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Big Deal Awards

Meet the eBay Doers: 15 budding businesses ready to go big

Chosen from hundreds of inventive, intelligent entries, these 15 emerging startups are on their way to bigger and better things - eBay and the Guardian Labs have teamed up to help take them there

by Anna Bailey

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162

We had a theory: that everyone's got a brilliant business idea in them. We tested it out, asking you to tell us yours. And we were right, a barrage of budding or would-be businesses came in. Inventions inspired and outlandish. Things of beauty and utility. Problems solved, gaps filled, and a whole host of things we didn't know we wanted, but do now.

Hundreds of ingenious ideas from imaginative, interested people. And a few that may not make it out of the pub - but not many.

We whittled those down, putting the favourites in front of our judging panel - Dragons' Den entrepreneur Touker Suleyman, eBay's Kirsty Keoghan, and the Guardian's Sarah Ebner - and whittled them down to 15 finalists. They've emerged ideas, plus the passion and commitment to take them forward. There'll be more like eBay Doers - joining our 10-week incubator aimed at helping people grow those bright ideas into successful businesses with workshops, funding and expert mentorship from entrepreneurs. Say hello to ...



Clockwise from top left: Amber Dilling-Baker, Sinead and Aiden Murphy, Catalina Reyes-Lower and Edd Lower

Timothy Rundle-Wood - Tweedle (natural home scents)
Tim's wife was pregnant and suffering from nausea. Rather than buying a meal diffuser, he decided to do some research into their ingredients. Disturbed by the harmful chemicals masquerading as "parfum" he created an 100% natural version - inspired by Alice Sweet in Somerset, near where he grew up. "I was already selling candles and lamps online," he says. "But the real diffuser outsold everything, so I made fewer candles and concentrated on diffusers." Tweedle's next product launch is wreaths to bench seat. "The dream is to be known as the expert in natural home scents."
Mentor Ade Hussain

Johanne-Marie Romeo - Eileen & Jo (plant-based face masks)
Romeo's beauty range has been born in the making. "I'd been beauty blogging in the evenings and realised I would always ask me if I sold products," she says. "I ran a white creaking different blends - all plant-based and handmade," she says. After testing them on friends and family, she launched her first product, a face mask, in time for her first Christmas. "There's Eileen & Jo in a really rounded brand."
Mentor Ade Hussain

Aidan Delaney & Sinead Murphy - Small Stuff Kit (ethical wooden toys)
Stirling Baker has big plans for Small Stuff. Having started out selling handmade clothes, the aim now is to launch wooden toys with a meaningful message. "The wood is from a sustainable forest in Scotland. Testing them out with a certificate of origin." After losing his job in the recession-plagued depression, she is looking forward to getting her own factory in eBay. "I want to create products that make people say 'I love the ethos behind this'." Sinead is also a mum-to-be so her time is very limited, but she's on it.
Mentors Adam and Sinead Murphy



Clockwise from top left: Abby Park and Laura Carr, Clare Haines and Melissa Burton, Michelle Duplessis and Shannon Teague

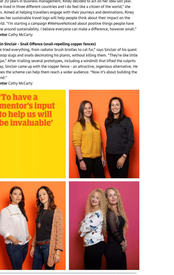
Catalina Reyes-Lower and Edd Lower - Pop Up (paper puzzle block toy)
A play on "pop-up". Pop Up has been run off a shared love of design and a desire to find an alternative to the plastic tat touted to new parents. "We wanted to create a beautiful product parents didn't have to hide," says Catalina. Launched in 2015, Pop Up blue leaves space for the imagination, challenging children of different ages. Running their savings with a Kickstarter campaign, the couple currently work out of their Hackney flat. They look forward to seeing how the doers scheme will help them manage big orders. "It's been an amazing experience so far," says Lower.
Mentors Adam and Sinead Murphy



Cathy McCarty, Catherine Reay and Colin Inverary

Catherine Reay - Our World Travel Logs (printed travel logs and notebooks)
After 20 years in business management, Reay decided to act on her idea last year. "I've lived in three different countries and I do feel like a citizen of the world," she says. "I've always been passionate about travel, and I've always documented it." Reay's hopes for sustainable travel logs will help people think about their impact on the world. "I'm starting a campaign #WeHaveNoExcuse about positive things people have done around sustainability. I believe everyone can make a difference, however small."
Mentor Cathy McCarty

Colin Dorrian - Small Difference (small-repelling copper fences)
"We hired everything, from radiator brush bristles to cat fur," says Sinclair of his quest to stop slugs and snails decimating his plants, without killing them. "They're like little ninjas." After trialling several prototypes, including a windmill that tilted the culprits off, he settled on copper fencing. "Copper has a mild electrical charge which means it hopes the scheme can help them reach customers. "Now it's about building the brand."
Mentor Cathy McCarty



'To have a mentor's input to help us will be invaluable'

'We wanted to create a beautiful product parents didn't have to hide'

Clockwise from top right: Abby Park and Laura Carr, Clare Haines and Melissa Burton, Michelle Duplessis and Shannon Teague

Amy Park and Laura Carr - The London Sleep Company (sleep cosmetics and journal)
Working in a high-pressure childcare law firm, Park struggled with her sleep, and would concoct cosmetic blends to help. Testing them out on colleagues, The London Sleep Company was born. "We've been overwhelmed by the response," she says. "We've had to launch a range. While it comes in a five-year plan, the pair are dreaming big. "We want to be a one-stop sleep shop," says Park. "We'd like to add bed linen, and be aimed in a sector where sleep is important. To have a mentor's input to help us will be invaluable."
Mentors Clare Haines and Melissa Burton

