

Hello On The Way, I'm Thomas Koell, co-founder of Les Biens en Commun. Les Biens en Commun is an appliance rental service. It's a more sustainable alternative that lets you hire equipment for a few hours or a day, rather than buying it outright. This makes it a more economical, more practical and more sustainable choice.

The beginning of my career was rather atypical given what I do today, as I had a childhood passion - although 'passion' is a strong word - for cars. I studied business and when I finished my studies I had the opportunity to work in the sector I was interested in. I got to work for prestigious German brands, for Porsche and BMW in Germany.

Then I came back to France and managed to work both in the automotive industry and with a start-up called Aramis Auto, which is now Aramis Group, and which is present in France and several other countries. This brought together the automotive sector and my entrepreneurial spirit.

Eleven years went by very quickly at Aramis, and I didn't have much time to ask myself questions. We had projects on the go all the time, things were always moving. Then I had two children, so that didn't help. Classic case. The second classic case was the Covid period, which gave people time to ask themselves questions. And the shock of both.

I had also just turned thirty. So I said to myself, "OK, now I want to be an entrepreneur and if I do that, what do I want to work on?" I knew I wanted to change. So what will my children be proud of in ten years' time?

It's an important motivational driver for me. I met my partner and co-founder of Biens en Commun, Yann Lemoine, who really helped me understand things like the ecological transition, its challenges and the limits of our planet.

Meeting him really set things in motion and enabled me to start building something with him.

When I left Aramis Auto, I didn't have a project in mind, other than the desire to be an entrepreneur. So on one hand I wanted to do it, and on the other hand I was sure that I wasn't going to do it alone, that I couldn't, I couldn't see myself going at it alone. I was quite aware that I was looking for someone who was very much into ideas and projection, whereas I myself am very much into action and movement, I like getting things done.

So I left and it was basically looking for a partner. I met a lot of people, there are lots of networking events around entrepreneurship at my old school, and so I was introduced to Yann. It turns out that he was also looking for a partner at the time, but he was still quite surprised by my profile.

He did what we all do: when I contacted him, he looked at my LinkedIn profile and didn't immediately understand what I wanted from him. So we had a first meeting and I think we both came away with a lot of questions about each other, because we have very different backgrounds and very different career paths.

He's an engineer who studied at AgroParisTech. But on the other hand, we were very curious about each other's backgrounds and, above all, we noticed that our profiles were very complementary. So it all clicked quite quickly and we went for it. We didn't waste too much time on agreements at the beginning, we wanted to work together, we wanted to work on this project and so we only formalised it afterwards.

This was actually Yann's idea. What appealed to me about this idea was its common sense. It's the common sense behind saying "but why should I buy expensive equipment that takes up space in my flat when I only use it once or twice a year?" The original idea was based around the concept of bike sharing, carpooling and all the innovations that have helped people understand that there are alternatives that mean that they don't have to give up a great deal.

We actually just need to change the way we consume an object or service. So it was this idea of Yann's that appealed to me and the way he presented it. And on top of that, and this is more my take-action side, all the applications and the immense potential for developing this idea that we are in the process of developing today for different scenarios.

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There's a world of difference between having an idea and executing it.

We had quite a few obstacles to overcome. We asked ourselves, "How can we bring this closer to people's lives? It was important for us to insert ourselves into the everyday life of French people, because that's actually one of the obstacles. If it's complicated, if it's far from home, if it doesn't suit your schedule, it's not practical."

So quite quickly, we started thinking about lockers. And actually, Yann had already produced a prototype and we thought "these lockers can be as close to people's lives as possible". And as close as possible to people's lives means first and foremost where they live.

For quite a long time, we worked on places of residence and we started with the people who were most willing to quickly test the concept, namely students. That's because they're already part of this movement, they're into sharing, an app on their phone, smart lockers, they're familiar with all these things. And so they very quickly started using the service and we saw that there was a real interest.

But once we started, we saw that the interest went beyond students and that when you have different equipment, a lot of people are interested. When we expand to areas such as DIY, gardening and leisure it becomes a service that appeals to a very large portion of the population. And so we started again, we wiped the slate clean, we added equipment that you couldn't usually rent or equipment you could rent but that was too difficult to maintain, which worked because we're the ones in charge of maintaining the equipment.

