

Husmus, fair, transparent and ethical insurance for all

As part of a series with Google for Startups Black Founders Fund, Maddyness spoke to Sarah Wernér at Husmus about funding, plans for the future and their advice for other founders.

Our startup was born out of personal frustration, a common theme among many startups. My husband and I had rented in London for a long time, and it was almost always an expensive experience laced with bias. I can't tell you the number of times we were passed up for doctors because it's assumed they will make for better tenants. When we became accidental landlords, we finally understood what was really at the heart of issues. A fear of financial loss!

Unfortunately there were no insurance products that helped tenants and landlords achieve their goals. That's what we set out to change.

Tell me about the business – what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so

on?

Husmus is an insurance marketplace where renters and home providers get matched to relevant cover based on their own unique needs and circumstances. All products are new and designed in conjunction with insurance companies to help people safeguard their continued access to homes. For example our renters insurance, which launches this year, is designed to replace deposits. Renters, and therefore their landlords, are protected against financial loss from damage, unpaid rent and other tenancy mishaps. We are really proud of the fact that this reduces deposit expenses by 90% and ends this cycle of constantly having to provide guarantors or pay advanced rent. It even covers pet damage!

Can you tell our readers about your engagement with the Google for Startups Black Founders Fund?

Black founders have a unique challenge when it comes to funding. For every £1M white founders receive, a Black founder only receives £2,500. Take a minute to really think about that. Many try to rationalise, justify and explain it away, but very few try to change it. That's where programs like Google for Startups Black Founders Fund come in. They provide both funding and expertise to support the growth of Black owned businesses.

We have been part of the GfS program for a couple of months now, and we have already felt its impact. When one of the most successful companies in the world believes in your dream, it is not only a confidence boost but massive social validation.

The funding is fantastic and will enable us to hire the staff needed to provide better experiences for our users.

The biggest win, and what the team and I are most excited about, is gaining access to Google's expertise and network. It's no secret that Google only hires the best of the best, and their products make life easier for millions of people. With insights from their experts, we hope to achieve the same level of success.

Tell us about the working culture at

Husmus

Startups live and die based on their ability to attract and keep talented teams. I spend a lot of time working on getting the right balance of achieving our goals and being a great place to work. Our team structure. My style is firm but fair and requires tons of communication. We all have our area of expertise and are trusted with what I term “autonomous teamwork”. This means we are all pulling together towards the same results even though we may be working on different parts of that plan.

How are you funded?

A combination of self-funding, angels, GfS, Innovate UK.

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

There have been two key challenges we’ve faced – convincing insurance companies to try something new and financing our venture.

To the first point, insurance companies do very well selling products that haven’t changed much since their inception. However, customer needs have changed. The way we live and earn a living has changed. Convincing insurance companies there is a better way to classify risk that will unlock a whole new market segment for them was the first major challenge we faced.

To the second major challenge, building a startup is difficult. It requires a village of people who believe in your vision of the future and are prepared to put their time, energy and capital into seeing you succeed. However, as a young Black female leader, especially in financial services, your presence is unusual. In a world where investment decisions are more art than science, investors are rarely prepared to provide capital to people who do not look like them or mirror their life experiences. We mainly bootstrapped our business but that was not entirely by choice. Between 2009 and 2019, only around 40 black founders in the UK have raised VC capital. It’s not an accident, it’s by design. As a result we’ve had to work even harder to achieve the same outcomes as our peers with a fraction of the budget. That’s why Google’s program is so important and impactful.

How does Husmus answer an unmet need?

Renters who do not fit expected lifestyles typically struggle to access homes at the same terms as everyone else. Such as a renter with a pet having to pay an extra £50 a month in rent to cover potential damage, or a self-employed person having to pay 6 months in advance or £400 a year for a corporate guarantor. Several of these practices while individually rational create a system of inequality and leave many in financial hardship. Until Husmus, there was no fair alternative.

What's in store for the future?

In the immediate term we are focused on releasing our new product lines that will provide cover that enables pet owners to rent homes more easily and scaling our platform to deal with millions of monthly users. We won't stop until every household can access the financial products they need to improve the way they live.

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

Talk to your customers! Speak to as many of them as possible. Understand their issues. Discuss your ideas, implement their feedback.

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

My focus at the moment is self-care! Aside from Husmus, I have an actual human baby now! When you wear hats and have several people counting on you it's easy to forget to take time for yourself. I am still trying to work out that delicate balance. If someone has cracked a solution, please let me know!

Sarah Wernér is cofounder and CEO at [Husmus](#).

The [Black Founders Fund](#) aims to tackle racial inequality in venture capital funding. In June 2023, 40 selected Black-led startups received \$150,000 each in non-dilutive cash awards through the fund. The Black Founders Fund was

first launched in 2021 with a \$2M (£1.5M) fund – this year’s fund doubled to \$4M (approx. £3.3M).

Prior to the fund’s launch in 2021, less than 0.25% of venture capital (VC) funding went to Black-led startups in the UK.

British tech startups make up a quarter of the 40 companies selected across Europe and are set to transform a wide range of sectors – this year’s UK startups are using technology to transform the fitness industry, tackle the country’s workforce shortage and disrupt rental insurance.

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