Matt Pierri

Role - Founder and CEO

Degree - MSc in Social Sciences of the Internet, University of Oxford, Master of Public Policy, University of Oxford

Matt is an Australian lawyer and disability advocate currently based in London, UK. He is an Entrepreneur-in-Residence at Schmidt Futures and formerly a Visiting Scholar at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, where he studied as a Rhodes Scholar (an international scholarship programme, enabling outstanding young people from around the world to study at the University of Oxford).

Contact - hello@sociability.app

An app empowering disabled people to find accessible spaces and enjoy greater social inclusion, whilst change public perceptions of disability

More than 1.5 billion people worldwide face barriers to social inclusion due to poor accessibility issues in venues and public social spaces. Inaccessible venues limit social engagement and opportunities. Whether someone is disabled, elderly or requires pushchair access – knowing the accessibility of a venue/location in advance helps to avoid stress or feelings of exclusion.
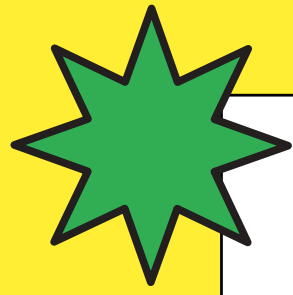
Sociability is a start-up with dual aims: to provide accurate and detailed information on the accessibility of hospitality and retail venues, and to change public perceptions of disability. Through the provision of quick, easy and detailed accessibility data from real time crowd-sourced information, those with personal accessibility issues can plan ahead before a visit and enjoy the social space. Ultimately, the start-up's mission is to make the world a more inclusive, accessible and sociable place for all.

The company was founded by Matt Pierri, a wheelchair user who understands first-hand how a lack of accessibility information contributes to lower rates of social inclusion and the influence that this has on societal perceptions of disabled and elderly people. In most cases, non-attendance at events or spaces is perceived as a lack of interest or engagement, masking the reality that disabled or elderly people may be obstructed from accessing or moving within these environments. Having moved from Australia to the UK, Matt found his accessibility issues exacerbated by a lack of working knowledge of places accessible to him in this new environment.

Inspired by his personal experiences, the social entrepreneur established the Oxford Accessibility Project (OAP); a student-led resource to crowd-source accessibility information on around twenty Oxford colleges. From there, the idea for Sociability was born and the app launched in September 2020, following a year of user-testing and fundraising, largely raised via the University eco-system.
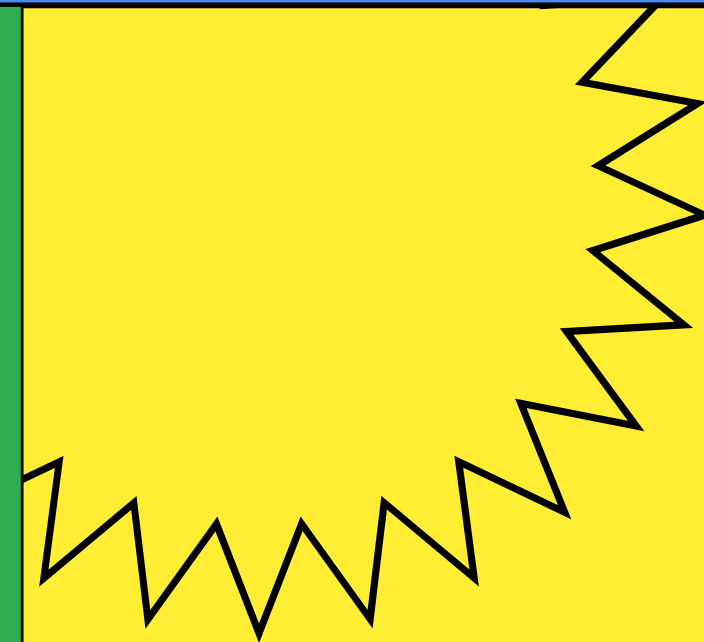
Sociability helps disabled people to take an important first step towards greater social inclusion, social representation & equality of opportunity. The app is rooted in social sciences concepts, placing the user at the heart of the technology and how their access to a social space will benefit them as an individual and build their social confidence. Additionally, it isn't just about building a technology platform, Sociability is about building a new approach to explaining the importance of accessibility, changing behaviours as a result and driving change in society.
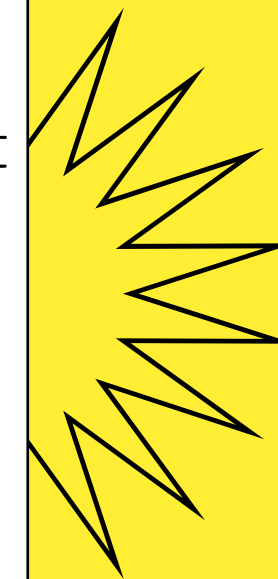
The start-up actively monitors and measure their social impact and contribution towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing through both qualitative and quantitative metrics and are consistently refining their methods to ensure that they are measuring the right things and listening to what the data is telling them about the social needs of their users. On a wider social impact level, the app will enable venues to attract more customers and generate more revenues, empowering the broader community socially and economically.