We manage service quality. And so we took one small step after another, and now we know what equipment works well. What the right price point is, where they should be made available, in what exact spot, etc. Today, you can find Les Biens en Commun in apartment buildings, local shops and large offices.

This means that we adapt our offer all the time. And that's something we do as we evolve and learn from the extensive conversations we have with our users.

Registering with Les Biens en Commun is completely free. So when you have Les Biens en Commun in your building, your office or local shop, you can sign up, create an account and then you can see all the products. This is an important aspect that we wanted to address very early on. We have developed a fully integrated, turnkey service. Because there were already some sharing apps out there.

I lend you this item or I rent you this item, you pay, and so on. But this was not taking off as quickly as we would have liked, because we're all in favour of sharing, but there are a lot of obstacles. Like what happens if you break something? Or maybe you don't feel like lending or renting your equipment to someone.

Maybe you don't feel like going to someone's house to get it either. So we have developed an all-in-one service. This means that we own the products stored securely in the Les Biens en Commun lockers. We source them via partners.

Very early on, we surrounded ourselves with major partners like the Seb group, Karcher, Stihl, Bosch, Boulanger, etc. We work with these brands and are able to source some fairly top-of-the-range equipment from them, that is durable and repairable and in line with our vision for the project. So once you've registered on the app, you can book equipment and see what's available in real time.

In just a few clicks, you can ensure that when you go shopping or leave the office at 5:30 p.m. on a Friday, the equipment you've reserved is waiting for you. It's rented. It's easy to access the locker. Today, lots of people pick up their parcels using smart lockers. It works the same way. It's extremely simple. You open the locker and inside you find your equipment, a carry bag and all the accessories.

All you have to do then is use it as you need it and return it on time. So there are things that are obvious for certain markets. Students, for example, obviously it comes as no surprise that they're going to rent hoovers a lot. That's what works. But when we started working, particularly with Franprix local shops, the first products,

we listened to our users and had to quickly change them. There were some products that were requested that we didn't really know about, like the upholstery cleaning machine. Today, it's one of our most popular products. It could be a video projector, which is a product that's quite in demand. The drill: another excellent example. Quite a few statistics have been shared about the drill.

A drill is manufactured, shipped, packaged... Just imagine all the work that goes into a drill that's sometimes used for only twelve minutes in its life. That's why it's one of our most popular pieces of equipment. So we listen to our customers, we test the equipment and quite quickly we find out whether it works or not. It was a bit counter-intuitive at first to build partnerships with the brands that supply our products.

You might think "Well, no, but it's not necessarily in their interest to work with us, it's in their interest to sell." Offering products for sale is more or less the classic model we've known until now. Except that everyone is asking questions. And more than just asking questions: people are coming up with initiatives, they're turning towards other models.

And the rental model is well-known. In the car industry, I know it well: a large proportion of car fleets are leased. Everyone is asking questions about the functionality economy and innovation. But when you have a company like ours appearing on the market, with the time, energy and desire to work with you, it's also a way of outsourcing a bit of your research and development, learning alongside us while also supporting us.

At first, it's a small step for them, but it already allows them to partner up with our initiative and the company's values. We are a socially responsible company. Our project has a strong environmental component. So there's this whole path that they subscribe to. And of course they're curious about the results, about what people want to rent,

about who rents, where are things being rented, at what price, etc. So there's this whole discovery aspect that they're really interested in and one of the reasons we've managed to enter into these partnerships. For them, it's obviously good in terms of image to provide these products. They see us as a way of bringing products closer to consumers using a rental model and a feel-good solidarity model, where they know that they're placing products in lockers belonging to a company that has values. So in a way, they also benefit from this image and being able to promote their products.

The question of the quality of the products, their maintenance and the condition in which customers find them is fundamental. It's been there from the start. I think it will always be part of the model, so we're working hard on it. There are several ways of approaching it. We worked with our partners on the choice of products. The juicer is an example that looked good on paper.

We tried it out and it did rent. On the other hand, I find this appliance quite hard to clean, having tested it myself. And so in our sharing model, where there are no systematic checks carried out every time something is rented, it's a more complex piece of equipment to manage. Today it's something that we no longer offer.

On the other hand, we can offer DIY equipment or even party equipment, which is fairly easy to clean. So we choose our products accordingly. When I say sustainable and repairable, I mean that, to give another example, that of Bosch, we're going to be working with more professional ranges, on equipment that has longer lifespans and that can be used pretty intensively.

