Photo: KUORI

Sustainability, crowdfunding and cooperation –

Swiss start-up KUORI – on course for growth with support from EEN, Wildling Shoes and European funding

Sarah Harbarth, CEO and founder of KUORI, Switzerland
Anna Yona, Managing Director and founder of Wildling Shoes, Germany
Ernst-Jan van Hattum, EEN expert at Innosuisse, Switzerland
in a mixed group interview with
Andrea Dohle, EEN expert at ZENIT GmbH, Germany

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How can I put my #start-up on a financially secure footing?

Sarah Harbarth from KUORI has often asked herself this very question. You can find a few answers to it in the following interview.

1. **Introduction**

   Andrea Dohle, ZENIT GmbH:

   Sarah, many thanks for agreeing to do this interview with me today about how you're financing your sustainable business idea. I first became aware of the crowdfunding campaign that you ran with wemakeit in the autumn of 2022 through the social media activities of our customer Anna Yona from Wildling Shoes (https://wemakeit.com/projects/kuori). I was fascinated, and together with my EEN colleague Ernst-Jan at Innosuisse we did a lot of promotion. Congratulations again on the success of your crowdfunding campaign. Maybe you could start off by explaining to our readers what KUORI is all about? And how will you be using the proceeds from the crowdfunding campaign in your business?

   Sarah Harbarth, KUORI:

   Thank you very much for inviting me to this interview, Andrea!

   KUORI develops and markets innovative and sustainable materials that are produced from food waste such as banana peel or nutshells. In the spirit of the circular economy, KUORI materials should of biological origin and biodegradable, as well as elastic.

   With our interdisciplinary team of researchers, designers and business experts, we're striving to break new ground in the plastics industry. To achieve this, we want to form a special relationship with the end consumer, raising awareness and staying in touch with our community in the process.

   It was terrific to see the support that we as a B2B company received during our crowdfunding campaign. Thanks to our supporters, we were able to raise CHF 51,200.

   The money has gone into our research programme and helped to fund and expand our young team and hone their skills.

2. **Cooperation with Wildling Shoes as incentive**

   Andrea Dohle:

   In cooperation with Wildling, KUORI is developing materials for shoe soles whose microplastic

abrasion decomposes in nature without contaminating it, yet which still have the same properties as conventional rubber materials. What do you expect from this cooperation? What other uses does your sustainable material offer? And where might difficulties lie?

Sarah Harbarth, KUORI:

For KUORI, running tests together with companies from industry is very important for the further development of our materials. As a research and development start-up, we benefit in this way from the experience of the respective industry and from knowing its actual needs in the marketplace.

In this respect, we welcome companies that are open to new, innovative solutions and that, like us, are looking for holistic, sustainable opportunities to optimise their products. Wildling Shoes, as a pioneer of green change, fits perfectly here with our mission and vision of a world without plastic pollution which recognises that we have only finite resources.

One of the first application scenarios for KUORI is shoe soles because of the immense microplastic abrasion we cause when walking, but our elastic material can already be used for applications such as sports equipment, toys or everyday products as well. To generate the greatest possible impact, we want to introduce applications for KUORI in as many sectors as possible and to continuously optimise our product. One challenge here is certainly price sensitivity in comparison to conventional plastics.

3. **Financing start-ups and sustainable business models**

Andrea Dohle:

Ernst-Jan, you were already in contact with KUORI during the start-up phase. What possibilities for finding solid financing can you tell us about or would you recommend to innovative young companies today?

Ernst-Jan van Hattum, Innosuisse:

There is both an international and a national aspect to this. The Enterprise Europe Network – een.ec.europa.eu/ – is a good first port of call: the EEN supports companies with innovation and growth at an international level and is also well networked at the national level.

When it comes to financial support at the very beginning, the first supporters are often “family, friends and private investors”. However, formal financing opportunities for start-ups also exist at a local and regional level.

Start-up events offer a good opportunity to network with investors directly. Here, you can pitch your own start-up idea on the spot, if necessary. Business Angel networks also give start-ups the opportunity to present themselves. In addition to financing, expertise, experience and contacts then also come into play.

Certain foundations can also be a perfect thematic fit for the start-up. In Switzerland, for example, a list is available here: www.swissfoundations.ch/stiftungssektor/stiftungssuche/.

