

SheHer

Tech GIANTS

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I'm **Gemma Telford**, Founder of She/Her Ltd, and I specialise in human marketing for technology businesses. My work redefines and evolves traditional marketing in the IT sector through a more collaborative, flexible, human-centric approach. Cultivating partnerships that deliver mutual value by starting real conversations and delivering work which excites, inspires and connects people.

I started **Tech Giants** to celebrate some of the great people I've worked with in the channel over the last 20 years and to share their wisdom and knowledge with others. I hope you enjoy reading about them!

Gemma: So, the first question, Craig is what is your current role and how did you get into it?

Craig: I'm Managing Director at Utopia Computers. I grew up with my Dad running various different businesses - a card shop, a restaurant, pub, a garage. He tried his hand at a lot of different things. But the one constant was always technology. One of my very first memories is him bringing a Spectrum home and I was sitting trying to work out how to get it to do something - even get it to start at all! So, I had really early memories of having a lot of fun with him just exploring technology and he loved technology as well.

Anyway in between one of the businesses that didn't do so well and his next venture, which was roundabout the time people were starting to get internet at home, he decided that just to help people get connected to the internet and show them how to use how a computer at home could be useful. He loved doing that and then he got a market stall and started selling bits and pieces of technology. I was helping him so I would get up at 4am or whatever in the morning on a Saturday or Sunday morning to help pack the car and drive off to some cold racecourse somewhere sell to sell technology. I had no idea that I was going to end up in the tech world. I actually just saw it as learning. I got to

spend time with my Dad and I was learning about sales. I hated talking to anyone - I was so nervous I couldn't speak in front of people - and my Dad was telling me it's going to be good for me to get the experience and learn about sales.

Then I went off to Uni and did a media tech degree. I wanted to keep working in technology, but I still didn't know really what my career would be. But Uni went really well. I ended up making a movie and it got taken over to New York Film Festival. I got to go to New York to see the film in an actual cinema and it was a bit of a kind of sliding doors moment for me because I was there and I was in New York and I was surrounded by people that were all going down this path. I was there with my best friend actually at the time as we made the movie together...but we both kind of took separate routes. He decided to stick with the film industry and I decided to go back and work with my Mum and Dad who were running Utopia at the time. I wanted to do it for a few years and see what I could do.

We've grown Utopia from a small retail store like many of the thousands that are up and down the country into a small e-commerce brand that's kind of recognisable for hopefully lots of good stuff, like customer service and where the products are a little bit different from what you would get elsewhere. Also, taking on young people that don't necessarily have experience and bringing out the best in them. That's one of the big drivers for me that I love.

Over the years I've managed to get involved with different stuff. You'll know that I was involved in Network Group for a while. That introduced me to a whole network of people that have inspired me over the years that we'll maybe come on to later. And then I've also kind of pushed myself to try and find opportunities in other areas. For example, I got involved with the Living Wage Commission and their leadership group both in London and Scotland. And now I'm sitting on the board for the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency.

Gemma: Wow. I didn't know that. That's cool!

Craig: I think when you're a small business owner, you've got to try and find ways to keep yourself up to date, inspire yourself, push yourself out of your comfort zone. But then I've got things that I want to try and achieve myself and there's only so much you can achieve. I mean, there's growth and doing all the things with the people in the business. But the environment is a big thing for me. You know, there's only so much we can recycle here. There's only so much we can drive towards our own Net Zero targets. Getting involved with the Environment Protection Agency was one of the ways that I wanted to be able to learn more and do more. And the same goes with the Living Wage stuff that allowed us to inspire countless businesses all over the country, all over the UK to join up and do what I think is the right thing. So that was really exciting as well. And all of that experience comes back to Utopia and helps us do what we need to do here.

Gemma: Yeah, that's amazing. I didn't realise it was it was your Mum and Dad's business originally. And so maybe you'll get you'll get a third generation of Utopia, do you think?

Craig: I'm not sure. Carmen's decided she wants to be a trauma surgeon. I don't know where that came from because it was definitely not me! And Liam is split between building robots and being a footballer at the moment. Unless we maybe change into robotics in the future! And Eva's too young and also, I think she likes dancing too much.

Gemma: It must be really satisfying to see how you've been able to move the business on. You know, as far as I can remember with the PCR awards, the opening award was always going to you guys. Every year it was the first award and I thought 'Oh, Utopia's going to get it.'

Craig: I remember that! It was a number of years ago for the first PCR awards! For the very first one we weren't actually there and the magazine dropped through the door and it was I think CK from Yoyo Tech who picked it up that first

year and I looked at it and thought 'Wow that's amazing recognition'. You know they're a small retailer down in London. I thought we could really take inspiration from some of the stuff that they have done. And I thought 'How could we bring that up to Kilmarnock?'