Even though with us, it's private individuals who rent the equipment most of the time. And then there's the whole community thing. Les Biens en Commun is a community and I think that plays a big part. Unlike other services that bring up images of scooters or bikes dumped into the Seine or the Rhône against their will...

After all, we're in restricted spaces, in offices. We're in shops, it's true. You need to go inside. There is a locker, you need to create an account. On some sites, you may need to give your bank card number. There are also quite a few measures that act as barriers.

It's really a balance between our principles, the community involvement and the technical measures we need to structure it. And, of course, an on-site presence: we visit our sites to check our equipment, extend its life, maintain it and, if necessary, replace it if there are any problems. There was suspicion at first, and sometimes we were told "Your service might work, but not in France."

Go to Scandinavian countries where people treat common goods more respectfully." So we were keen to show that actually, it works in France too. And indeed, today, out of several thousand rentals, there has been no theft, no deliberate damage. When people damage something or have a doubt, they often spontaneously contact the support service to inform us.

And for us, that obviously makes management a lot easier. So that's a real victory, and we're working on it every day. This is of course it's because people say to themselves: "I'm in my place of work and I don't want to damage other people's property or that of my colleague who's going to rent it next. What's more, I'm the one who sponsored him on the app, so he can't go and find equipment that's not in the state he's expecting." And then, in a slightly selfish way, we, the Biens en Commun are part of your life. What we are seeing today is that once people start renting from us they keep renting from us. You may be the one using the equipment next time, so you're not going to damage something that you yourself will be using in a few weeks' time.

Our knowledge of users is growing week by week, month by month. Today, we are mainly present in urban environments, in large cities, in offices and shops. Most of our users are women, and they tend to be young. We still cater to students, but now we're really targeting a much wider age range. There are maybe two limiting aspects. I've spent some time in shops or chatting to people, it sometimes comes down to how easy you find it to use a smartphone to book the whole process and how comfortable you are with picking the item up from a smart locker, without talking to anyone. So there's a barrier there sometimes.

And then there's a second barrier that people may come across: they need the service to be very close to home. So we need to grow quickly. Today, our community is growing on social networks, but we need to get closer to it. To put it another way, we have a lot of people who sign up to the app and we're trying to get them to join the community, and when we talk to them, one of the issues is how close to them we are. That's also why we're looking to roll out the service on a massive scale. Because this is one of the barriers to use, not being close to the customer, we're actively working on that. It's a

question that comes up a lot, and obviously when you set up a company that's socially responsible and with the mission that we have, people will quickly ask about the impact you're having.

Initially, what we've done are life cycle analyses, but they're based on assumptions. When you're very small, you don't have the measurements, the statistics. But they still allow you to confirm that you're heading in the right direction. I talked a lot about common sense at the beginning, but we give the example of the residential sector: it could be a block of flats, 80 flats, that's 80 hoovers, that's the home appliance rate for France, but it could also be 60 drills.

In a company with 1,500 employees there might be 300 drills. Imagine this same building, this same company ten years from now, with seven, eight, ten times less equipment manufactured, because these are the figures that can be largely achieved. The impact is enormous. It's common sense, but we've proved it with life cycle analyses, and it will obviously have to be tested over time.

The next question is whether we are informing users of the CO2 savings or even the financial savings they have generated. The answer is no, not yet. I also said at the beginning that my partner is an engineer, so we're very careful about what we do with that. We know that the project is moving in the right direction.

We're very transparent about our values, but we can't announce things if we don't measure them properly, so we're currently working on this. But I think that fairly soon, yes, we should have, at any rate, orders of magnitude, things to share on the financial gains, space savings and obviously the gains we have made in terms of CO2 impact. We talk a lot about CO2, but when it comes to manufacturing a drill, there's obviously a huge number of other resources that can be optimised by producing fewer drills.

The question of the company's business model arose quite early on. One of the things that appealed to me about the project was its complexity. I really enjoy working on difficult projects. Why is it so difficult? Because we have lockers to deploy, to finance, also equipment to finance, to maintain, to service...

It's essential to find the right economic equation. Otherwise we'll have zero impact if we're no longer there to provide the service in the years to come. We had different models to choose from. And what we realised quite early on was that when we create value, the value we create for users also creates enormous value for the places where we deploy the service.

