

Bear Market Coffee expertly blends digital into its future

The omnichannel future: How popular roastery [Bear Market Coffee](#) in Dublin looked to digital commerce as it battled the challenges posed by the Covid-19 crisis.

Plummeting footfall, temporary closures during lockdowns and putting ambitious plans on ice, the experiences of Dublin roastery Bear Market Coffee echo those of many a business across not only Ireland but the entire world.

The business – founded by Stephen Deasy and his wife Ruth – is not only a labour of love but a haven for coffee lovers across the city of Dublin.

The Covid-19 crisis wasn't the first economic storm the couple had to weather.

“My wife Ruth and I both graduated from architecture in 2009 and spent a brief period in the industry before we realised that we'd need to emigrate to continue in it due to the global financial crisis,” recalls Stephen. “But having such close family ties here, we instead decided to channel our passion into Bear Market Coffee. We saw a gap in the premium coffee space and thought there was an opportunity to tempt coffee drinkers to explore a higher quality product.”

They initially launched the business in 2012 as a pop up in Blackrock Market in Dublin, just a stall from 6am to 9am every morning. “This allowed us to test the market and the product, and after six months the property next door became available and we jumped at the opportunity.

“We now have seven stores across Dublin, providing sustainable high-quality coffee roasted locally in Dublin, served by trained and skilled baristas, with our most recent branch in Decathlon opening last June.”

Many businesses like Bear Market Coffee have had to accelerate their digital plans or pivot rapidly to digital to keep engaged with consumers who increasingly expect digital, omnichannel offerings. Over the coming weeks *ThinkBusiness* will focus a series of articles on the omnichannel future of retail including how to go online and sell as well as case studies of businesses that have adapted, including SMEs that have successfully received funding as part of the Government's Online Voucher Scheme.

An estimated 60pc of all online commerce conducted by Irish people leaves these shores direct into the coffers of global giants. Before Christmas there was a surge of support to buy Irish online

out of a public recognition that shopping locally online saves businesses and jobs.

As an independent Irish business, what makes your company different and how do you stand out from the crowd?

SD: We have created a community of coffee lovers who believe that where you enjoy your coffee is just as important as what's in the cup. Whether you're grabbing a quick one on the way to work or interested to learn more about the art and science behind coffee, we want everyone who walks through the door to feel inspired, revitalised, and, above all, welcome.

Our passion for quality runs through everything we do, from our specially chosen coffees, teas, hot chocolate, and pastries, through to our determination to create a space that people will really enjoy.

Every inch of each Bear Market café is lovingly designed and crafted; from the burnt timber tables, hand-built furniture, warming copper accents, and artwork lovingly given by our friends and family. We wanted to create an atmosphere that was contemporary and relaxing.”

Did the pandemic have an impact on your business?

SD: “Blackrock closed for four weeks in the initial lockdown and was quiet from April-June before gradually picking up and doing comparatively well compared to our city centre stores.

“In contrast our city centre locations have seen footfall plummet, with stores temporarily closing or planned stores put on hold, so we explored other opportunities in terms of diversifying our business. For example, our Pembroke Street is open again, but we have done that primarily to roast batches of speciality and single origin coffees in our micro roastery, using it as our distribution centre for online sales.

How did you adapt, did you begin selling online for the first time, offer takeaway service, etc, and what has the response from customers been to date?

SD: Given social distancing requirements, we couldn't use our stores the same way, but this also gave us that opportunity to diversify. We removed our seating in our Pembroke Street store and set up a micro roastery.

We were lucky in that we had been investing in our online presence prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, building a whole new website in January of 2020. That launched in mid-March of this year and our online sales went up rapidly, rising 200pc to 300pc, which has been a much-needed boost. Our Black Friday deal at the end of November did fantastically as well.

We've hired three people to manage the online side of the business, which we wouldn't have done as quickly had it not been for how Covid-19 has transformed the retail space, so our ecommerce team is now very strong.

How did you invest/fund the changes (i.e. your online journey, starting a delivery service, etc)?

SD: Whether it was by accident or design, we did well in terms of timing when we decided to invest in our online presence and a micro roaster, decisions which we had both made and commenced prior to Covid-19.

We self-funded both, which were wise investments in retrospect as it meant we had a head start when we needed to pivot.

What was your biggest challenge and how did you overcome that?

SD: The challenges have been the stores, especially in the city centre. We had to adapt to a new way of doing business and ultimately give customers confidence that they could buy a coffee with us safely, so we launched a pre-order app, working with [LoyLap](#), which was of huge benefit to our Blackrock store. Rather than queue, people can now pre-order from their phone and it will be waiting for them when they arrive.

Every challenge is also an opportunity though and we used this opportunity to embrace trends faster. For example, when we originally opened our George's Street store, we made it the first cashless coffee shop in Ireland. Now, because of the pandemic, we have made our entire business cashless. Because of George's Street, we had a mindset around digital infrastructure and now I don't think we'll ever go back to cash. From an operational perspective it presents several benefits for us, including hygiene, security, and accounting, cutting down on costs. All these little things have combined to make a big difference at a challenging moment.

What was the most important thing you learnt and what would you like to teach other businesses?

SD: The need for diversification is the key piece of wisdom we would pass on. We were lucky in that we had a mix of locations between suburban, city centre, and retail, along with the website. This reduced our exposure to risk. Nobody could have predicted that the city centre would be in the position it has been this year, but having a mix of locations and the ability to sell online was very fortunate for us.

What are your plans for the future?

SD: Our strategy going forward will be to try to build up more revenue streams. Our e-commerce operation will continue to be a big focus, but we also have significant plans around the coffee side of the business, allowing us to look at different products beyond just the hot bar, moving away from a reliance on the shops. We are now looking at future projects down the road from our micro roastery, adding product ranges to enable greater scale through our online presence.

If we see something in terms of new locations, we'll explore that also, but our focus will be to get our existing shops back up to where they were, developing new product ranges in those stores to raise average spend, as foot fall will continue to remain low in the city centre until at least September 2021. We have a property on Westland Row which we are hoping to fit out and open early in the new year and will hopefully be looking to open another location outside the city centre in the next year.

Pictured at top: Stephen Deasy and Ruth Deasy, founders of Bear Market Coffee

[Bear Market Coffee](#) is one of the small businesses featured in Visa's Where You Shop Matters campaign – a long-term commitment that recognises the essential role that small and independent businesses play in our communities. For more information, go to visa.ie/wysm.

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Published: 7 January 2021