

Animal's Choice: bedding down a great plan

"It's like chess. It can be easy to see the next move when you are not the one in the game."

In 2010, Tipperary woman Julianna O'Brien was living in Australia, and thinking of a business plan she could pursue if she came home to Ireland. She was inspired by the fact that Ireland has large stocks of miscanthus, commonly known as elephant grass, which is used here as a bioenergy fuel for power plants. Julianna identified an alternative use for miscanthus as a bedding material for horses, poultry, livestock and pets.

Together with husband Colin Ruttle, a production engineer, she set up Animal's Choice and began trading commercially in 2012. The product is branded as 'Elly Bed', and is sold through several different kinds of stockists including co-ops and also direct sales. One new product they will be introducing in 2015 is miscanthus in smaller packs for pet-bedding. Please keep an eye on the [website](#) for updates and further information.

What's your business's elevator pitch?

We process and bale miscanthus for animal bedding. Its primary advantage is its efficiency, that it is 100% natural with no additives and also 100% Irish. It's very price-competitive and dust is extracted. It is quick to break down and decompose after use. Animals don't eat it, which is important. It has no additives and is tested for microtoxins.

What do you regard as your business's greatest achievement?

Getting up and running in the middle of a recession, at a time when everyone and every business was struggling.

What was your biggest challenge?

We started out with LEADER funding but that meant a huge amount of things had to be balanced. To get funding, I had to have a seven-year lease on a premises, which meant finding one. Then I needed to match fund the Leader funding.

Though we had some savings of our own, we needed to finance the other half of the money and we needed bridging finance on top to help us with cashflow starting off. It was stressful. We applied for a bank loan and didn't get it, so we took that decision to the Credit Review Office and, on appeal, secured the finance.

We have been very lucky to have had an excellent relationship with our bank, and they have been very supportive.

What was your lowest moment?

In January 2014, due to a number of unforeseen circumstances, there was an unexpected gap in our supply of raw materials. I had to go out and find more, fast, at eight months' pregnant.

I had too much to do and I was exhausted. It was hard. My husband also works full-time and so there was only so much he could take on.

How have you coped with setbacks?

I talk to my accountant, business advisers, and I do analysis to see where the problem has resulted from in order to prevent it from recurring. Family members and friends who have entrepreneurial experience also help.

It's like chess. It can be easy to see the next move when you are not the one in the game.

What is your attitude to risk?

I'm okay with it as long as it is calculated risk. I'm comfortable with debt, for example, as long as I'm comfortable with my ability to pay it off. I try to mitigate risk as much as I can in all aspects of the business, such as sales analysis, targeting and making sure I have a wide enough customer base so that I'm not putting all my eggs in one basket.

We are currently looking at adding another product to our existing line in order to turn additional revenue, which also gives us more routes to market.

Who has motivated or inspired you?

The fact that both my husband and I come from backgrounds with self-employed parents encouraged me. Building a business was something I always wanted to see if I could do. And I always think of that Rudyard Kipling poem, 'If', for motivation.

What do you do, if anything, to switch off from the business?

Horse riding. Prior to my daughter being born, I'd ride five or six days a week. It switches you off like nothing else. I had real difficulty with that when I was pregnant with my daughter.

I would still walk the dogs nearly every day but I found walking doesn't stop you thinking about work, and you really do need a break from it. Even meeting with friends is great and important.

Would you do anything differently if you were starting your business today?

Hindsight is 20-20, so there would always be mistakes that you would not make second time around no matter what. However, I do believe that once you make a decision, you accept the outcome regardless and move forward with it.

Circumstances dictated a lot of how we did things, such as having to comply with the grant people and the bank.

What lessons have you learned in business that others could apply?

The biggest thing I've learned is the importance of cashflow. A lot of good businesses go to the wall not because they haven't got great products, or sales, but because they don't have enough cashflow.

We have felt that pressure massively. You have to focus on it constantly and keep overheads as low as possible.

Finally, if there was one piece of business advice you'd like to give, what would it be?

Know your business inside out. Know its strengths, weaknesses, finances, customers, everything.

See the [website for Animal's Choice](#) for more information on Julianna's business. Also find her on Facebook at 'Animal's Choice - Elly Bed'.