

Meet the entrepreneur

Polina Karbanova, Good Fabric

Welcome to our series, 'Meet the entrepreneur', where we sit down with founders, CEOs and the like and get to know the person behind the business.

Meet Polina Karbanova, founder of Good Fabric, as we take a look into this entrepreneur and her business.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about the business?

Polina: Good Fabric was born during the 2020 lockdown after I was made redundant twice in a row. Frustrated by the lack of control in my career and with a small child at home, I decided to take charge and launch an online fabric store focused on sustainability. Drawing on over 12 years of experience in product development and production, I aim to make eco-certified fabrics more accessible in the UK, helping small fashion brands and startups source sustainable materials while ensuring that our products don't harm the planet or people involved in the supply chain.

Q: What is your Monday morning routine to get you in the mood for a successful week?

Polina: I like to start my week with a clear idea of what needs to be accomplished today and over the coming days. After dropping off my daughter at school, I sit down with a cup of coffee and a notebook to write out a list of goals for the day and the week. Sometimes, it's all about staying on top of administrative tasks but having a clear plan frees up mental space for me to focus on bigger things, like developing a marketing strategy or planning my next project. Mondays are all about setting goals, tying up loose ends, and checking off as much admin as possible.

Q: What is your favourite podcast to listen to/book to read for business advice?

Polina: I'm a huge fan of Steven Bartlett, and I absolutely loved his book *Diary of a CEO: 33 Laws of Business and Life*. I found it incredibly useful and insightful, straight to the point, with no unnecessary fluff. It's highly relevant for anyone running a business, so I highly recommend it, 10/10. Another recommendation, though a bit more niche, is for those new to SEO and digital marketing. When I started Good Fabric as an online business, I knew absolutely nothing about these topics, literally zero, I hadn't even heard of SEO. Then I stumbled across Kate Toon's podcast, and I learned a lot from her. I appreciate her clear approach, so I'd recommend this podcast to anyone just starting their SEO journey.

Q: How do you navigate the digital world as an entrepreneur?

Polina: Before starting Good Fabric, I knew nothing about digital marketing. I'm a product person, skilled in buying, sourcing, and creating, but digital was out of my comfort zone.

Studio Cotton has been incredible, offering practical advice tailored to small creative businesses. Having access to experts is crucial when starting from scratch, and it's vital to trust their advice. Finding the right partners takes time, but once I do, I stay loyal, knowing my business is only as good as the people behind it.

Q: What is your best IT infrastructure advice to other entrepreneurs when getting their business started?

Polina: As a small business owner and the only person employed in the business, my IT infrastructure needs to be flexible enough to meet my needs. I often find myself working on my phone while waiting for my daughter at her swimming or gymnastics practice, so it's essential that I can access all my information on the go.

I store everything on Google Drive, and I also use Google Drive for desktop, which allows me to save my work in folders just like I would on my laptop. The key difference is that it automatically saves and uploads everything to the cloud. It might seem like a minor detail, but this ease and simplicity mean I don't have to spend any time manually saving and uploading the latest documents to the cloud, it's all done for me automatically. This has streamlined my workflow and has allowed me to focus on tasks rather than on administrative work.

Q: What are your biggest pain points as an SME?

Polina: The biggest challenge as a business owner is maintaining self-motivation, especially when sales are low or negative feedback comes in. It's easy to feel lost, thinking you're doing everything right but not seeing any results. I wish I could say I've overcome this with a specific formula, but the truth is, there are times when I'm unsure of what's wrong or what my next step should be.

My advice is to seek feedback from professionals rather than relying solely on friends and family, whose well-meaning advice can be more emotional than practical. So, I take my own advice: when things are tough, I reach out to the people I work with to see if they have any ideas on what we should do next. A fresh perspective can work wonders.

Q: What helps you wind down at the end of the day?

Polina: It's very important for me to have some downtime after work; otherwise, if I keep working into the evening, I find it difficult to switch off, get a good night's sleep, and reset for the next day. I love to cook and it's never a chore for me. I enjoy browsing through cookbooks, doing the grocery shopping, and planning meals. Often, I'll stop by the shops after work, which also serves as a little walk on my own that helps clear my head. Then, I'll come home and dive into cooking. It's a simple routine, but it creates a clean break in my day. I think it stimulates a part of my brain that doesn't get enough attention during the workday.

Q: What did you want to be when you were growing up? Did you always see yourself being a business owner?

Polina: As a teenager, I was determined to become a fashion designer and dreamed of attending Central St Martins. But when it came time to apply for universities, I somehow completely forgot about that dream and ended up going to law school instead.

It was very out of character for me, but I think I felt pressured to pursue a stable career. Unsurprisingly, I dropped out after a year, took a gap year, and worked on the shop floor at Harrods. I loved every minute of it. Working at Harrods was amazing, and it made me fall in love with retail. So after my gap year, I enrolled at UCL and earned a degree in Fashion Management.

I never saw myself as a business owner, quite the opposite. I was adamant that I didn't want to follow that path. My father ran his own business all my life, and my brother and mother both worked in the family business. It annoyed me that every family meal would inevitably turn into a work discussion, they just never stopped or switched off. But after becoming a parent, I realised that what I truly needed was the freedom to manage my own time. Income was no longer the primary concern, time was.

Starting Good Fabric after having my daughter and experiencing two redundancies just made sense. I made a pro-and-con list back then, and I literally had no cons. Growing up surrounded by business owners and self-employed family members helped me decide to start my own business, I had no fear. However, I did decide that I wouldn't work with family members because I needed to maintain clear boundaries between work and life.

Q: What do you see for the future of your business?

Polina: I am increasingly drawn to working with startups and brands, as I really enjoy the B2B aspect of the business. I find it highly rewarding to collaborate with like-minded entrepreneurs whose business values align with my own. Although I've spent many years in production and find myself missing it a little, I'm not interested in returning to that career path. Instead, I hope to build more relationships with factories in the UK to explore future collaborations. It feels like a way to combine the best aspects of my career with the goals of Good Fabric.

Q: What do you do to stay ProActive (please excuse the pun) when times are hard as a business owner?

Polina: My business is highly seasonal and can fluctuate significantly depending on the weather. When it's sunny and warm, people are less likely to stay indoors and sew, but on a rainy day, many of my customers love to dive into a sewing project. After running my business for four years, I've learned not to panic when sales are low or nonexistent because I know they'll pick up soon. I now use this quiet time as preparation time.

I work closely with Studio Cotton, an amazing website agency in Bristol that created my website. They provide invaluable advice through their Slack Club House and Instagram, constantly reminding me to post seasonal blogs and descriptions at least six weeks in advance to give Google time to index and rank them. So in August, I find myself writing about cosy autumn layers, outfits for bonfire nights, and Christmas shopping lists for sewists. It all comes down to having a clear plan for what's happening in your business and staying ahead of the game. These quiet times are actually quite useful, as they allow me to prepare for the busiest times of the year.

Q: What song would you play on a Monday morning to get you through the Monday blues?

Polina: In the past, I used to have different playlists, not necessarily for specific tasks but more for my mood, like chill-out music, dance tracks, cosy autumn ballads, and so on. However, these days I often find myself overstimulated by everything around me, so I now prefer absolute silence when I work. Since I work from home a lot, finding a quiet moment isn't a problem. This silence helps me focus, allows me to talk through ideas in my head, and lets my mind wander in a productive way.