We took inspiration from it and we said, 'You know what, next year we're going to be shortlisted.' That was our target, and that's exactly what happened. We got we got shortlisted and at that point it almost seemed like an unreal dream because in Kilmarnock the culture at that time certainly for a small store like ours wasn't that you would be recognised for nationwide success or that you would be delivering service or products at that level. And I think we lost out to Novatech that year, but we were blown away by being there. And from that moment we said 'Right, we'll look at Novatech we'll look at Novatech, see what they were doing, what people were doing elsewhere in our world that we could take inspiration from. And let's see if we can get nominated again the following year.'

And the following year was the first year that we won the award and it was amazing! It was the first time we'd ever won an award. It's an incredible feeling. You just can't take it away. I still remember it. And that was the roller coaster that we went on for quite a number of years where we held ourselves up against the bar, which was you know delivering this unbelievably awesome experience for our customers and trying to raise the bar each year. And we've kind of consistently managed to do that at PCR but also at some other awards as well.

Gemma: It's a great motivator for your team as well. So, on that note, what do you think is the best thing about working in the channel, Craig?

Craig: It's a big family, isn't it? You know, SMEs can be isolating; it can feel as if you're quite alone some of the time. The problems you've got, the challenges you've got. I think the wonderful thing about the Channel is when you kind of get into it and you start to make those relationships, you all of a sudden realise that everyone has the same stuff going on and we're all wanting the same

results. So yeah, so I think the cool thing about the channel is that it feels that we're small enough that you do kind of know all the whales. You know, everyone knows everyone. It's a really nice thing to walk into a room and have that friendship that's going on and know what's going on in people's lives. And so, yeah, I think it's the family thing that I love about it.

Gemma: Yeah. me too. What's your biggest frustration about it? Is there anything, that you come up against or that you think that's a problem?

Craig: I think as a retailer you're always going to be frustrated by the Amazons of the world. Sometimes it feels unjust that they can do things in a way that is not in any way in line with the values that you have as a business. But yet they seem to consistently succeed. You know, a silly thing but they seem to be able to sell products without warranties. They can sell hardware to customers and say that they've only got 30 days to return it and after that they have to deal with the person who sold it. If you're a consumer that's bought an SSD or something, you're not going to send it back to America. You're just going to have to throw it out and buy another one. But as a retailer that is doing business as well as possible, it can be really frustrating that they do that. It's not really fair. It's not a level playing field. So yeah, that that's always a little bit frustrating.

But the support that we get through distribution, the support that we get through groups like Network Group, give us all the benefits that we do have. And you know me, I'm Mr Positive. So, I don't dwell too much on the negatives and just look for the opportunities. And I think what I see and hopefully it's the same for you is that increasingly people are looking to buy more now from local businesses.

Gemma: Yes, I agree. I live in Bedford and when I can, I buy locally even if it's a book, you know, I try not to buy it from Amazon. If there's independent shops, I'll go there first. Because I still want to spend the money locally if I can because it's keeping those jobs locally, isn't it?

Craig: And it's supporting your local economy and they say that money spent in the local economy is worth it seven times round. So, when you spend a pound with the local economy, it goes round seven times. So it's worth seven pounds for the local economy. I think COVID was an opportunity for people to come back to local. I think a lot of businesses were there for people. You know we all adapted our services and we even did pick up and drop offs in people's houses and things. And I think that that made people refocus back on local. I do think that people are becoming way more aware of their footprint and how their purchases affect the environment now too. A social consciousness seems to be more present now than it ever has been before. I think it's a real opportunity for small local businesses and larger ones to talk about what they're doing in a real, not in a green washing way, in a way that they're actually saying this is our carbon plan, this is how we operate, this is how we're going to get to Net Zero. I think if you can work out what the story is behind that and communicate that in a way that is accessible to people and that will resonate with them, then hopefully they'll support you by being loyal customers.

Gemma: Yeah, absolutely. What are you working on right now that excites you, Craig?

Craig: We're still working on our website. We are always trying to provide the latest information, the best value, the best resources to customers to be able to give them what they need. We've got some pretty exciting servers for things like AI technology for people in that world - we just moved into that.

That's going to see us supplying systems that are exponentially more expensive than the systems we've got just now which could be pretty exciting, I think we will be the only company in Scotland that is doing stuff like that. So, my team and I are very excited about that. And then there's always the custom stuff that comes - the customer that wants their computer the same colour as their shoes or something - that always that always brightens my day.

Gemma: Talk a little bit more about the AI stuff then because especially if you're the only people in Scotland doing that, that's exciting. We need to make sure people know about that.

