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Mentorship

Sparks A Tech Start-up That Empowers Women

By Susan Bender-Phelps



When you talk to women in business, you learn that they're hungry for mentorship. Many want to be mentors because they know that being a mentor helps them grow their leadership skills while giving a hand up to someone who's walking in their footsteps or forging new frontiers. Even more women are eager for the guidance and opportunities that aspirational mentoring can provide for them as they advance their careers or grow their companies.

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Some want that one-to-one relationship that lasts for months, years, even a lifetime. Others want short-term support for a specific project, challenge or change initiative. Now, you can get either or both at PropellHer.com, the new tech start-up co-founded by business partners Danielle Fletcher and Naomi Kimberlin.

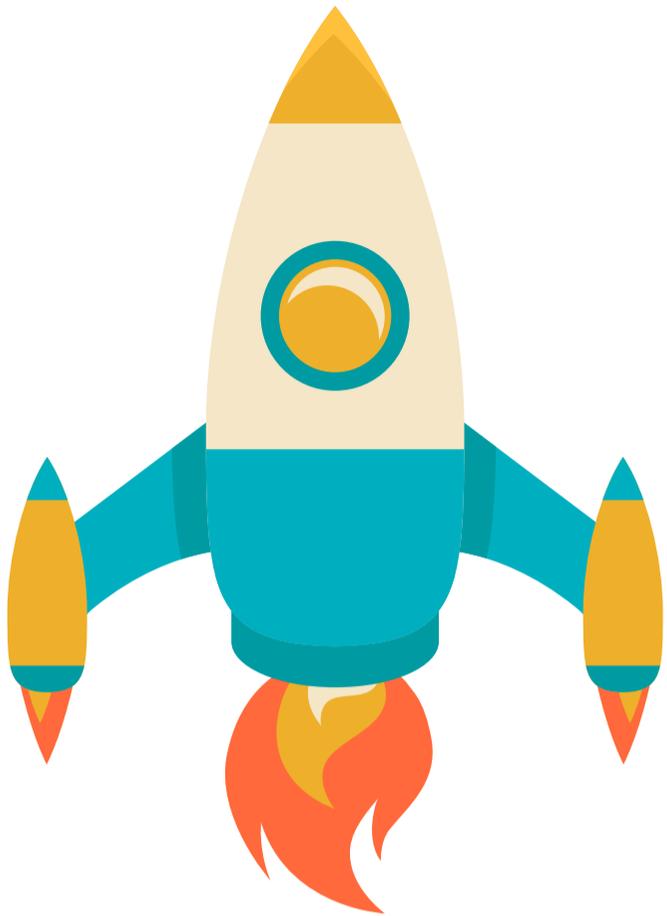
The PropellHer platform overcomes the barriers of traditional mentoring programs by matching and managing the mentor - mentee relationship online. You can access your perfect mentor whether she's down the hall, down the street, across town or on the other-side of the globe. PropellHer gives you the tools to communicate seamlessly and meet face to face via video conferencing.

After a little more than a year of planning and design, the site went live this March and more than 1400 people, mostly women, signed up to volunteer as mentors in less than a month's time.

In addition, mentors, as well as experts and writers from around the world have been submitting articles to the site's blog, creating a dynamic library of career and business stories, advice and news.

PropellHer is on track to have more than 4500 prospective mentees signed up by the end of this month. Signing up to be mentored is free and the mentors are all volunteers. You scroll through the bios of the mentors and choose the one you want to ask a question and you're on your way. If you're looking for a longer term mentoring relationship, you may request it. There will be a small annual administrative fee for the mentees for this part of the service.

In the interest of full disclosure, I did sign up as a mentor and guest blogger as soon as I learned about it. I'm based in the U.S., but most members of the mentorship community are from Australia, like PropellHer's founders. I love this global approach to mentoring.



How It All Began

Danielle and Naomi met through business. Naomi was a sole trader. She owned a consulting practice called Kimberlin Education and Danielle was looking for her next opportunity. They immediately saw a possibility for working together. Naomi was passionate about having been able to change her career and do what she really loved and work for herself. Danielle had a passion for helping women create a future for themselves. Like Naomi, she had also changed careers. She left working in big corporate HR to go back to university to do a Masters in Design.

“I realized I wasn’t as creative as I thought I was. I loved to be creative in the development of a product which I learned when I was in the Masters program, but realized I wanted to do it with people. It was a great lesson. I learned I could never be a creative in an ad agency,” she freely admits.

Even though Danielle describes them as “complete opposites...who disagree on everything!” they realized their shared experience in career change, resulted in a shared commitment to empowering women in the workplace. They started with the concept of personal branding.

“When you see Naomi you’ll see that she’s the much more stylish one than me. She was very into personal styling and body language and feeling good about your self. My emphasis was more around helping you find the right career choice, using psychometric tools to find the right job for you, how to build a CV, how to find jobs, how to get in front of recruiters and creating that strong personal brand that people think you are an expert in your field and you’re the go-to person.

“We spoke to a lot of women and talked to them about what they needed in the way of personal branding and how that would help them get ahead. And everyone just kept saying, ‘We want a mentor, someone who has walked in my shoes, someone who can give me the experience that they have had and help me work out what it is that I need to do next.’ The more women that said that to us, the more we realized that we needed one, too,” Danielle recalls.

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A Mentor Changed Their Lives



I remember turning to Naomi one day and I said, ‘I think we need a mentor.’



“She said, ‘I know this guy called Lars. He works at Facebook.’

He turned out to be Lars Rasmussen, the VP for Engineering at Facebook.

