

Kickstarter's creative community takes hold in Britain

December 9 2012, by Joslin Woods



Emilie Holmes poses in her tea van in London. The 27-year-old Londoner has turned her battered grey 1974 Citroen H van, whose engine growls like a small aircraft mid-take-off, into a mobile tea bar that features black, green, oolong and white teas.

Tea enthusiast Emilie Holmes this week hit the streets of London in her antique van serving flavourful loose-leaf tea to drinkers she says have had to settle for low-quality brew—courtesy of around 300 complete

strangers.

The 27-year-old Londoner has turned her battered grey 1974 Citroen H van, whose engine growls like a small aircraft mid-take-off, into a mobile tea bar that features black, green, oolong and white teas.

Holmes, who left her job in advertising to launch the business, needed about £10,000 (\$16,000, 12,000 euros) to refurbish the delivery truck with flooring, shelving, worktops, sinks and other basic supplies.

But instead of taking a loan from the bank or pitching to an investor, she posted her tea project on the crowdfunding website Kickstarter.

Just 25 days later, Holmes had raised £14,682 from 372 backers, most of whom she didn't know—and she does not have to pay any of it back.

"To have that support is so unexpected," she told AFP. "Even the pledges of £1 are amazing because it's kind of like a 'thumbs-up, go for it'."

Her project is one of the first success stories from Kickstarter's new British venture, which opened on October 31.

Run by 46 people out of a tenement building in New York City, the website provides a space for creators to bid for funding from people around the world.

Since its launch in 2009, more than 3.1 million people have pledged more than \$426 million to about 33,000 creative projects ranging from films to new technologies and food projects.

Despite being considered the largest crowdfunding site worldwide, initially only creators with a US bank account could take part.

But British [innovators](#) can now try their luck and in the first week they launched 171 projects, raising more than £588,000 from more than 15,000 [pledges](#).

"It oozes creativity. It's about exciting, passionate people doing things, rather than other sites where it sort of feels like it's about the money," Holmes said as she sipped from a cup of Starbucks tea that was not to her liking.

Holmes has been talking about a tea-related project with family and friends for the past four years, but it wasn't until the mobile tea van went up on the website that she was able to gauge public interest.

"It was an amazing market research exercise because people have the opportunity to choose who they want to exist, and if they want your idea to come to life, then they help it happen," she said.

Holmes is lucky that the online community liked her idea.

For 56 percent of those bidding for funds on Kickstarter, the money never materialises.

Backers can pledge between £1 and £5,000 (or \$1 and \$10,000), but their donations are only taken once the project's funding goals are reached.

In return they are guaranteed nothing but the satisfaction of participating in a new creative process, although there are occasional tangible awards.



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Holmes will give 95 backers who pledged between £15 and £25 a bag of tea, an illustrated postcard, a loyalty card and their names listed on her website as founding supporters.

On other projects it's just e-mail updates about how the work is unfolding.

"Once you get people involved in it they want it to work too," said Adam Smith, 33, who has already raised more than £5,000 from 92 backers to publish an illustrated children's book—with more time still left to donate.

He is also a donor, having given money to support another children's book.

"I just think if you want to be a part of Kickstarter you've got to be part of the community, and you've got to wish other people well," he said.

Kickstarter isn't only creators backing other creators.

Some, like Alex Clymo, a 24-year-old PhD student at the London School of Economics, have only used Kickstarter to pledge.

He made a modest contribution to an iPhone video game developed by two Americans, and will receive a copy of the game when it's finished.

"I wanted to be a part of it. It's very much about feeling part of a project," Clymo said.

Donors cannot be sure however that their promised rewards will arrive on time, if at all.

Ethan Mollick, assistant professor of management at the University of Pennsylvania, said his research has shown particular problems for creators of large projects in delivering promised products to deadline.

"Kickstarter says that it's not a pre-order system, and you aren't customers, you are patrons," Mollick told AFP. "If you are viewing it as Amazon, you are making a mistake."

Creators also need to be wary of promising too much, as they have no idea how many people will support them.

"It's a bit like running a business in itself. You have to kind of budget it all really carefully," said Holmes.

Although she said it was "terrifying" to put her idea on Kickstarter to be scrutinized, she exceeded her £10,000 funding goal by 146 percent.

She even had backers from other countries who may never see her [tea](#) van cruising along London's streets, but they will surely ride with her in spirit.

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Citation: Kickstarter's creative community takes hold in Britain (2012, December 9) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-12-kickstarter-creative-britain.html>

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