Craig: Yes, we partnered with Exertis and Supermicro a year ago and we've basically just been building up our product offering so that we can supply CPU dense servers that are able to be able to work on the AI applications. And it's been interesting, we're up against some pretty stiff competition. I'm not going to lie, it's pretty hard for business out there, but we are working out how to create an offering which is everything that our customers need. And the reality is, that I don't think there's a lot of places out there that are able to talk to people about what the solution is they need, they don't necessarily know what the hardware in between is. We've been doing a lot of training, a lot of work in the background to enable us to support universities and big businesses that are looking to be able to move into this space and it's moving at pace. So, we're really excited to be, as far as I'm aware, the only company in Scotland that's doing this type of stuff.

Gemma: That's cool. I know everyone's talking about AI, but I think a lot of people still don't really know all that much about it in the real world. So I think it's super interesting.

Craig: Yeah. If we go back only just a couple of years, if you were a multi-billion dollar company like the Amazons of the world, you could access AI to help you understand large data sets and to maybe even help you create a plan for what would be a better strategy for the future. I think what's so exciting to me is that this technology is now taking a side-step away from the systems we're building. The actual AI technology that's available right now is available to everyone. And if we can encourage businesses to create a culture of openness around AI and best practice then most businesses will probably have a couple of people at least working in it that are quite good with AI and they will start to find out new ways of using it with different things. Then it's about how do

you bring that into the business so that everyone can learn from it. And we can all share the tools that are making our lives a little bit easier. Because that's what it's all about. Time's the most valuable asset that we've all got.

Gemma: Interesting. I'll have to send you a book, which I also talked about with Ric. I don't know if you've read it, called The Coming Wave by Mustafa Suleyman. He founded DeepMind before Google bought it and he ran Inflection AI but has joined Microsoft now. And yeah, the book is equal parts like wow, it could do this and shit, it can do this too.

Craig: Yeah, it's going to be an interesting time because things do seem to be moving at pace. We're in technology, we're used to things moving super fast. But this is moving faster than anything I've ever seen before.

Gemma: Yeah, for sure. What would you say you're most proud of?

Craig: Well, a lot of my team have been with me for more than 10 years now. I think in the world of the great resignation and silent quitting and all those kind of things, having people still with me that have been on this journey with me, is incredibly important. Seeing them be able to get married or buy a house and all of these kind of things that I think that Utopia has been the catalyst for from a very local point of view is so rewarding.

But then also in some ways the national stuff we've done where we've encouraged things like the adoption of the Living Wage, is something that even if it all stops, I'll be looking back and thinking, well, that was, that was pretty incredible.

Gemma: How did you get into the Living Wage stuff originally? Because I know you've been doing it a while, haven't you?

Craig: Yeah. It's a really good question. We've always had brought on young people and we had a guy working with us who turned, I think it was 17 and the way that the minimum wage worked was that now he's 17 he got paid a little bit more. Kaz came to me and said 'Look this guy is

17, we now need to pay him a little bit more. My question to you is why were we not paying him this yesterday? Because to be honest, he's a good guy and works hard.' And I was like well that probably makes sense. It's just that we had a history of being a minimum wage retail company where our roots were in retail and that's how it's done. And she said, well to go a step further, there's this thing called a Living Wage, which I think we should look at. It's basically been calculated to what the cost of living is if we were to have some of the things you would like in life. You know, to be able to go out for a meal, to buy some clothes, maybe go on a holiday once a year, that sort of thing. At that point there were only about 40 businesses in Scotland that signed up to it. We thought do you know what, let's do it.

So, we signed up and we got to know the people behind it in Scotland and we found the values and everything they were trying to do was something that really resonated with us. We decided to go all in and support them as best we could. And at that point I got elected on to the leadership group. I worked with the leadership group to inspire more businesses to sign up. Now I think there's about 3000 businesses. And I want to say hundreds of millions of pounds have been put into workers pockets because of the real living wage. And then I got asked to join the Commission which basically oversees the calculation of the rate to make sure throughout the UK the rate is appropriate and that it covers everything.

I was really lucky to be on that for a while and to be fair I've stepped back a bit now as I felt as if I'd given them everything that I could and it's time to look for something a little bit different. I would highly recommend any business that even if they already pay all their staff the living wage to sign up for it because it supports the accreditation and it supports other businesses to do the right thing.

Gemma: Thank you, that's great. What was your biggest mistake?

