

## Thinking business - Tom Duffy, Cow Comfort

**Tom Duffy set up Cow Comfort in Belmullet, Co. Mayo in 1988. Today the business, which manufactures rubber mats for cattle sheds and equestrian stables, employs 30 people in offices in Ireland and the UK. The plant operates a 24-hour production schedule sending mats around the world.**



We make mats for cows so that they can lie on a bed and not on concrete. Concrete is cold, hard and slippery. Our mats are soft, heat insulating and non-slip. If you have only a few mats in a shed, you see the cows fighting to get on them. And they work - the result is dairy cows that milk better and for longer and beef cattle that reach their target weights quicker.

Success for me is the fact that we sell cow mats all around the world, from Chile to Russia and the US. The UK and Ireland are our two biggest markets, mainly because we have a physical presence in both. In the UK, we supply mats to the Queen's herd. But that's nothing compared with an order we got last year, our single biggest order ever, from Braum's Farm in Oklahoma, one of the largest dairy farms in the world. It was for 13,000 mats – and they're now building more sheds.

There have been low moments in business. The worst? In 1999 at two p.m., the factory burnt down. Oil and electricity met and the entire place was destroyed. The fire was so big, unsurprisingly given what we produce here, rubber, that it made news as far away as the US. It was devastating to us.

In that case, we were out of production for a year. I was just lucky that the previous year my insurance broker had encouraged me to change the cover to a UK insurance firm which was offering me twice the protection for half the premium. We didn't get any loss of earnings cover, but it did mean we could get back up and running within a year. It was a hard year.

### **Minimise risk**

I try to minimise risk in business as much as possible. Even when I was starting off, I did so while I was working in the factory that is now my premises. It made rubber soles for shoes at the time, so I was both working there and trying to start off my own business – I was both an employee and a customer. Doing it that way helped me gain the confidence to go with the enterprise. To start this business now you'd need €8 million in plant and equipment, it's a big operation, we burn €1,000 of electricity a day. But I started it step by step and grew gradually, eventually buying the shoe factory I worked in.

My wife Finola, who works full time in the business with me, is my inspiration and motivation. She works in sales and deals with suppliers, but both of us wear many hats. Sean Quinn was an inspiring business person to me also, up until a couple of years ago.

If I were starting off again today, I wouldn't do too much differently, other than not use electric thermostats. After the fire, we have begun using manual valves for safety instead.



People often ask, why don't we have a website. Two reasons. Firstly, for most of the time I've been in business, my market hasn't used them.

Up until the Celtic Tiger, it was the older generation who stayed on the farms while, the younger ones went off and got other jobs. As a rule, older farmers don't use the Internet. The younger generation of farmers does though so it's something we are going to get sorted. Deep down, though, I still have a feeling that if you have to have a website to sell your product, there must be something wrong with it. Almost all our business comes from farmers who have heard about us from other farmers.

Our biggest sales activity is attending agricultural shows. Typically we'll offer a farmer some mats to try for free and tell him we'll either come and collect them if he doesn't want them or he can pay us when we come back. I can't be fairer than that. Once they try them, they'll always buy them and order more. One of the biggest challenges we face is people going around selling mats they say are our Mayo Mats when they're not. Ours are patented and to be genuine they have to have our logo.

If there were one piece of business advice, I'd like to give other business owners, starting or trying to grow? Do your research. Don't get carried away with your idea. You have to be clear-eyed about the market opportunity. Be realistic. And be ready to put in very long hours.