

From Lonely Mum to Technopreneur — Meet Katie Massie-Taylor

By Amala Pillai



From being a cut-throat broker to an artist by necessity, and eventually a technopreneur, 35 year-old Katie Massie-Taylor started off like most us — uncertain.

Dressed in Jeans and a polka-dot shirt, the mother of two is a reflection of the hip yet causal co-working space, *Huckletree West*, tucked away in White City, London that houses her start-up.

Katie is the co-founded *Mush*, a mobile application (app) that allows mothers to connect with each other.

“More and more, women have jobs and the transition to being a full-time mother can be very isolating. It was obvious there was a gap in the market — there just weren’t enough ways to connect with other mothers,” she says, almost with regret in her voice.

Katie smiles fondly as she recalls her encounter with co-founder Sara Hesz. “It was a grey November morning in 2014 in a nearly abandoned playground in London.”

Within a few months, they started talking about creating an avenue that will allow mothers to connect. Fast forward to June 2015, they had a business plan and by August, they were pitching to investors. In March 2016, *Mush* was officially launched.

With 200,000 users across the UK, *Mush* successfully raised one million pounds from investors and is looking forward to the next round of funding. While the Enterprise Research Centre estimates that 50 per cent of London-based start-ups are destined to fail, Katie is sure that *Mush* will not add to that statistic.

With a far-off look she says: “Of course it wasn’t all smooth running — neither for *Mush* nor me.”

Unusually gifted with both linguistic and mathematical genius, Katie, a Spanish language graduate from Bristol University, snagged a coveted role as a derivatives broker after graduation.

“I was excited at first and then I really started to hate it. It left me feeling utterly unfulfilled. But I maintain that nothing teaches you to “hustle” like brokering. I was one of a handful of women there,” she says, with a hint of pride in her voice.

Almost 10 years later, Katie resigned and joined a campaigning company called 7 hills based in New York, where she picked up several entrepreneurial skills that would later prove essential. She then started her first venture — *Paint Me a Picture*, an art commissioning platform. However, the business’s three week turn-around promise proved to be one of many problems.

She laughs good-naturedly: “I learned the hard way how free-spirited artists are. Once, a piece was due and the artist had vanished so I had to paint it myself. I remember a neighbour looking through the window and I must have been quite a sight – breastfeeding a new-born in a pouch with a paintbrush in my hand.”

When Katie moved back to London, she found herself completely alone. It was ultimately the desperation of needing company that compelled the young mother to start a business targeting others in her shoes.

Her eyes reflected a certain amount of pain. “I was on the precipice of being extremely unhappy. I would walk by strangers and hope someone would speak to me. It’s unbelievably difficult having no adult contact until your partner returns home.”

While it took approximately 18 months from the business conception of Mush to the actual launch, the main delays were because of funding and technological inadequacies.

Katie shakes her heads in recollection: “We were in a permanent state of confusion. If I had known how difficult the tech would be I doubt we would have done it, but luckily, we *didn’t*.”

When the slightest amount of money started to come in, Katie and Sara decided to take a leap of faith and hired a team in the Ukraine to develop the app.

“One thing we realized is how much credibility you lose when you pitch an app to investors without any tech know-how.”

The pair was forced to learn the language of the business and fast. After that, the *hustle* Katie employed in getting the press involved to spread brand knowledge was vital in promoting Mush.

Still, the pair faced issues with what the industry calls “stickiness” or client retention. Once mothers connected, they would exchange numbers and get off the app. This became a concern when Mush went into its second stage of funding.

Katie takes a serious tone: “VCs [Venture Capitals] wanted more data and matrix to ensure that “the client life cycle” would grow, something crucial for a community-oriented app.”

They decided to add a chat board feature where mothers could post discussions and have unabashed conversations. It worked — the client life-cycle increased from an average of 40 to 140 days.

Slapping her hand on the table, she recalls: “The inspiration to form a social vertical came from the app Fish Brain – fish enthusiasts simply ‘geeked-out’ on everything fish-related. And these were three million *paying* users!”

All future plans are now aimed at building the community effect so more users will sign up for premium paid membership offering special discounts with marketing partners like Tesco, and premium content.

When asked how Mush had changed her life, Katie visibly becomes emotional. "It's bittersweet looking back. You can see it as years wasted at a job you hate and false starts or you can look at it as lessons. Creating Mush allowed me to use everything I've learnt – the dots connected."

Struggling to keep composure Katie tries to recall the point where she knew that she had found her calling. "Someone asked my daughter what she thought I did for work and my daughter replied, *'my mum helps other mums.'*"