In relation to sustainability, competitions or funding for this purpose – such as the "Switzerland Innovation Tech4Impact Initiative" (https://sitech4impact.ch/) – can be suitable. Its aim is to facilitate the implementation of innovation projects with a focus on selected themes of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

One of the Enterprise Europe Network contact points in Switzerland is hosted by Innosuisse, the Swiss Innovation Agency. Innosuisse has a tool called the "Innosuisse Guide" (https://www.innosuisse.guide/#/), where you can see what funding and support are available specifically for start-ups (e.g. coaching).

There is also a contact point for advice on the European research framework programme Horizon Europe, Euresearch (https://www.euresearch.ch/). From a European perspective, the EIC Accelerator is also worth mentioning. Funding and investment are available through the EIC Fund for start-ups and SMEs so that they can develop and disseminate ground-breaking new innovations.

Nowadays, another good option for finding funding is through crowdfunding campaigns, such as through wemakeit, which KUORI made perfect use of. The great thing about this form of start-up funding is that it allows for support from family, friends, private investors, and other businesses, as well as from other supporters at home and abroad.

Andrea Dohle:

Thank you, Ernst-Jan, for this insight into your work at Innosuisse. Supporting start-ups at an early stage is critical. As an EEN partner, we also support aspiring entrepreneurs in North Rhine-Westphalia on their way to launching a start-up. We work hand in hand with our EEN experts both locally and internationally. Business contacts and networking also play an important role here, so my next question is for Anna Yona, the founder of Wildling Shoes.

4. **Sustainability, cooperation – cradle to cradle**

Andrea Dohle:

Anna, we've known each other since you took part in our internationalisation competition in 2018, so for quite some time already. I'm really happy to hear that your sustainable business idea has developed so successfully since you founded your company in 2015. If I remember correctly, you also used crowdfunding to build up funds during the start-up phase. With the German Sustainability Award, which Wildling won in the category "Supply Chain" in 2022, you reached another important milestone. With Wildling Shoes, KUORI has launched its first collaboration with an industrial partner. What is the significance for you of supporting an innovative start-up such as KUORI? And what do you expect from the collaboration in terms of the further development of your minimal shoes?

Anna Yona, Wildling Shoes:

The collaboration with KUORI is valuable for us for several reasons. First of all, it is simply motivating to be able to support a great team and such an important contribution to the circular economy through this partnership. As a relatively young company ourselves, we're able to act flexibly and draw on our knowledge to help KUORI realise their developments in real-world applications. At the same time, through our collaboration with KUORI, Wildling can help to find a solution to a major problem in the footwear industry, namely preventing the toxic microplastic abrasion of soles. With respect to the circular economy, there are currently many challenges and still too few answers. If we join forces across industries and collaborate, we'll find solutions more quickly. And that is very important as we've no time to lose here.

5. **Future KUORI activities – Eurostars**

Andrea Dohle: Sarah, I heard from you that you've started a new project with Wildling in 2023. Project funding through Eurostars supports small and medium-sized enterprises that develop innovative products in bilateral and multilateral project collaborations. What is the scope of the project, what is it about and how important to you is the focus on Europe? What other activities do you have planned for 2023?

Sarah Harbarth, KUORI:

We're proud to be able to start 2023 with the approval of project funding. Our Eurostars/EUREKA project will be supported over the next two years with a total budget of EUR 1.5 million and a strong, broad-based consortium. The focus will be on material innovation and its implementation in existing markets. The funding also gives us the opportunity to expand our team and stay in close contact with our invaluable consortium partners.

We no longer view our company from the perspective of Switzerland alone, but rather we're using this opportunity to engage in as many countries as possible, both in Europe and beyond. The focus here is on making new contacts and spreading the idea of recyclable materials.

This year, in addition to material research, we're mainly focusing on expanding our supply chains, securing food side streams, the much-anticipated start of our first pilot production and the first official material sales.

6. **Prospects and cooperation partners in Europe**

Andrea Dohle, ZENIT GmbH: Here's a question to round off our interview that particularly interests me from the perspective of the Enterprise Europe Network. What kind of partnership is interesting for your company? The EEN offers contacts from all over the world – what qualities would a partner from research or industry need to have for you?

