



Aspiring Social Enterprise case study: Ground Up Digital

Our social enterprise journey so far

Ground Up Digital started up in March 2019. As a Digital Marketing Agency, we help organisations to improve their online presence and engagement with customers. This enables them to maximise their sales and outreach.

We specialise in Google Ads campaigns and Facebook advertising as well as producing high quality websites. In online advertising, the basic concepts are easy to understand, but specialist knowledge is crucial to achieving successful results. Expertise adds depth, effectiveness and most importantly, value for money.

Our founder Rory was determined to leverage the skills and know-how he had built up during years working in digital marketing agencies for corporate clients in a new way, prioritising social objectives and a strong ethical compass.

Raw ability does not always easily translate into personal career success. For those who find education more difficult due to disability, or make poor early choices, evidence of employment capability can be lacking or inconsistent. In a competitive job market this can lead to applications being overlooked and a dispiriting negative spiral of rejection, as lack of experience then becomes yet another barrier to employment.

At Ground Up Digital, we will help our trainees to break free of this spiral. By focusing on intrinsic capability rather than employment history, we will offer employment to people who may never been offered a proper chance to show what they can achieve. Our trainees will progress through a learning programme from the basics of digital marketing to an advanced, practical understanding of how online promotion can be used to drive a business's success.

Ground Up Digital is not a training company, but an active business. Trainees will learn on the job, ensuring that they build not only specialist knowledge but also the practical, business-focused, hands-on skills that make a robust basis for a longer-term career. They will be paid accordingly, at Living Wage from day one – we are an accredited Living Wage employer.

As they become able to work autonomously, they will be able to choose if they want to take the transferable skills they have built up to a different employer, either in the same field or a different area. Or, they can stay with us and advance their career as an experienced member of the Ground Up family, with the option to potentially specialise further or train others themselves.

Find out more about becoming an Aspiring Social Enterprise:

<https://www.socialenterprisemark.org.uk/aspiring-social-enterprise-accreditation/>



Why we applied for the Aspiring Social Enterprise accreditation

As a start up in a competitive marketplace, building trust and credibility is central to attracting the clients we need, to achieve our business and social goals. We have high social aspirations that we're fully committed and bound to, yet in order to achieve them, we need to first create our foundation.

We have to put down strong roots, so that as we later grow our numbers of trainees, we can have confidence that we can always maintain a great service. This is vital, but it also necessarily restrains us from being able to focus fully on achievement of our social objectives quite as early as we would ideally like.

Obtaining the Aspiring Social Enterprise accreditation enables us to make a public demonstration of commitment, to mirror both the formal obligations created when the company was formed, and our personal aims. It allows us to bridge the gap between where we are currently - stabilising our start up business for dependability - and where we look forward to being - an established, effective social enterprise.

Being able to tell our existing and future clients that we've been awarded the Aspiring Social Enterprise accreditation gives them an external perspective on our ambitions. They already know about our social mission and future intentions, because we are proud of what we are doing. Having external validation that we are aiming in the right direction shows them that our mission is more than a lovely idea. It underlines that our vision is realistic and attainable, and that choosing to work with us is a genuine step for social good.

Our experience of the application process

Having built the business up very quickly and attracted a great client base, it's sometimes easy for us to forget Ground Up Digital has been up and running for less than a year. But if we ever do need to remember, there's one thing that can usually bring us back down to earth with a bump – and that's having to complete forms about the company. We don't have two years of trading history to fill in, and at this stage in our journey there are natural limits on how much social impact it's realistically possible for us to have made to date.

The application process for the Aspiring Social Enterprise accreditation was a refreshing change for us. The criteria focusing on your starting framework, goals and direction of travel, not just what you have done so far, were appropriate to our situation. The process flow was straightforward and did not demand too much time investment, which is hugely important when you are a very small team with clients to look after.

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We first became aware of the Aspiring Social Enterprise accreditation in the last week of July. We registered our interest and paid our application fee, ready to start applying in August. We checked over the eligibility criteria as set out in the Qualification Framework and then completed the application form in mid-September.

It was so nice for once to review a completed form and be able to see all the positives of what we've achieved so far, rather than just the blanks showing how much further we want to go!

At this point, the assessment review of our documents indicated that we'd need to make some clarifying changes to our company Articles of Association. We made these with welcome guidance from Social Enterprise Mark CIC. Having to schedule board agreement to the changes, and then involve the administrative processes of Companies House, inevitably had some impact on process timelines. We were delighted to be advised that we were fully approved for accreditation as the very first Aspiring Social Enterprise on 21st November 2019.

Support received during the process

During the application process it emerged that it would be necessary to clarify some aspects in our Articles of Association. While of course they already accurately reflected our intentions, they needed to be more specific and unambiguous to meet the requirements for the Aspiring Social Enterprise accreditation.

We were provided with guidance from compliance experts at Social Enterprise Mark CIC. They were very generous with their assistance and suggested small changes that successfully achieved the criteria, while remaining true to our original vision for the future development of the company.

When our application was approved, we received a feedback report on the details of our application, confirming how we met the criteria. The action points we will take forward from the feedback provided will feed into our governance plans. This will include formalising an update process for our income forecasts and introducing a corporate social impact framework.

At Ground Up Digital, we are proud of our social objectives and we're happy that they are thoroughly embedded into our culture and operations. However, we recognise that we need to further develop how we measure, evidence and record our social impact. As a new social enterprise, we know we have learning to do in this area. We are keen to ensure that our framework will be comprehensive and accurate in reflecting our social contribution. So, we are glad to benefit from the guidance of Social Enterprise Mark CIC.

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The Accreditation Record sets out criteria for establishing social impact that we can incorporate into our plans. We are also working with regard to the Social Impact Questions. Together, these will help us ensure that we meet wider expectations on the nature and extent of the benefits we deliver, putting us in a good position to move up to the Social Enterprise Mark as soon as possible.

Achieving the Social Enterprise Mark

We want to achieve the Social Enterprise Mark as soon as possible, while being realistic about the natural challenges we will need to overcome to get there.

The primary constraint is going to be how quickly and effectively we can scale Ground Up Digital up to the operational structure we need, in order to give our trainees the support they deserve. Our output is quality services for paying customers, so it's absolutely vital that we must maintain diligence and caution as we expand and start developing our social trainees.

Different types of social enterprise may therefore find it easier than us to progress quickly through to the Social Enterprise Mark standard. We are focused on building a sustainable business with great ambitions, and that can take time. The important thing is that when we do reach this goal, it will be as a robust, fully-fledged Social Enterprise, ready to make the most of the opportunities that achieving the Social Enterprise Mark will open up for us.

Achieving the Social Enterprise Mark will provide objective recognition of our standards and the social good we are doing. We see it as a signal of trust, an independent confirmation that we will be operating in accordance with the principles that we are proud of. It will demonstrate the importance that our social goals hold for us, in a straightforward way that can be understood by anyone.

Success in digital marketing is visible through an agency's numbers, but the success of the agency itself is closely linked to how it is perceived. We want Ground Up Digital to stand out as a supplier that can deliver excellent services and at the same time, meet the social aims we have set for ourselves.

Being seen to do good in business is great for doing business, but there's more to it than that. Our social aims create passion and purpose in what we do and pursuing them contributes to our own fulfilment, as individuals. So formal validation that we are making a difference won't just matter to Ground Up Digital as a company, it will mean a lot to each of us personally, too.

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