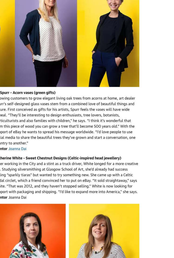
Michele Duplessis and Shannon Teague - Pop 'n Sprinkle (sprinkle-on popcorn flavours)
The motivation for Duplessis' and Teague's business is simple. "We're obsessed with popcorn," says Duplessis. "We've been eating it since we were kids." Inspired by a trip to New Zealand to sell at the cinema. "In South Africa, you have at least five sprinkle-on flavours," says Duplessis. Spotting an opportunity, they worked with a manufacturer to develop six flavours, which they've been selling online. The next challenge is to build brand awareness and take Pop 'n Sprinkle into the retail market.
Mentors Clare Haines and Melissa Burton



Ed Spurr, Catherine White and Jeanne Ellis

Ed Spurr - Acorn vases (green gifts)
Making customers to grow elegant living oak trees from acorns at home, art dealer Spurr's self-designed glass vases from a combined love of beautiful things and nature. "I've always been fascinated by trees," he says. "I've always had acorns on my desk." He's interesting to design enthusiasts, tree lovers, botanists, horticulturists and also families with children," he says. "I think it's wonderful that from this piece of wood you can grow a tree that'll become 600 years old." Will he be successful? eBay he wants to spread the knowledge worldwide. "I'd love people to see the beautiful trees that grow and start a conversation, one acorn at a time."
Mentor Joanna Dai

Catherine White - Sweet Chestnut Designs (Celtic-inspired head jewellery)
After working in the City and a stint as a truck driver, White binged for a new creative job. Studying silversmithing at Glasgow School of Art, she'd already had success selling "sparkly tiaras" but wanted to try something new. She came up with a Celtic-tribal, ethnic, witchy-themed crowbar for just an eBay. "It sold straightaway," says White. "That was 2012, and they haven't stopped selling." White is now looking for "more exciting, inspiring and engaging." "I'd like to expand more into interiors," she says.
Mentor Joanna Dai



'I'd like to build it into a major global brand'

'You can't beat speaking to someone face to face and fleshing out a problem'

'The scheme has given me the impetus to give this everything'

Clockwise from top left: Luke Stanton-Jones, Emma Orr, Wither Gleeson

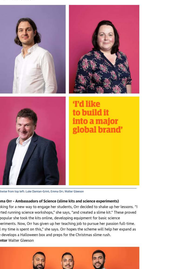
Emma Orr - Ambassadors of Science (slime kits and science experiments)
Looking for a new way to engage her students, Orr decided to shake up her lessons. "I started running science workshops," she says, "and created a slime kit." These proved popular, leading Orr to develop more experiments, and more kits. "I love experiments. You let loose, get to see learning pick to pursue her passion full-time. "My next big step is to open an Orr," she says. Orr hopes the scheme will help her expand as she develops a halloween box and preps for the Christmas slime rush.
Mentor Wither Gleeson



Luke Cox and Lindsey Fairhurst

Lindsey Fairhurst - Ladra Design (individually designed decals)
Teaching assistant Fairhurst started her wall sticker business from her home in Cumbria. "I've been overwhelmed by the response," she says. "I've had lots of things, and I love to craft things, so I came naturally to the idea." When personalised, her vinyl illustrations were an instant hit online. She hopes the scheme will help her find the support to scale the business. "I want to employ someone to manage the customer side of it, so I can concentrate on creating more products, that's where my passion lies."
Mentor Kate Cox

Luke Stanton-Jones - Bone Studios (Bone-conducting smart sunglasses)
Stanton-Jones's sunglasses glasses use Bluetooth technology to hook your phone to a bone-conducting speaker, so users can comfortably listen to music and phone calls in situations through their skulls to the inner ear. Some similar products are sold in the US, but Bone Studios are unusual in that they run on Google systems, so the tech is always updating. Stanton-Emir has started taking pre-orders and, with the scheme's support, he eventually wants to expand into other products. "I'd like to build it into a major global brand," he said to major ventures globally."
Mentor Wither Gleeson



Clockwise from top left: Jo Wilson, Duncan Bain, Jamie Hamilton, Sarah Long

Simon Bain - Built by Bain (artisan gym hooks from recycled skateboards)
Can gear kinetic made from old skateboards might not sound like an obvious idea, but it's certainly a popular one. A fan of Reddit, Bain shared a video of himself making the accessory on the site and, to his shock, it gained more than 400,000 views in a matter of hours. The orders soon started rolling in. "I will be people who like customising their cars, but now they're customising their gyms," he says. Bain hopes the scheme will help him expand, but he's not looking to scale. "It's not been speaking to someone face to face and fleshing out a problem."
Mentors Mo Bro's

David Long - Kokosuke Golf (handmade personalised golf head covers)
A trip to Marrakech inspired Long to create his range of golfing accessories. After commissioning a leather maker in the souks to produce a cover for his driver, he brought it back to his home course. "Everyone loved that it was nothing like the branded covers you can buy," he says. Long's range has since grown to include a full set of head covers for eight clubs. "The scheme has given me the impetus to give this everything," he says. "It's not just a side hustle, it's my future."
Mentors Mo Bro's

Meet the mentors

Each of our Doers has been paired with an expert entrepreneur to offer advice and guide them through the scheme.

Melissa Burton and Clare Haines, partners, Longtail Dental Group
Kate Cox, founder, Cherie Investments
Joanna Dai, founder, Dai
David, Aaron and Ewout Mathias, founders, We Bro's
Wither Gleeson, founder, musicMagpie
Ade Hussain, founder, Tender Bar
Cathy McCarty, founder, Cathy Mac Textiles Limited
Sinead and Adam Murphy, founders, Pineapple

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