Sarah Harbarth, KUORI:

We're always looking for partnerships, pilot projects or customers who are committed to sustainable development and want to break new ground in a disruptive manner. To reduce the ecological footprint worldwide, we can also imagine marketing our technology and placing it on the market in other countries. For this purpose, we're specifically looking for customers in the rubber industry with whom we can realise a wide range of product applications.

Andrea Dohle, ZENIT GmbH:

Many thanks to my interview partners Sarah Harbarth from KUORI, Anna Yona from Wildling Shoes and Ernst-Jan van Hattum from Innosuisse for these exciting insights as well as for their time and interesting answers! I'm already looking forward to seeing what you do next. We'll also be happy to report on this in the context of the Enterprise Europe Network.

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As experts in the Enterprise Europe Network (EEN), we support start-ups as well as small and medium-sized enterprises on their way to a sustainable corporate strategy by promoting measures in the area of circular value creation but also through digitalisation projects, which can also have a positive effect on business sustainability.

Are you interested in receiving support from the Enterprise Europe Network's regional partners?

Email us at ad@zenit.de or call us on 0208 / 30004-34.

Contact:

Sarah Harbarth, KUORI
www.kuori.ch

Anna Yona, Wildling Shoes
www.wildling.shoes

Ernst-Jan van Hattum, Innosuisse
www.innosuisse.ch

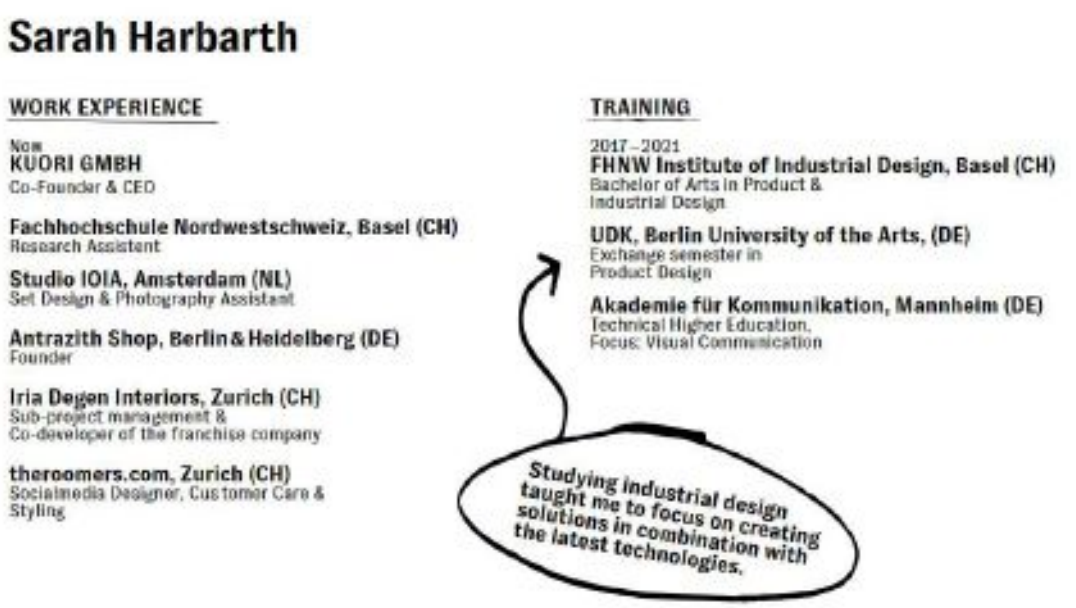
Andrea Dohle, ZENIT GmbH / NRW.Europa
www.zenit.de

About Sarah Kim Harbarth, KUORI

CEO and founder of KUORI

#InnovativeMaterials
#sustainability
#Cradle2Cradle

WHO AM I?



About KUORI

Cleantech start-up KUORI develops and markets sustainable, novel materials that are produced using food waste such as banana peel or nutshells.

In the spirit of the circular economy, KUORI materials should be elastic, of biological origin and also biodegradable. Their first application is in shoe soles, thereby preventing the harmful abrasion of microplastics into the earth and waters.

www.kuori.ch

About Anna Yona, Wildling Shoes

#BarefootShoes
#WomenEntrepreneur
#sustainability

Anna and Ran Yona founded Wildling Shoes in 2015. After Anna's studies in Middle Eastern Studies and English Literature at Tel Aviv University, positions in marketing and as a freelance translator and journalist, their common centre of life continued to be in Israel. Her three children spent most of their time barefoot there before the family moved to Germany in 2013. The biggest challenge here: finding suitable shoes for her usually barefoot children. No model seemed to meet her demands when it came to freedom of movement, sustainable materials and fair production. That's how the idea for Wildling Shoes was born.

