

Case Study: Indigo Tree

‘My vision is to be the leading SME-focused WordPress agency in the UK.’

Indigo Tree Digital is a web design agency based in Hertfordshire. Its core business is developing digital solutions, from simple websites for charities to complex e-commerce sites hosted on secure platforms for clients in the retail, education, hospitality and business services sectors.

Indigo’s Managing Director, Louise Towler, joined the first cohort of Brunel’s Help to Grow: Management programme – although she wasn’t expecting to take part when she applied. ‘I just filled in the form and sent it in,’ she recalls. ‘A few weeks later, someone from Brunel phoned and said, “Would you like a place?” I nearly fell off my chair!’

As Louise explains, the programme was a fairly new direction for her. ‘You don’t need any qualifications to start a business,’ she points out. ‘I’ve done bits and pieces of training, but nothing as formal as this.’

Louise’s work on Help to Grow covered a range of areas, including examining Indigo Tree’s business model, developing a marketing strategy, exploring segmentation and positioning, reviewing skills and training needs, improving operational efficiency and targeting a major new product launch for 2023. Full details of the firm’s themes, actions and outcomes during HTGM are shown on the snake diagram.

Sustainable growth

One of Louise’s main priorities is to grow her business in a sustainable way, and Help to Grow helped her develop her vision of what that might mean. ‘I first heard about the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals about three years ago,’ she explains. ‘I went to a talk at a local business group and someone was there from Epson, who have done a lot of work in this area. At that point, I realised that it’s so much more than just window-dressing.’

The discussion on sustainability during Help to Grow reminded Louise goals she had set earlier in Indigo Tree’s development. ‘One of our core values is inclusivity, especially for minorities and people who are often marginalised by society,’ she says. ‘Admittedly, as a web agency, we’re not in the business of saving lives, and our clients aren’t at the Epson level of CSR. But there are still little things we can do. And little things matter because if everyone does little things, big things will happen.’

Putting her money where her mouth is, Louise aims to donate 1% of Indigo Tree's profits to the community. Now she's talking to her team about how they can incorporate sustainability into the company's values in a more formal way – not least because of the commercial benefits it can bring. 'At the most basic level, it's a marketing tool, because it differentiates us from competitors,' Louise points out. 'All else being equal, it gives people more confidence in us. A lot of the people working with us are young marketers and content editors in their 20s and 30s, and sustainability is really important to them. At the end of the day, people buy from people they like.'

Freeing up time

One of the strengths of Help to Grow is its strategic focus, which marks it out from much of the commercial, off-the-shelf training available in the marketplace. 'While there's a wide range of training out there, a lot of it is companies trying to flog their own methodologies,' notes Louise. 'Help to Grow is a step up from that – something more strategic.'

While working on the strategy and innovation module in Help to Grow, Louise sharpened up her vision of the medium-term development of Indigo Tree. 'I've got a pretty clear idea of what we're going to look like in three years' time, and in five years' time,' she says.

One of Louise's main priorities is recruiting more executives to free up her own time. 'I need to put people in place to handle the day-to-day, so I'm not so heavily involved,' she says. 'For example, in three years, I will have someone in a sales and marketing role, so it's not just me being wheeled out to talk to the bigger clients. Then I can focus on getting out there, doing some public speaking, representing the brand. A recent talk that I delivered brought in two direct leads, right then and there.'

Alongside Louise's own profile-building activities, Indigo Tree has also stepped up its content marketing and social media efforts, achieving a significant increase in LinkedIn followers as a result.

Refining the value proposition

Another strategic priority for Indigo Tree is refining the firm's value proposition, teasing out different themes using the business-model canvas approach that forms a central part of Help to Grow.

'With the team, I want to look at the elements of our value proposition, and what customers really value,' explains Louise. 'Some of our services, like web consultancy

and design development, are quite strategic – whereas others, like web support and hosting, are more functional. So we might split them out into different canvases, reflecting the different experiences that clients have at different stages of their journey with us.’

Help to Grow gave Louise the opportunity to share ideas with other SME leaders in related industries, which unlocked new insights she could use at Indigo Tree. ‘It was really interesting to talk to people in similar areas to us,’ she says. ‘Three of us had a conversation about pricing and proposals, and how we pitched to clients – that was fascinating.’

People and processes

Help to Grow has highlighted the importance of team-building and a nurturing culture at Indigo Tree. ‘We’re looking to minimise employee turnover, so myself and my two fellow senior managers check in with people regularly to make sure we’re doing the right thing by them,’ explains Louise. ‘Our daily update channel on Slack used to be just a digital to-do list – but now we also ask everyone, “How do you feel?” Each person answers in their own way, but it’s just nice to see people’s personalities, rather than the communication being purely transactional.’

Women represent just 20% of the workforce in the Information and Communications Technology industry, and Indigo Tree is doing its bit to redress the balance. ‘We tweaked our recruitment ad to attract more female developers,’ says Louise. ‘The words you use, and the way you say things, make such a big difference. It took us a few iterations to get it right, but in the end we took on two female candidates.’

Following these changes, the workforce at Indigo Tree is now over 40% female – over twice the overall industry rate.

Award winner

During her time with Help to Grow, Louise applied for Innovate UK’s Women in Innovation Awards. As she explains, her involvement grew directly out of her work on the programme. ‘One of the professors emailed me and said, “Have you seen this award?”’ she recalls. ‘I saw that a lot of the questions and criteria were things we’d been talking about on Help to Grow. So I spent around three days running around like a headless chicken trying to get it all written and produce my three-minute video!’

There were over 800 entrants for the award, and Louise was one of 38 winners announced in March 2022. As a result, she received a £50,000 grant and a bespoke package of mentoring, coaching and business support from Innovate UK.

Looking to the future

Summing up the benefits that she has gained from Help to Grow, Louise points to leadership development, team growth, boosted project value and ambitious future plans.

‘I’ve learned that my value as a leader is in the impact I can have on the company,’ she says. ‘We’ve gained another two employees, and the average value of a customer project has increased by £1000–£2000. While profits have narrowed slightly, it’s only because we now have the confidence to invest more for the future.’