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Innovation at Unilever: The Foundry

In January 2016 Jeremy Basset, Global Marketing Director and Head of Unilever Foundry, sat in his office at the 90-year-old Unilever head office in London, pondering the future growth of the Foundry.

Since being established in 2014, the Foundry had taken shape as a vibrant platform where Unilever could engage with young start-ups and entrepreneurs and provide them with access to Unilever's brands as a means of enabling their growth, while bringing innovative technology back to the company. Unlike some of Unilever's earlier corporate venturing activities, the Foundry did not take equity stakes in the start-ups it worked with; instead, it sought to build a commercial relationship with them (e.g. by licensing use of a major brand) to help both parties grow.

The Foundry was gaining a lot of support internally and with the start-up community in several cities around the world. But for Jeremy, this was just the start of the journey:

(The) reality is that our world is being transformed. If you think what has happened to black cabs or hotels, the same thing is potentially happening to our industry, too. The thing that I'm passionate about is helping to build the Unilever of tomorrow – a company that still has the same positive social and environmental impact as today, while still just as relevant in a digital world.

Jeremy wondered if it was the right time to scale up the operations of the Foundry. Had it delivered results which could stand the scrutiny of the larger Unilever organisation? Was the organisation ready to embrace what the Foundry had to offer? And if not, what more needed to be done?

Unilever's history

Lever Brothers was founded in 1885 by William Hesketh Lever and his brother James. The company produced Sunlight, the world's first packaged, branded laundry soap. The brothers earned a reputation as social reformers, championing a shorter work day, savings

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