

THERE'S POWER IN NUMBERS



**Forward facing:
Tamara Littleton
mentors female
entrepreneurs**

are less likely than men to know other entrepreneurs or to have access to sponsors, mentors or professional support networks. Even though 31 per cent of women surveyed highlighted the importance of networking as a business skill, compared with 21 per cent of men, only 30 per cent of women said they knew an entrepreneur, versus 38 per cent for men.

Littleton discovered that networks started opening up only once her business was turning over £1 million – “That’s when the help comes.” She joined The Supper Club, a members’ club for founders and chief executives. “It’s a group of around 500 entrepreneurs and it’s incredible peer support – sharing successes and failures, helping each other,” she says. Mentors who open up their little black books and can solve your problem with a phone number “are just gold dust”, says Littleton, “and that’s what you don’t have when learning from scratch. Having a trusted network makes you move faster.”

With DWEN, she has been able to forge these lasting connections on a global scale. “I find that really great. I met members in Singapore last year and we’ve stayed in contact,” she says.

Ingrid Devin, DWEN’s global leader, believes a lack of mentors can be a barrier to growing a business because “you need a strong team, and personal and business mentors play a critical role in feedback and guidance”.

Connecting with other female entrepreneurs is vital in a number of ways, says Devin, such as access to a community of peers who understand the challenges, and advice and support from credible experts. Meeting those further ahead in terms of scale is crucial too. “As one member said, ‘I have £1 million in revenue but I want to get to £5 million so I need to meet with others who are at £5 million and find out how they did!’”

Social media research conducted by social intelligence agency Storyful found that popular events for female entrepreneurs included informational and networking sessions. The Storyful report, commissioned by Dell in February, also found that social media posts about awards ceremonies, personal milestones and accomplishments were often an inspiration, and that regional stories resonated online, amplified by local communities and support groups.

Having the right tools is key too, says Rachel Wilkins, Dell UK’s marketing director. “From laptops to workstations to award-winning monitors – before even getting into servers and storage solutions – Dell is there for every business owner,” she says. “We have tech advisers available on chat or on the phone for advice on products but also offer 24-hour aftercare so your business doesn’t stop running.”



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Tamara Littleton taught herself to code and started her successful social media agency long before the days of Facebook. Now she supports and inspires other women

Tamara Littleton was, she admits, a bit naughty when she was at convent school. The entrepreneur who grew up to found The Social Element social media agency was fascinated by computing, and even driven to subterfuge when it did not feature on her timetable. “I took a key, used it to break into the computer room and I taught myself to code,” she remembers. “At home I had a Sinclair ZX81 and I used to get magazines from WHSmith and code games.”

A self-proclaimed “out and proud geek”, Littleton’s trend-bucking did not stop with her aptitude for STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects, areas in which women continue to be underrepresented. When she founded her company 18 years ago – then called Emoderation – she was entering uncharted territory.

“I set up a social media agency before social media was really a thing. Facebook hadn’t started, YouTube, Twitter – none of those things,” says Littleton.

In the early noughties she advised online forums and virtual networks on child safety and reputation management. From the start

she took a global outlook and attracted some big American clients including Disney, Chevron and GE. “I’ve built the business into The Social Element, turning over £9.5 million a year. We employ around 300 people, a mixture of staff and freelancers, with people working remotely all over the world.”

Littleton relied on her own confidence and entrepreneurial spirit to navigate the early days. “There wasn’t really anyone telling me how to do it – there was a distinct lack of mentors,” she recalls. “It can be an incredibly lonely time. Having those ups and downs where you’d win clients and sometimes lose clients – and the worry that every entrepreneur has: are you going to be able to pay everybody? I went through all of these, and it was hard because I had to rely on my own resilience.”

This experience inspired Littleton to mentor other female entrepreneurs, helping them to scale up their businesses. One group she shares her knowledge with is DWEN, the Dell Women’s Entrepreneurs Network, which supports an international community.

The Alison Rose Review of Female Entrepreneurship in the UK found that women

**‘Having
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**Support can help
you to focus on
what you do best**



Enterprise Nation is a UK-wide network of small businesses. Its founder Emma Jones says: “Starting and growing a business can be tough. So it’s vital to surround yourself with support. This could be psychological backing from a partner or spouse on challenging days, expert advice from

specialists such as accountants or marketing professionals or peer support from fellow founders.

“You can build this network by attending events and through gathering a group of online supporters. The ideal scenario is that your support group includes customers – who better to cheer you on

than the community that buys from you? Women, by nature, tend to be multi-taskers, which is a great asset when running a business but can be a limiting factor as you are growing.

“Focus on what you do best and outsource the rest. This is where a strong support network comes into its own.”