

Beautiful, functional and planet friendly homeware, meet REBORN

As part of a series about Virgin StartUp's Collective Impact programme, Maddyness spoke to Brian Walmsley, CEO and Founder of Reborn.

I've worked in homewares for many years, for organisations such as Joseph Joseph and EKO. Homeware brands design lots of lovely looking products, but manufacturing is invariably outsourced to factories and sub-contractors in places like Asia, using mostly virgin materials and resulting in long-distance shipping practices. Moreover, these products are often non-recyclable at end of life and so ultimately end up landfill, as yet another part of our staggering quantity of waste – averaging 409kg of waste per person in the UK alone each year. This is an unsustainable approach which therefore creates a huge opportunity to create a more climate-positive industry.

My passion lies in product innovation and design, and creating my own range of more sustainable homewares has been a long-held ambition. Speaking to retailers such as John Lewis, it's clear that there is strong demand for a more sustainable and more circular approach to homewares. This is something that ReBorn delivers.

Can you share your elevator pitch?

Homewares is a huge industry full of great brands and products: but mostly imported from Asia, made from Virgin materials and 'co-moulded' with different

materials, making them non-recyclable or repairable. ReBorn is dedicated to creating beautiful, functional and planet friendly homewares. Our products are all made in the UK, from recycled materials and 'circular by design'.

Can you tell our readers about your engagement with Virgin StartUp?

Last October, I joined the Collective Impact programme run by Virgin StartUp – which is an accelerator programme that runs over ten weeks, bringing together an amazing network of like-minded founders and supporting mentors and businesses.

As well as providing an opportunity to meet key members of the Virgin team, I was also fortunate enough to meet some of the Branson Family who, given their strong focus on investing in purpose-led businesses, subsequently decided to invest in ReBorn, helping to realise our ambition to drive change in the homewares sector.

Tell us about the working culture at ReBorn

ReBorn's culture is all about empowerment and networking, with a view to transforming the sustainability of the homewares industry. This includes the team, our partners and our growing network of customers and supporters. I believe strongly in the ethos of "People, Planet, Profit", i.e. doing things that are right for people and planet first; and using resources (profit) as the enabler to make that happen.

What has been your biggest challenge so far and how have you overcome this?

Manufacturing in the UK has been harder, slower and more expensive than I could have possibly imagined and it's been incredibly challenging to find the right partners. Fortunately, we've now managed to develop deep partnerships with some excellent, like-minded organisations who have been paramount to our success to date.

What's in store for the future?

Lots of new products and categories are in development. The potential is almost endless for turning waste into beautiful new products. Watch this space!

Can you talk about why you put purpose at the centre of building ReBorn?

ReBorn was created to drive change and to have a positive and much needed impact on the homewares industry. Purpose has never been a secondary element that needed adding onto the business.

What barriers have you faced in realising your entrepreneurial ambitions?

The business is capital intensive due to tooling and materials involved, so securing finance was the key challenge to launching ReBorn and to delivering a brand and product that realised our sustainable ambition without compromising on the quality of our products.

How can we make entrepreneurship more accessible in the UK?

Two things would help: education and tax.

Entrepreneurship is a skill that can and should be taught – and it should reach people from all social demographics. We need a wide variety of hands-on courses for founders to road test and develop ideas. So much of education policy is focused on the young, or is heavily academic though courses such as the Open University or MBAs, some of which can be very expensive. Many of the best entrepreneurs are well into their careers or family lives, and can bring their experience to exciting new segments. Accelerator schemes like the ones Virgin offer are a fantastic way to fill some of that gap. So much more could be done to help educate and empower start-ups from all parts of our society.

In relation to tax... SEIS/EIS is a truly amazing scheme. In addition to this, it would help to reduce taxes on jobs (NI & lower bands of income tax), and reduce taxes and barriers with Europe. Specifically in relation to climate

entrepreneurship, I'd love to see a more progressive taxation system that targets uses of fossil fuels, carbon emissions and waste generators.

What one piece of advice would you give other founders or future founders?

One of the best things about being a founder is that you can choose the people you work with – and build an organisation around their unique talents and resources.

So my advice for other founders would be to think hard about your network: who are the people and businesses that will help you succeed and where are the gaps in your capability that need filling. Keep asking for recommendations and suggestions until you fill those gaps!

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

Most days I will either cycle or walk the dog first thing in the morning – to get fresh air, exercise and to engage positively with other people. My family and friends give me such joy, so I always try to have dates in the diary to look forward to with them, and I generally try to treasure and celebrate each day as a gift on this beautiful planet.

Brian Walmsley is the CEO and founder of Reborn (reborn.homes).

Virgin StartUp is the not-for-profit home of entrepreneurship at the Virgin Group, helping early-stage founders start, fund and scale the businesses they're passionate. Its *Collective Impact programme* is an investment-readiness accelerator specifically for UK startups that want to have a positive impact in the world and are raising investment for the first time. In 2022, 24 founders completed the seven-week programme and raised £4M.