

Saving the world, one toilet joke at a

For many, the pandemic spelled disaster, but for Who Gives a Crap CEO Simon Griffiths, COVID-19 sent his profits soaring. And in Simon's case, more profit equals more toilets.

BY EMILY McAULIFFE

At just 27 – not an age in the high-risk demographic for deep-vein thrombosis – Simon Griffiths' doctor thought it unusual that an otherwise healthy young man had presented with concerns about DVT, citing pain in his calves and quads.

Though the medical assessment cleared Simon (TC 2001) of the condition he feared, the quad pangs signalled nerve damage (which would linger for another three years) and proved that the entrepreneur had literally suffered for his cause.

Sitting on a toilet for 50 hours in an attempt to raise \$50,000 will do that.

While painful, and at times hallucinatory, Simon's bold crowdfunding stunt was successful, and he and his two co-founders of Who Gives a Crap – a toilet paper company that donates 50 per cent of its profits to charity – almost doubled their fundraising target, clocking in at \$93,000.

It was 2012 – a time when crowdfunding was novel and 'going viral' had only recently been facilitated by Facebook's new share function. It was also a time when social entrepreneurship was an unfamiliar concept, and Who Gives a Crap was about to become a global leader in showing how benevolence and aid could be remodelled.

'The philanthropy market is relatively fixed in terms of its size,' says Simon. 'I could see that organisations were essentially competing against each other for a fixed pool of funds. They were celebrating when they won – not realising they had taken funding away from three or five other organisations competing for the same money.'

That's where one of the most popular fast-moving consumer goods came into the equation: toilet paper. A good decade before hoarding toilet paper became a national obsession, Simon walked into the bathroom, saw a six-pack of loo paper and thought, I should start a company called Who Gives a Crap and use half the funds to help build toilets in developing countries. It was that easy. Well, sort of.

While the idea and ensuing success of Who Gives a Crap came quickly (a projected three-month supply sold out in just five days following its initial production run, with the company making \$8.3 million worth of donations since), like many entrepreneurs, Simon's success grew from failure.

In 2007, he had founded the online fundraising platform Ripple with Jehan Ratnatunga (who would go on to co-found Who Gives a Crap) and fellow Trinity alum Matthew Tilleard. Ripple enjoyed some early success but soon proved unsustainable. Next came Shebeen, a bar that donated 100 per cent of its profits. Simon's hard lessons ►



time



Amid the great toilet paper apocalypse of 2020, Who Gives a Crap saw an 1100 per cent increase in demand, at one stage selling almost 30 rolls of toilet paper per second. As a result, the company made a \$5.85 million donation to their partner NGOs for the 2019-20 financial year.



Simon in Timor-Leste, visiting one of WaterAid's projects in the field.



from the now-defunct CBD hangout were that: one, there's no equity in a non-profit to help the business grow; two, hospitality is tough, even if you are in it for profit; and three, setting up a bar next to the East Melbourne police station's sleeping quarters was not a good idea.

The Shebeen experience amounted to what Simon describes as a 'three-year, very expensive MBA', but learning from its failure, he, Jehan and third Who Gives a Crap co-founder Danny Alexander steered clear of the not-for-profit model. 'We believed we could grow [Who Gives a Crap] twice as fast by re-investing our profits and getting the [staff] incentives working,' says Simon. 'If you can grow the business twice as fast, you can have the same impact donating half the profits.'

However, the business's master plan extends past the profiting power of Who Gives a Crap. The aim is to light the path for other businesses, which can help tackle issues beyond sanitation. 'There are a lot of social problems that need to be resolved, so if we're going to have the most impact, we can show that business models like ours achieve social impact at scale as well as financial returns at scale,' says Simon. 'The best thing we can do is to prove we can make a profit,

because that's ultimately how we'll get more people coming into the sector and having a crack at some of the other social problems that exist.'

Simon's philanthropic bent stems from his travels to south-east Asia, Central America and Africa during his university years, where he went in search of cheap holiday destinations and started doing development work. His entrepreneurial spirit on the other hand manifested in childhood. 'I was the kid that looked after people's cats when they went away for pocket money,' says Simon. His schoolboy hustling levelled up when he made and sold sand boards to friends so they could surf the dunes in his home state of WA.

During a post-school gap year, Simon taught himself how to code and used his freelance web development funds to put himself through university, while a Trinity scholarship gave him access to a collegiate education. This he relished, getting involved in athletics, football, hockey, swimming and the TCAC,

alongside his role as Music Society treasurer and coordinator of events such as Clean Up Australia day and Shave for a Cure.

Simon found he liked doing a lot of things but working for someone else on problems he didn't care about wasn't one of them. 'When you did well at university, you got funnelled into a corporate job and there wasn't another pathway that was seen to be viable,' he says, reflecting on his brief foray into the corporate world. 'I always saw [my development work] as a hobby until I started to think about doing something other than management consulting, and thought my fascination with the developing world could be turned into a viable career.'

And a viable career he now has. Through Who Gives a Crap, Simon transformed one of the least-sexy household items into something fun and desirable through the use of playful colours, poignant storytelling and plenty of toilet humour, finding the sweet spot between commercial success and social responsibility. As for sitting on the throne for 50 hours to get there, Simon says: 'I'd never do it again, but it was the right thing to do.'

