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Internet Icons: Creating big business online

On Tuesday 7 February 2017, we hosted a panel discussion - Inspiring Entrepreneurs: Internet Icons - which was moderated by journalist and TV broadcaster, Nadine Dereza. On the night we were joined by Ella Mills of [Deliciously Ella](#), Rupert Hunt of [Spare Room](#), Sarah Wood of [Unruly](#) and Aron Gelbard of [Bloom & Wild](#). The event was also live screened to all 10 of the Business & IP Centre's across the country, as well as a webcast to viewers across the world.

About the speakers

[Deliciously Ella](#) – Ella's business empire began with a blog and quickly developed into a popular brand. Her entrepreneurial rise has seen the opening of two London-based deli's, four published books and the development of her own food range.



[SpareRoom](#) – Rupert Hunt created the UK's busiest flatshare site, SpareRoom.com which receives over two million hits a month. The company has now expanded its services to the United States and can be used all over America.



Bloom & Wild – Aron Gelbard is the co-founder of Bloom & Wild. His company has redefined the online flower delivery service, delivering pristine flowers without the recipient needing to be at home. Bloom & Wild has been rated as the top online flower delivery service in the UK and developed the leading flower delivery app.



Unruly – Sarah Wood is the co-founder and CEO of the video ad-tech company, Unruly. Assisting companies to create unique online video content since 2006 Unruly provides a platform that helps brands to reach an audience of 1.44 billion.



A powerful tool for business growth

With the internet playing such a vital role in the modern business world, it is important for business owners to learn how four very different companies harnessed the power of the internet to scale up and grow successfully. When considering the statistics, it's no surprise that more and more businesses are going online and as Isabel Oswell, Head of Business Audiences at the British Library, explained, "90% of people connected online in the UK, three-quarters of these have bought online and the online retail market continues to grow by 15-20% each year". For most businesses today ignoring the internet is no longer an option, and with numbers like these, why would they?



The Myth of the Big Idea

The audience was keen to quiz the online trailblazers who weren't shy in offering wise words of advice for our budding entrepreneurs. Each of them drew from their own unique experiences to answer a variety of relevant questions, covering everything from surviving knock-backs to how social media can help businesses to grow.

Both Rupert Hunt and Sarah Wood were keen to stress that the myth of 'the big idea' was something that entrepreneurs had to be wary of when trying to start up. Rupert's position was clear, "don't get hung up on the big idea, get to the market and let the market guide you". Indeed, the internet provides the perfect platform for many small businesses to gauge how their prospective customers feel about their products and services. If they react well, you'll quickly know that you're on to something - and, even if the response is not what you expected, you'll be able to learn how to improve what you do for your target audience. Sarah expanded on this point, explaining how [Unruly](#) started out as an online sharing board in 2006 but quickly noticed that the video content posted always had the most online engagement. Noticing this trend in audience behaviour, encouraged the company to create a 'top 100 chart' for online video content and, in turn, led to big brands wanting their videos featured. Today, Unruly is one of the biggest names in online advertising and works with 91% of the Ad 100 brands. It is also active in 20 locations worldwide and was acquired by News Corp in 2015.

The Power of Social Media

For most small businesses, developing a strong and loyal fan base of millions may seem unrealistic at best. However, we now have the online tools to reach people from far and wide with engaging and unique content. Ella drew on her own entrepreneurial journey advising the audience to, "never underestimate the power of social media when building your audience and business". Having battled through a traumatic illness, Ella had changed her diet and lifestyle as a means of improving her health. After receiving encouragement to write a blog post for her friends and family, she quickly noticed that there were many people who were interested in what she had to say. The frequent engagement with her online followers quickly established a platform from which a successful business could be built. [Deliciously Ella](#) has now

become a popular brand in its own right and has seen the development of a successful bricks and clicks business.



A big boost for small business

The panel was keen to stress how the internet can also make it much easier for small businesses to enter already established markets. Both [Bloom & Wild](#) and [SpareRoom](#) transformed their respective markets by developing solutions to age-old problems. Rupert spoke of how the 'crazy housing market' in London had inspired his business idea to develop an online tool that would work much like a match-making site for renters. Having experienced the London rental market himself, he used his knowledge to focus on making a product that saved renters money and matched them with people they would get along with. The platform has proven to be so popular that SpareRoom currently has over 7 million registered users, and helps one person every three minutes to find a flatmate in the UK. Having conquered the UK, SpareRoom has set up shop in America and is already close to reaching a quarter of a million users in the United States.

Learn as you earn

Similarly, Aron Gelbard of Bloom & Wild entered a market with large established companies but was able to successfully promote its unique selling point to a large online audience. For Aron, the success of Bloom & Wild only cemented his belief that simple day-to-day things can lead to successful business ideas, and although he had made a few mistakes along the way, he was keen to urge our audience to "carry on learning" as they embarked on their entrepreneurial journeys.

Want to hear from more entrepreneurs who've shaken the business world? Hear the co-founder of Lonely Planet, Tony Wheeler, speak on the trip of a lifetime which inspired this now global brand. With over 130 million travel guides in 14 different languages, Lonely Planet is the biggest travel publisher in the world. Its humble beginnings may surprise some, but it is a reminder to us all that today's small businesses have the potential to be tomorrow's big brands. Taking place on 27 February, this is a 'must attend' event – [book your ticket here](#).