Naomi contacted Rasmussen who was working in Silicon Valley at the time. He was planning a trip to Australia for some other business. While there he spent time with Danielle and Naomi meeting with them in their little home office.

As it turns out, he loves start-ups. He loves watching small companies grow. He told them, “If you want to reach all women and really make an impact, you need to build to a tech company.”

According to Danielle, they couldn’t even get their wireless printer to work. It seemed way out there. But in the spirit of the moment, Naomi and Danielle said, “Yeah, let’s build a tech company.”

And what a journey it’s been! They had no idea how to build a tech company. Neither of them had worked in tech before. They came from very different backgrounds. But Lars connected them to a lot of really great people. They started talking to women who’d founded great tech companies. They began talking to developers who opened them up to a whole new world and a whole new language.

Partners Who Disagree on Absolutely Everything!



was very intrigued when Danielle told me that she and Naomi disagree on just about everything. Most people would find that a counter-productive way to start and run a business. “I think disagreement has made us as strong as we are. We do have a rule. If one person says no, then it’s a no. If one person really strongly disagrees with something, then it’s a no; so there is that fail-safe.” She continues, “Disagreement is an opportunity for us to discuss everything in more detail than if we just blindly agreed with each other. We debate and discuss and we go through everything until we both come to a conclusion that we think is the right way.”

She adds, “Naomi has a very different point of view. She comes from a different background and looks at things from a different angle. You need diversity in order to make the right decisions. Part of that is looking at a problem from a different point of view.

That’s where we come from and that’s what makes it kind of easy to disagree but then easy to work out what the right solution is.”

One of those early decisions was to attend the Launch48 Hackathon (July of last year). PropellHer was one of four ideas chosen. Teams were formed around those ideas and they spent the next 48 hours creating a “minimal viable product,” something that people can see and interact with, as minimally as signing up with an email.

The pair started developing from there. They hired some very talented people who came to work with them part-time to build and design the platform. Slowly PropellHer started growing organically as the team brought their vision into focus.

An unexpected benefit of starting PropellHer is that they were able to use their increased tech capability to transform the Kimberlin Education business model. Instead of writing curriculum-based content, going into primary schools and teaching it, they put it all on-line.

All of the primary schools

in Australia have interactive whiteboards. They now had the ability to create content that goes on those whiteboards allowing classroom teachers to teach the lessons Naomi used to do face-to-face. Their customers and clients really loved the new approach and their client base and earnings began to grow.

From the beginning the duo planned for Kimberlin Education to support whatever other business it was that they were going to create. The tech capabilities took the lid off in a very unexpected way. In less than a year, this two-person company now has a combined staff of nine people. As a direct result of the growth of Kimberlin Education, they have been able to fund PropellHer without borrowing or taking on investors. They’ve also moved out of their home office and the companies share the new office space in a small warehouse building in Sydney.

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Creativity is a Team Effort

“We have graphic designers, in-house content developers, and back end developers.

Everyone would assume that they would be the creative ones.

But when it comes to product development and what we are doing and how Propellher is going to work, that’s everyone’s role,” explains Danielle.

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ondays are usually focus days when they look at their product and how they can better meet their mentee and mentor needs. Everyone throws ideas onto the table. The team does all their design thinking in a way that allows them to think of ideas that solve as many problems as possible.

“You don’t stop to see if they’re good or bad”, she adds. “You just throw them all onto the table on Post-it notes. And then we ruffle through them. Everyone is encouraged to say what he or she thinks. Even if it is the most stupid idea in the world, we want to hear it. That’s because people spark off each other. And that’s what we try and do on Mondays.”



“When you build a tech company there are lots of bumps”

“Mentor recruitment has been our greatest accomplishment so far,” says Danielle proudly. “If you ever want affirmation of how amazing humanity is... We launched Propellher in March to Mentors. We had 1400 mentors sign up in six weeks. And we had to stop the campaign because we didn’t have any mentees yet,” she recalls.

They recruited the mentors by reaching out to people personally and the majority of them agreed right away. Each one also agreed to do it as a volunteer. Danielle and Naomi were stunned by the generous response and commitment.

“The mentors have been very patient. We actually learned that the way we initially designed the platform didn’t work as well for our mentees and our mentors as we thought it would. So we’ve been redesigning the profiles and dashboard, making it easier for mentors and mentees to connect.

“You have an idea, create a test version of the product and trial it and you don’t know straightaway the first time you build a product if it’s exactly what’s going to meet your customer’s needs. You’ve got to test some things and see what they like and what they don’t like. It is not a smooth ride,” she warns.

“And that all takes time, you’ve got to constantly test things and see what works and what

makes it more effective for people. It’s really a game of trial and error and we’re just really appreciative that all of our mentors have been so supportive and hung in there with us,” she says with sincere gratitude.

“We’re very excited about how it’s been going and the fact that our mentors are so fantastic. Mentees are asking them questions and they are donating so much of their time to answer them. The quality of the answers and the insight that they’re giving... It’s just overwhelming and on days when you’ve had a hard time in the office and things don’t go how you planned a mentor will come through and write an answer to a mentee and it just reaffirms everything that you’re doing,” says Danielle.

Click on the imbedded icon to hear my conversation with Danielle Fletcher, co-founder of PropellHer as we talk about the role their own mentors have played in making their gamechanging tech start-up a success.

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Susan Bender Phelps is an internationally recognized expert on mentorship, leadership and communication. She runs Odyssey Mentoring & Leadership and is the author of *Aspire Higher*, true stories of career and business mentoring success.