Craig: Well, I remember making a

mistake when I was very young, and it was a mistake I learned a lesson from. So, I'll share that. And then I'll maybe share an actual real mistake. So, the first mistake was when my Mum and Dad went on holiday and I was looking after the business for the first time on my own. And I received a letter through the post that said that we had been chosen to be included in a brochure of businesses. And this was going to be sent out to all sorts of businesses all across the UK. And I can see you smiling, Gemma, so you know where this is going. I filled it out and sent it away and my Mum and Dad come back from holiday and I forgot that I'd even done this thing. About two months later this huge book comes through the post and you know somewhere on like page 899 is Utopia Computers and our address and with it was an invoice for I think it was £3000. It was a huge amount of money. The colour just washed out of my face and I was like, how am I going to tell my Dad? I thought I'd done everything right and for weeks I tried to find a way out of it and eventually I broke and I was like, 'Dad, I need to talk to you, I've made a mistake, this is the thing.' And he was so calm about it. He said 'Look at it. It's not legal because in Scotland you need 2 signatures to sign off on it. Just tell them that and tell them to go away.' So, I told them that they went away. And then he said a couple of days later 'Is that it fixed?' And I said 'Yes' and he said 'A problem shared is a problem halved. Never keep a problem to yourself.' And that was a big thing for me. So, from then on with the team, with home, with the kids, I don't keep anything to myself because you just stew on it. When instead if you share it, you've got this group mindset where you work out how do we fix this. So yeah I think that was that was a big lesson learned from an actual mistake.

I think there have been times because I'm such a people person I think I've that have carried people in the business longer sometimes than was necessarily the best thing for the business, which unfortunately wasn't the best thing for the team. I've just got this belief where I always believe that everybody has it in them and I'll give it everything and that's that. I'm still on that journey to this day.

Gemma: I think that I think that's the right side to be on, Craig. Honestly, I think if more people were like that, more of those people would sort themselves out and you know, they would make that leap, wouldn't they? Unfortunately, there'll always be some that won't. But you know, I think having someone who believes in you can be a big turnaround for a lot of people, can't it?

Craig: Especially if you're younger and you've maybe had a tougher upbringing. We spoke about what I was really proud of, but we've got guys that came through the work experience program. We get school kids in and they spend a week with us and get to know the different aspects of the business and some of them will get a part time job with us. One of the guys that got a part time job with us now works for the robotics side of Amazon. We've got another guy that went to work for JP Morgan. We've got another guy that now heads up his own development team and is travelling around the world. It feels amazing. Often as good things don't start necessarily here, people feel that they have to go somewhere else first and we're big on trying to say that you can do good things from here.

Gemma: That's really good. I had a similar mistake to you. Not quite the same, but I remember when I was doing some work with my Dad when I was at college. He was running a factory that made cardboard boxes and I had to do all the ordering while he was away. And I put a zero on one of the types of cardboard that I meant to order. I was supposed to order, I don't know, 10 pallets. And I ordered 100 pallets. And then the day the delivery came, there's just all these lorries. I was thinking there's normally only one lorry. So quite a lot of cardboard boxes got made out of that type of cardboard for quite a long time afterwards. That was yeah, a bit of a moment. Actually the next question is – do you have one piece of advice that you pass on or have found useful. It sounds like definitely the problem shared is one. Do you have any other nuggets?

Craig: When I joined Network Group, I got given the Go Giver book. And that and the

Fred Factor have been brilliant. If you've only got a little bit of time to read a book, just read those two books and do what it says. Just be there to give value to the people around you. Like for someone starting out in the channel, that is the best advice I could give. I think it opened up a huge amount of doors. It's not what people can do for you, it's what you can do for them. If you go in with that mindset that the channel will support you and the sky's the limit. I do love those little fable books. They are very nice reading.

Gemma: That's good. OK Is there a little-known fact about you?

Craig: I guess we touched on it at the beginning with the New York film. Yeah that is something that that was in my past. But it was very fun. Also, I love ultra running. I like running crazy long distances inspired by Rob Boynes another Network Group member who I love. Rob is legend and he's currently planning a cycle from I think it's Edinburgh to Rome to raise money for a charity. So Rob always manages to put all of my achievements in the sporting world to shame.

Gemma: Then my last question really is, have you got a favourite book or film or a song or is there anything that you have as a 'go to'?

Craig: You know, it's so funny because I know you ask this question. So last night. I was thinking, what's my favourite film?

Gemma: I love that! I love that these Tech Giants are getting so much coverage that people are now prepping for them. That's brilliant. I've made it! Haha!

Craig: Exactly! So my answer is any of the Marvel movies. The kids always enjoy watching them. So that just reminds me of family time.

Gemma: Oh well that's it, Craig. That's all my questions! Thank you. And it's really nice to find out some of that stuff because I feel like I know you well, because I've known you a long time, but you so rarely actually get a chance to sit down and talk to people and find out about them. That's why I just love doing these.

Craig: I've enjoyed them and it was my honour to be your guest Gemma. You've always been such a supporter of everything that we're trying to do and I really appreciate it. You know it's it means a lot and I appreciate the opportunity. And I'll see you at the Network Group Gala in April.

Gemma: Yes! And I've been asked to judge the awards so I'm excited to be there! See you soon!

If you'd like to suggest a Tech Giant, find out more about the work She/Her Ltd does, or have a question or feedback then please get it touch!

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