Wildling shoes are minimal shoes for children and adults and are handcrafted in Portugal using robust and durable materials, most of which are ecological natural materials – in compliance with fair working conditions as well as environmental standards. Thanks to their innovative, particularly thin and flexible sole, they have a positive impact when it comes to comfort as well as health. In contrast to conventional shoes, the minimal shoe concept allows for a natural gait and thus brings joy back to movement. Wildling wants to extend this positive impact to all the areas it can influence as a company – to people, to the environment and also to the way we do business.

Wildling Shoes sees itself as part of a great re:generation – the generation that must now do whatever it takes to meet the great challenges of our time – climate change and social injustice. It is important to take responsibility as a company for every step. This includes working on appropriate projects to help preserve biodiversity, support renaturalisation and reforestation and cultivate sustainable raw materials ourselves in collaboration with partners. That is why Wildling Shoes consciously positions itself as a purpose-driven and socially responsible company and continues to develop itself together with equally committed partners – from Move to Movement.

Today, Wildling Shoes has almost 270 employees – most of them women, young parents working part-time in a decentralised and digital home office setup. It is not only for this new work approach that Wildling Shoes has received several awards, including the "German Founder Award 2021" and the "Gründerpreis NRW 2018" (an award for innovative entrepreneurs). The innovative and sustainable design of the minimal shoes was recognised with the German Design Award in 2020.

Further information available at www.wildling.shoes

About Ernst-Jan van Hattum, Innosuisse

#innovation
#sustainability
#funding
#PartnerIntroductions

Innovation & Technology Advisor for the Enterprise Europe Network – Switzerland at Innosuisse – the Swiss Innovation Agency. Innosuisse promotes in particular the partnership between science and the market with innovation projects, networking, training and coaching.

Ernst-Jan van Hattum studied Industrial Design Engineering at Delft University of Technology in the Netherlands and has been working for many years on the relationship between innovation, technology and design (for the circular economy) with a focus on sustainability. He did this from the perspective of an R&D manager working for an SME with sorting systems in logistics centres (95% was exported worldwide, joint R&D projects with other companies in the USA, Japan and Europe), one of the driving forces and a chairman of the o2 Global Network Foundation on Sustainable Design, a freelancer in Switzerland, a lecturer on the University of Applied Sciences and Arts Northwestern Switzerland (FHNW)'s Industrial Design programme (Bachelor, Master – "Design for a better World") and an Innovation & Technology Advisor for the Enterprise Europe Network in Switzerland, initially at Euresearch since 2007 and then at Innosuisse since 2018. He was the initiator and chair of the EEN thematic group Circular Economy from 2017 until the end of 2021.

As an Innovation & Technology Consultant for the Enterprise Europe Network, Ernst-Jan van Hattum is committed to helping Swiss companies find the best international partner for innovation and technology projects and advising them on existing funding opportunities.

Contact via www.innosuisse.ch

About Andrea Dohle, ZENIT GmbH

#ProjectManagement
#communication
#customers

Andrea Dohle is responsible for marketing and communication
for the NRW.Europa consortium (Enterprise Europe Network in North Rhine-Westphalia)
and acts as a communications expert for #EEN_Deutschland

Andrea Dohle has more than 30 years of experience in advising and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises. She has been working at ZENIT GmbH in Mülheim an der Ruhr, the centre for innovation and technology in North Rhine-Westphalia, since 2009. She has already proven her skills there as a project manager and network manager in many projects. Her thematic focus areas and interests were also already in the areas of environmental and quality management, innovation management and internationalisation in earlier projects. Currently, the focus of her work is on managing the marketing and communication activities of NRW.Europa for the consortium of NRW partners in the Enterprise Europe Network. As Communication Champion for #EEN_Deutschland, she is committed to ensuring that the successful offers and results of the network are visible in Germany as well as worldwide.

Contact via www.nrweuropa.de or www.zenit.de.

8 February 2023