This has opened up the possibility of having two financing streams for our business model. The model doesn't just rely on the drill you hire for €10, otherwise it would be pretty complicated. But when you set up in a residential building, in an office or a shop, there is also income that comes from the hosting premises.

Why? Because the people who own the premises want to offer this service, either in order to stand out, to attract and retain employees, or to show their commitment to CSR. We have more and more of them, particularly in our corporate accounts. So we have two sources of income, which offer a degree of stability and also make the service extremely accessible.

We didn't want this service to be elitist. I said that we were present in the big cities, but our long-term goal is to have a Les Biens en Commun rental option within ten or fifteen minutes of your home pretty much everywhere in France. And to achieve this, we needed a business model where the rental fees we charged end users were not too high.

Today, according to our assessments, we're really seen as a good deal. We're trying to have all our products be accessible in terms of price. So there are some products that don't lend themselves to this, because they have to be rinsed and then left to dry or cool. Anyway, there are different products. But we always try to offer affordable prices that start at under 10 euros. And in residential environments, it can be much less than that. When we were talking about students at the beginning, students sometimes rent equipment for €1.50 / €2 for a very short time. The Les Biens en Commun app is a cornerstone of our model, because it is there specifically to make the rental experience easier and to let customers book quickly and actually see the products.

We've been working on it from the start. At first, we didn't own it, so we started again and now we do. So Les Biens en Commun is a company that's already operating but that also involves a lot of technology, and we keep developing all the time. That's a very important differentiating factor for us, and we're working on it.

The first thing we did with this application was to make it possible to book very quickly and see the products and their availability very quickly, in real time. Today, the app is evolving. Why is it evolving? It is evolving in response to the trend we are observing. And the trend is that more and more people are looking for rental options close to home, so we're developing public points.

I mentioned some supermarkets earlier. We're in the process of launching with some others, most notably the Casino group. But we also opened in our first Super U store. At some point, the more shops like these we open in, the more users will be able to say to themselves, "My town is a kind of treasure trove full of resources." In a few weeks' time, people will be able to use the Les Biens en Commun app to geolocate products and see their availability in real time. And that's much easier. When you're sitting on the sofa and you think "Ah, that infamous hole in the load-bearing wall, don't I need a percussion drill?" Well, actually, there's one 650 metres from your house and you can book it for Friday for €10."

Doing things becomes much easier. All the barriers come down and you get to test it out. And then, of course, testing the service obviously means that you're actually using it; that's our job behind the scenes. When we assess Les Biens en Commun today, we get a very high satisfaction rate: 97% of people would recommend us. So we're still young, we'll have to stand the test of time. But we test, we assess, we go back, we rent the

equipment again and then little by little, we get started and that's the advantage of this project:

we start to rent other equipment and test other ranges. And we sometimes survey people we see are regular users but who never rent out certain things. And when we talk to them, they say "yes, but I've already got that". "OK, great. Of course, if you have it, you're not going to rent it. But what are you going to do tomorrow when it breaks?"

"Well, obviously then I'd switch over to you." And that's where the impact will increase over time. It's a long-term project, but we know we're heading in the right direction and that, little by little, people will come and stay. And people are diversifying the way they use our service.

The first two years of Les Biens en Commun, we spent quite a lot of time on residential projects, so we opened around twenty sites, including two fully equipped buildings. Behind the scenes, we've now refocused on shops and large businesses, mainly for reasons of critical size: the more people there are in the same place or in the same neighbourhood, the more potential there is for sharing, the easier it will be for us to find a viable economic model and the more impact we'll have. That's actually quite important. At some point, we thought about train stations. They are places of transit. We don't currently have any very concrete plans in this area. We sometimes talk about it. There are issues of flow and safety standards.

It's a complex world that I still don't know very well. And we saw that in the world of mass retail, we could develop the service much more quickly. It's much simpler. Then, if you want to be integrated into people's daily lives, of course train stations come to mind, but so do the places where people go for their shopping. Since we made this decision and also slightly changed our economic model and our offer, in the past two or three months, we've doubled the size of our network. We've opened around twenty new outlets, and we're planning to open about a hundred more this year.

We are therefore in a rapid growth phase in 2025. Obviously, it's great for us as entrepreneurs and for the team that believed in us from the beginning. There are ups and downs, and when we were in the process of rethinking the model, of taking a different approach, there were times when we didn't open any outlets for two or three months, sometimes even longer.

