

We need to revolutionise business studies in the national curriculum

Ryan Williams is the cofounder of multimillion-pound social media agency KOMI Group. His entrepreneurial journey began as a bit of fun, making parody accounts on Twitter and Facebook. He quickly learned how to monetise his accounts and before long he founded what became KOMI Group with two like-minded social media creators. Within six years, leading the content team, he helped build the business into the industry leader it is today, working with some of the world's most recognisable brands.

Ryan has since exited the business, and has ambitious plans to help young people realise their business potential. He's also on the lookout for his next big challenge in the social media industry. I sat down with the entrepreneur and lifelong Oldham Athletic fan to learn more about how he got to where he is, and what's next.

You co-founded KOMI Group, a social media, marketing, and licensing company. Tell me a bit about KOMI.

Put simply, KOMI builds social media brands for businesses, influencers, and anyone else with a story to tell. It creates unique content to put brands at the top of people's feeds on platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook. KOMI gives clients the outcomes they want, whether that's growing the brand's online presence, promoting a product, or helping creators and brands earn revenue through platform's monetisation tools.

During my time at KOMI, we worked with some of the world's most recognisable brands, from Nando's, Disney, and Vodafone, to CNN, ITV, and BBC. But we didn't start out as an agency. KOMI began as the creator of its own brands, many of which it still owns today, such as It's Gone Viral, Go Fetch, and Ultimate. It was the experience of building these brands that guided our work as an agency.

After six amazing years building KOMI from nothing to a multimillion-pound business with over 80 employees, I decided it was time to cash out and move on to my next challenge.

How did you get into the world of social media business?

Believe it or not, I fell into it by accident. I started out making parody social media accounts as a hobby while I was working in the IT department at Manchester Metropolitan University. I couldn't tell you why I started doing it, but once I started, I couldn't stop. The followers of Deluded Brendan (one of my early parody accounts) were on tenterhooks for his next post!

Some of these accounts, many of which were sport related, but not exclusively, started to build up a mass following and that's really where it all started. At one point the Deluded Brendan account won awards at the Football Blogging Awards and I had to take time off work to accept the nomination despite none of my colleagues knowing I ran it, which made for an interesting conversation.

I first monetised these accounts when a number of betting companies reached out about promoting their content on my sport-related accounts. I also began taking payments for promoting other accounts and even building accounts from scratch, with the help of my existing accounts, and selling these on.

How did KOMI come about?

The founding of KOMI Group definitely wasn't an accident. Once I was making money from my social media pages, I got involved in a network of people running similar accounts. We promoted each other's accounts, shared tips, and built connections – it was the only way we stood a chance against the big players like LADbible.

I met the KOMI cofounders Andrew Trotman and Matt Thomas through that network. We saw the potential to scale up what we were doing, so we took a gamble and dived into what became KOMI. It was a huge step for me, giving up my job with no guarantee of success, but we were quietly confident.

I think it's safe to say it paid off. Within years our flagship page, It's Gone Viral, hit the top five most-viewed pages on Facebook! Things moved fast – we had to keep up with rapidly changing platforms and evolve to use emerging ones like TikTok. We started out producing crass memes, and within a few years we were creating intricate video content. Before long we were an agency working with some colossal brands.

What is it about social media that fascinates you so much?

When I started playing around with social media, it felt like that world reached out and grabbed me. I got a buzz from it, particularly the engagement and the followers. I've always loved the feeling of taking something and making a success of it, which is one of the things I talk to young entrepreneurs about to inspire them to go into business. I got this same feeling, albeit on a smaller scale, from building social media accounts.

Social media also offers people a little bit of escapism and a good laugh, which is so important. Particularly through the pandemic lockdowns we saw the immense role social media could play, not only in keeping people entertained, but also in bringing people together.

Social media platforms are also fantastic resources for entrepreneurial-minded people. Whether you're looking to make some pocket money or build a business, as long as you've got something unique to offer and some free time, you can get started with very little capital.

What are your plans for the future?

My biggest priority now is to support young entrepreneurial-minded people get out into the world and build their own businesses, and pull down the barriers holding so many potential entrepreneurs back.

I'm also continuing to work in the social media space. I've been having some great conversations with people in the industry and have a number of exciting things in the pipeline. More information coming soon on my next big business challenge – so watch this space!

What do you see as the problem or barrier holding aspiring entrepreneurs back?

So many youngsters who have the big idea, the potential, or the right mindset to go out and build a business are being let down by our education system. Schools are missing the mark and failing to teach key enterprise, entrepreneurial, and business skills to children. Instead, they pass on false ideas and negative perceptions about what it takes to found and grow a business.

Right now, we're probably losing 90 per cent of our entrepreneurs because brilliant-minded kids are being put off at day one. We're denying the next generation the opportunity to enrich their lives and their communities.

Business studies, which should be a foundational block for teaching children about what it takes to set-up and run a business, is completely insufficient in its current form. It's far too detail-oriented, theory-driven, and textbook-heavy. It teaches children that if they want to start a business, they need to write an extensive business plan that lays out microscopic detail on sales forecasts, inventory lists, and income statements. This just isn't the case.

Entrepreneurship isn't about carrying out a series of administrative tasks or ticking boxes – there's no conventional way of starting and growing a business. It starts with one big idea, you learn as you go, and you need to be flexible.

How can we fix this problem?

I've got many of the traits of an entrepreneur on paper and I always wanted to work for myself but the myths I was taught at school, particularly in business

studies, made me think I didn't have the patience or the attention-to-detail to start a business, let alone make a success of it. I'll use my story to guide my campaign in this space.

To start, we need to revolutionise business studies in the national curriculum. I want to see a complete overhaul to make it fit for the modern world and the fast-changing industries that fill it. Alongside reform, we need to raise the credibility of business studies. It's often seen as frivolous and is pushed aside in preference for the sciences, Maths, and English – this is such a wasted opportunity to support young business minds.

We also need to get entrepreneurs, startups, and incubators into schools to speak with students. This would be a fantastic way to pass on real-world stories, knowledge, and inspiration to students so they're fully aware of the opportunities available to them, and have a realistic sense of how they can build something of their own.

We must also make it easier for young entrepreneurs to find the right investor. Considering so many investors invest in a person, rather than a business plan, it would be hugely beneficial to have a platform or forum through which entrepreneurs can meet investors, and sell their idea, rather than writing extensive business plans to send out into the ether to no end.

What advice would you give to aspiring entrepreneurs?

Just get an idea and go for it, and be flexible. Just because an idea fails, that doesn't mean it's a bad one, it just means you have to come back and tackle it in a different way. We were always very versatile at KOMI. If one thing didn't work, we'd brainstorm other ways of monetising the following we'd built up across our accounts, and try different approaches until one worked.

Ryan Williams is the cofounder and previous content director of the social media agency *KOMI Group*.