Forest Valley: the climate tech matchmakers helping early-stage startups scale

Frustrated by the number of impactful climate solutions struggling to get traction, a set of entrepreneurs co-founded Forest Valley in 2021. Their mission was clear: bridge the scattered space of climate tech with a digital valley of innovation.

"For a long time, I'd been frustrated at the pace of change in sustainability," says Giulia Marsaglia, the co-founder and Head of Startup Programs at _Forest Valley._

"With so many promising technologies in their infancy across clean energy, efficient production and waste management, I wanted to create a sustainability-focused accelerator that would help these products go to market faster."

In 2021, Giulia and a group of entrepreneurs across multiple backgrounds and industries founded Forest Valley to do exactly this. The plan? Transform the climate tech industry from the inside out by building a holistic tech ecosystem – one that matches promising early-stage startups to investors, shareholders and industry professionals to help them attract funding, drive revenue and create impact.

We ask Giulia how her work is levelling the climate tech playing field and putting solutions straight into the hands of the buyers and investors who need them.

Planting a seed for change

Prior to Forest Valley, Giulia was working in business model innovation for a consulting company based in Zürich, Switzerland. The pandemic forced Giulia to return to her home country of Italy, which led to a meeting with an entrepreneur who shared her frustration at the pace of change: Paolo Meola.

"It was a case of the right thing at the right time," says Giulia. "At Forest Valley, we decided early on that we wanted to facilitate the integration between climate tech startups and buyers by providing training across different verticals, from operations to finance, and resources."

"We see so many patterns in the challenges facing early-stage startup founders and part of our role is in sharing that knowledge, to prevent them from falling into the same challenges."

The process is twofold. "We first bring knowledge to the buyers to prime them to welcome innovation and mitigate any resistance to change," explains Giulia. "And then we help the startups by providing the connections, resources and community to scale."

Telling the right story to investors

One of the biggest challenges that Giulia sees in early-stage startups is in communication – specifically, the need to connect technical expertise with the reality of customer challenges.

"To gain commercial traction, you have to connect your technical expertise and product – whether a new material or an algorithm – to the reality of customer challenges," says Giulia. "If you bring technical expertise, look to partner with an advisor or co-founder who has demonstrated business acumen and can

communicate your solution's value to investors and potential customers."

"One of the most common pitfalls that we see in founders is the belief that a product with a positive environmental impact is attractive by default. It's not true."

"Most climate tech investors are seeing hundreds of promising startups a month. In order to stand out, founders need to be able to show an understanding of the customer challenge, demonstrate a scalable commercial model and tell a story that includes the right stats on return on investment (ROI) to inform their decision."

"When startup founders are able to do this in their pitch and tell a story about their mission, that's when they receive large rounds of fundraising. Having a fantastic technical product is no longer enough."

Applying strategic design principles to innovation

Giulia's background is in strategic product design. In the first year of Forest Valley, Giulia dedicated everything to building the digital ecosystem from the ground up, applying the strategic design principles from Delft University to help the team get comfortable with venturing into the unknown, complex and brand-new.

"Will this have an impact? Is it relevant to what I want to do? And does it make me happy?"

Giulia applies these three questions to her daily work to aid effective prioritisation. "When Paolo and I started Forest Valley, there were so many

ideas and opportunities that we could have pursued. Back then, we didn't have the resources to meet them all, so our success lay in effective prioritisation," says Giulia.

"The climate space is a particularly complex and dynamic one – and one with many stakeholders. The principles of product design can help guide stakeholders and move a project from its infancy into something that is desirable, feasible and viable."

Developing a culture of psychological safety

The strength of the Forest Valley ecosystem and community is testament to Giulia and the alignment of her co-founders.

"Everything is connected under the overarching mission to help accelerate startup growth and drive meaningful impact," says Giulia. "We value empowering individuals through a culture of psychological safety – applying the principles of listening and continuous feedback from strategic design."

"In design, empathy plays a key role in success. It's the same with startups."

According to Giulia, this empathy is one of the things that founders appreciate the most. "After the Sandbox Program, founders often continue the relationship with other startups through supportive cohorts. Meanwhile, we act as advisors to our startup community and provide the strategic frameworks, resources and community to guide their growth, rather than tell them how to do it."

The Forest Valley Sandbox Program

Every year, Forest Valley runs four editions of the Sandbox Program: an accelerator designed to help early-stage B2B startups in the climate space scale fast. Applications are always open and the program is free of charge to join.

"We actively look for solutions that can demonstrate a proven impact and are

looking to raise up to $4-5 million in Series A funding," says Giulia.

Another arm of the Forest Valley ecosystem lies in its investment.

"We recently launched the Forest Valley catalyst – an investment vehicle that comes equipped with its first $500k," Giulia explains. "In the coming months, we will be putting a personal stake in one Forest Valley startup to help them grow."

Prioritising impact

According to Giulia, the solutions that she predicts will grow the fastest in the next few years are those that target the worst offenders in carbon emissions: food, energy, infrastructure and fashion.

"We are also seeing incredible new capabilities thanks to the increased accuracy of satellite data," says Giulia.

One of the startups in Forest Valley's alumni is the digital agriculture platform, _Agrovisio_. Agrovisio uses the surge in the quality of satellite observations to give over 20,000 farmers across Europe an affordable way to optimise their farming yields while simultaneously reducing carbon emissions.

The startup has already made an incredible impact on crop yield and agricultural communities across Europe, including working with the likes of the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the General Doctorate of Agricultural Research in Turkey.

A future of top-down and bottom-up approaches to innovation

For Giulia, her vision of a climate utopia ten years from now is to see climate solutions implemented in less than twenty to thirty years. An approach that will take both a change in customer behaviour and buying habits, as well as top-down policy changes to influence human behaviour.

"So many opportunities are untapped: solutions for fashion industries to use waste products to produce new products, solutions to improve battery efficiency, or even ones to make methane for cooking for hours at home."

"In many cases, we know what we need to do. The question is, how do we put solutions into the hands of companies and consumers to make it a reality? That is exactly what we're looking to answer at Forest Valley."

Giulia Marsaglia is the cofounder and Head of Startup Programs at _Forest Valley_. To learn more about the Sandbox Accelerator Program, click _here_. Applications for the next cohort end on the 23rd of July.

Article by EMMA PEGG