

From investment banking to garden retail: Meet James Folger, founder of The Stem

As part of our new quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to James Folger, CEO and founder of The Stem, about moving on from investment banking, the joy of nature and the value of social media to his business.

What is The Stem?

The Stem is a garden retail brand with a mission to connect people to nature through a best-in-class digital experience. The Stem is aiming to disrupt the £7.5B UK market by creating a one-stop shop for all things green, building a leading content platform and developing a business for a sustainable future.

Social media has been integral to us as a platform for growth. The plant lover community is enormous!

We're never short for content with our product range growing all the time too. As we are a digital first brand, we invest very heavily in our website and making sure it is as user-friendly as it can possibly be. We try to work with partners that are aligned with our sustainable vision as much as possible.

It is also important to us to make sure we invest back into the planet too. We are 1% for the planet members, and we work with the Eden Reforestation Project to make sure a tree is planted for every sale. So far, we've planted 60,000 trees and we are on track to become carbon neutral in 2022.

What was the catalyst for launching The Stem?

Straight after graduating, I embarked upon a career in investment banking, complete with its long hours, high pressure and competitiveness of the finance world.

After being promoted to an associate in 2019, I was changing from one city bank to another and put on gardening leave. I took this time as an opportunity to spend more time to reflect and found that being in nature helped me to destress and ultimately started to improve my mental wellbeing. It inspired me to the extent that I decided to start a business that helped others build this connection with nature too.

How has the business evolved since its launch?

We had a 'soft' launch in October 2019 to get things moving and things ramped up in March 2020. At that point I was still in charge of everything - logistics, buying, delivering. It was a very hectic time but worth the graft. There was nothing like meeting some of the customers face to face, and it was the best feeling knowing they were happy with what we were doing. The first stage of crowdfunding enabled me to take on staff. We grew from there: the rate in which we grew was incredibly intense from that point.

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What has been your biggest challenge

so far?

The biggest challenge has been to deal with the inevitable growing pains of scaling the business and maintaining the quality of our customer experience. It's hard work and occasionally can be tricky as we can get very stretched when things get busy.

How does The Stem answer an unmet need?

The benefits of living in synergy with nature have never been more widely recognised and nature will become more prevalent in our living and working spaces. However, the industry has been slow to adapt and we believe there are a lack of brands that connect with the future generation of consumers. We are there to appeal to a digital first consumer who loves nature.

What's in store for the future?

At the beginning of January 2022, we launched from London only to UK-wide, representing a 7.5x increase in our addressable market. Now, we are looking to replicate our success across the UK – so far so good.

By creating a best-in-class digital proposition and a product set fit for the future, our goal is to be one of the leading brands in UK garden retail.

We're also planning to grow by further developing our product range, focusing on flowers, outdoor and 'Grow Your Own'. We're enhancing the customer experience by introducing a loyalty scheme, refining our B2B and gifting offerings too.

We're building our content platform with the aim to grow organic website visitors to 100k a month by the end of 2022. Last but not least, we're adding talent to our team, with a focus on marketing, buying, logistics and data.

On a personal level, I know that there is a tonne of research into the benefits of plants around you to benefit mental health. At The Stem, we are avid readers of this research and keen to always learn more. We never want to stop researching, being curious, asking questions – there's always something more to learn. For example, the amount of enquiries we get about air purifying plants is unreal! We want to make sure we are catering to consumer demand as much as we can so if you are a current customer, keep calling and messaging us – we love to hear from you!

What one piece of advice would you give to other founders?

Founding and leading a startup is all about taking calculated risks. Not every decision works out perfectly, but nothing risked nothing gained, so be brave with your decisions and enjoy the journey.

James Folger is CEO and founder at The Stem.

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