 2021 – looking to raise £2-4M.

What kind of illicit goods are people

accidentally buying online? What kind of tactics do scammers use?

We're trying to protect people who do not realise how exposed to risk they are.

If you look at any online marketplace, however reputable the name – if there are third party sellers on that platform, there will be organised criminal sellers and people who are out to scam you.

This could be banned products. So what are we talking about there? Children's toys with chemicals; some babies' teething toys contain chemicals that can cause kidney failure. These chemicals have been banned in Europe because they're really, really dangerous.

Image: Welcome drinks for a previous Wayra/NCSC cohort.

We've seen children's slime and putty – which is really trendy right now – with mercury or borax in it. Borax is in contact lens fluid. I think there have been about 18 deaths from children's parties across the EU.

Diet pills is a huge one right now. Some of the diet pills that are openly available on mainstream marketplaces can and do kill people.

Anything to do with COVID – from testing kits, to vaccines, to PPE and hand sanitiser. Lots of that stuff has been either faked, untested, counterfeited or stolen. It could be diluted with any old rubbish.

We've focused on stuff that causes the buyer harm. While a fake handbag is a bad thing, on the whole – and I'm sorry to say it – the consumer doesn't care. Whereas if it's going to burn your home down or injure your grandchildren, you'll make a different decision once you're aware of the problem.

A big piece of work throughout 2021 will be to work with payment providers – to take some of the responsibility for checking away from the consumer. We

want to automate it more by introducing our scores into the point of purchase.

What are some basic things the consumer can do to avoid buying illicit goods?

Be very suspicious. Think before you buy. Read reviews. I know it sounds boring, but read the listing, read the small print. Honestly, the number of items that say 'not genuine product' on the packaging!

Criminal sellers are clever; they use psychological techniques, optimisation techniques. They'll make it appear that there's only one left; they'll make it just fractionally cheaper than everything else; they'll write fake ratings.

Never feel pressured into the purchase. Also, ask yourself:

"If every high street retailer that I've heard of hasn't got it, how on earth would this retailer that I've never heard of have it?"

Has COVID-19 seen a big increase in online crime?

COVID disrupted all the legitimate supply chains, and Brexit will have the same effect. All the trusted places in local communities didn't have access to stock, or closed due to lockdown.

People have been forced to go online to shop for everything, including things they've never bought before. And because they're moving online to buy things that they've never bought before, they are very at risk because they're not familiar.

Wherever you've got shortage, panic buying and unfamiliarity, people are hugely exploited.

What's your daily routine, and the rules you're living by to get you through lockdown?

I don't see any point in working ridiculous hours for the sake of it in a normal week. I used to do that; I used to be a workaholic entrepreneur who didn't know when to stop, and I burned out and it made me sick.

These days, I try to make sure that I have at least one day at the weekend where I don't switch my computer on. I try not to encourage overworking in my team; there's a lovely feature on Google emails, which delays when your emails are sent out.

Even if I've written a whole bunch of emails on a Sunday afternoon, they arrive on Monday – so I don't accidentally set a culture of workaholism.

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