"Sometimes all you want to do is grab a beer with friends – but due to the lack of accessibility information for wheelchair users like me, planning for that simple pleasure is a chore. I'm so grateful to Sociability for taking the hassle out of planning the little things so I can focus on the fun ones! A lack of accessibility information is more than just a hassle – it's a source of stress that threatens to derail plans. Sociability significantly eases this stress"

Jay Ruckelshaus, Sociability App User, Oxford, UK

THE IMPACT

The app has attracted £95,000 of funding, largely raised through the Oxford university ecosystem including the Oxford Foundry L.E.V8 accelerator programme, the Skoll Venture Awards and the Oxford Seed Fund.

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Sociability highlights the diverse range of accessibility needs and is educating venue owners on how being universally 'accessible' is more than just installing a stairlift or a disabled toilet, it's putting the user experience first and implementing flexible measures to enable social inclusion for everyone.

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An increase in representation of disabled people and others with access needs will alter mainstream perceptions that disabled people are disinterested in social activities and frequenting public spaces.

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Since its launch on 31 August 2020, almost 450 users have signed up and there have been over 8000 searches on the platform.

The start-up journey

In addition to the financial support, Matt credits his university experience with helping him to develop and launch the start-up. Enterprising Oxford connected him to relevant competitions, awards and shared the product with its network. He also gained a place on the Oxford Foundry L.E.V8 programme which provided more tangible support, including valuable mentors who have taught Matt how to turn his idea into a functioning business. Oxford's Careers Service also endorsed Matt's Graduate Entrepreneur Visa, allowing him to develop the venture into a business.

Matt's advice to fellow social entrepreneurs:-

✦ Believe in your idea: even the most successful ideas require defending in the early years. Invest your time in ideas you truly believe in.

✦ Entrepreneurship isn't glamorous: approaching entrepreneurship through rose-tinted glasses is unwise, it can be hard and there are low moments – you need to be self-motivated and have a clear sense of your purpose and mission.

✦ Choose co-founders wisely, if at all: whilst solo founding is difficult, finding people with the same level of engagement or core commitment to your ideas is extremely hard. Don't bring on co-founders unless you find the right people to share the journey with.

✦ Make full use of any entrepreneurial support available at your university on your journey, from financial to business advice, to help make your business idea become a reality.
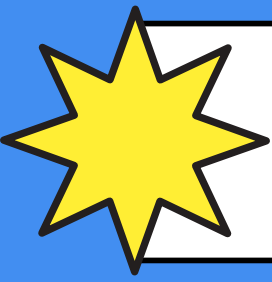
What's next for Sociability?

Since its launch, the Sociability team has been focused on perfecting the app's functionality. The aim is to scale up through marketing campaigns and increase three key metrics: user engagement; venue representation; and funding streams.

As more venue information makes the app more useful to its users, the start-up is exploring new strategies for greater engagement with venues to improve the quality and quantity of accessibility information on the app.