And right now, for example, at the time of this interview, we're opening four of them, so we're doing almost as many as we opened in six months last year. So we're in a phase of rapid expansion. It turns out that we're the only ones doing what we do in France. There are others in the world with similar models.

There are models, notably in the Scandinavian countries, Germany and Switzerland, and now even in France, that have appeared. Where it's more like a box, but focused on outdoor sports. So we can see that the concept is taking shape, that we're no longer the only ones talking about this. The more we are in the media, the more we are visible in shops, the more people adopt it and talk about it amongst themselves.

So that helps. And then there's also knowing how to adapt your offer to the market. That's something we've changed recently, in particular to address the large business and retail markets. That was really a combination of two things: you have customers who are increasingly receptive and who also have increasing expectations, whether from their employees or their customers.

When you're one of these major distribution groups, you're under pressure to innovate and offer services that are both useful and sustainable. As a result, we've come at just the right time, with just the right offer. This obviously helped us get off the ground more quickly. As for the community of users who like the service, take a look at the large communities built around Blablacar or Too Good To Go. So we have a slightly different model, as we said, we have lockers. But you can imagine that millions of French people, and that's really what we're aiming for in the long term, millions of French people, will either use this service, or, even if we won't always be the only ones on the market, will have the reflex to use this kind of service. And we will have brought about this change. It will be hard to measure how much of this is down to us, but we'll know that we will have brought about a change in the consumption of everyday appliances. And that's what we're aiming for, for it to become an everyday reflex. And to be present just about everywhere. As for the reflex, it's saying "I need an everyday appliance so I go downstairs and there's one in the lobby of my building."

"I need something on a one-off basis, I know there's a locker in my shop or I can find it at the office." That's obviously something that's going to take a few years, but in the end, we plan to build a presence everywhere in France and even further out, we'll see. Because this is not a change that's only happening in France. And there are even countries that are more advanced than us on these issues.

But the potential is huge.

We've also recently begun setting up in Belgium. Not directly, we're not operational yet, but we're talking with a local authority. And this is a very active local authority. We talk to a lot of local authorities in France too, in Lyon, where we're based, but not only that, with lots of other ones. And we believe that they will also have a role to play.

It's true that we've talked a lot about private partners, private players, those who supply us with products and those who host us. But my partner Yann and I are talking a lot with local authorities. He, in particular, talks to them a lot. We believe that regional authorities have a role to play, in terms of support and communication. But we try to get them involved because wherever we get set up, we like to make it a local project and work with local partners behind the scenes.

We spoke earlier about maintenance and upkeep. As far as possible, we will work with local service providers, which may be associations or professional reintegration organisations. So we really need to create this regional network and turn our services into small regional projects. We will select our products according to a number of criteria. Location is one of them.

Means of transport, ways to get there, is it in the city or rather in the suburbs? That's what's going to determine the type of products and their universe. Today, we do tend to try and provide the products that are most popular across the board. But we are starting, and we were talking earlier, to geolocate products in cities. We're starting to ask ourselves the first questions about how we're going to optimise this by saying that we don't need to offer the same products everywhere and in all outlets. What we need instead is to look at expectations, at the number of people looking for a regular drill and the number of people looking for a hammer drill, for example.

A regular drill we maybe have in all our outlets but a hammer drill, we have only one in the neighbourhood or a kilometre away. Somehow people are more willing to seek out certain equipment. For example, if you're having a crepe party, you might not want to walk all the way across town to find a crepe maker. But the upholstery cleaner that were talking about earlier, which is very useful and a fairly expensive product that takes up a lot of space and that you only use once a year - you might be willing to travel further to go get it. That's how you think about it.

To sum things up, it's all about the common sense I talked about earlier. I try to apply it to myself. I'm far from blameless when it comes to my choices, especially when it comes to making the most environmentally-friendly choice. But I try to combine financial, practical and environmental common sense. You have to aim for the trifecta, and I think we mentioned it earlier, the services that have developed very rapidly, it's because they know how to respond to at least these three dimensions at the same time. And so it's about using common sense when we make choices, the choices we have in our everyday lives, our consumption choices. Of course there are choices to be made: renovating your home is a big important decision, it's not taken lightly. So it's a matter of having the right reflexes when it comes to everyday equipment, thinking smart, thinking sustainable and looking at the options on the table.

Obviously, it's up to us to offer this opportunity to everyone and as close to home as possible.