

## Farmer builds brilliant product following life-changing injury

***After suffering a life-changing injury, vegetable farmer Dick Weldon turned his problem into an opportunity which has turned out to be very successful.***

Farming is recognised as one of Ireland's most dangerous occupations, linked no doubt to the challenges of weather, shortage of labour and mechanisation. In November 2011 vegetable farmer, Dick Weldon experienced a life-changing event on his farm in Rush, Co. Dublin. While carrying out a maintenance job on his purpose-built vegetable harvester; a spanner slipped and hit a sensor, switching on the machine, resulting in the loss of use of his arm - and a premature end to his farming career.

Turning a problem into an opportunity has been the hallmark of many start-up businesses. This is a story of resilience, about a man using his creative talents to manufacture a rehabilitation tool called proFITSTICK. A tool developed to help himself and others, deal with the suffering from injury and pain.

### **Innovation experience**

In 1992 we took over the farm from my father. We started with a 40 acre vegetable farm and by 2013, we finished up farming on 450 acres, growing 100 acres of parsnips and 50 acres of brassica's every year. As a grower, making it easier to harvest parsnips on wet ground was a problem that needed to be solved. The inspiration for a solution arose, from a national school trip to the midlands, back some 50 years ago. The tour was to a Bord na Mona (BNM) plant, where large tractors on tracks, were able to travel with ease across bogs, extracting and milling peat. Over the years that image stayed with me and it sparked the question as to 'why not build something on tracks that could help lift produce out of the ground?'

In 1998 there were four main parsnip producers in Ireland, all with a similar issue of harvesting on heavy wet ground. The only place to build such a harvester was in Holland and subsequently from 1998-2000, I travelled to Holland, working on the project on a weekly basis. It meant flying out from Dublin Airport every Monday morning and returning home on a Friday evening. The machine cost £190,000 punts to manufacture and by selling three machines, I was able to get my machine for free. It proved a huge bonus for us and revolutionised the harvesting of parsnips on our own farm.

## How did the idea for proFITSTICK come about?

The physiotherapists at Beaumont were fantastic. Part of my rehabilitation involved getting physiotherapy for my arm, shoulder and upper body. As part of my recovery, everything at rehab was either solid or rigid, none of which allowed my arm to bend. I realised if I had something to bend, to get under my arm, that I could create some counter-tension. While it would be sore initially, the pain would eventually subside and release; and each day I could add a little bit more tension to it. This is how the idea for a flexible stick evolved that could bend with my body. Half in jest, I told the physiotherapists that I was going to make one and I was going to sell it - and that's exactly what I did. I then set about researching a prototype in my home workshop.

## Research and manufacture

At the time, I was encouraged to seek help from CWIT and brought along my prototype to them. They agreed that they could do something to help develop it and 8-12 months later, we had the proFITSTICK product developed. They helped with clever uses of materials and colour tones and identified other opportunities to make the product more universal. We settled on the design and I then sent it to China for tooling; it actually took a year to get the tooling correct. It now comprises of four pieces which I assemble here at my new home and workshop in Threecastles, Co. Kilkenny and retails for €29.99. The problem proFITSTICK helps solve is to release tightness in your shoulders and back.

## Customers

I began by walking around shopping centres, chatting to and showing people our product. I then approached Halpenny Golf and McGurks Golf and proFITSTICK is now available in both their chain of shops. We sell online and we also target gyms, work-places and schools. At the National Ploughing Championships, we sold over 600 proFITSTICKS over the three days. Once people try our product – they have no hesitation in buying it immediately. I also supply our products to gyms, physiotherapists, physical therapists and sports clubs. It has also been recommended by the Golf Union of Ireland European and by Orlaith Buckley, the Tour physiotherapist along with recommendations from international sports people. We have been profiled on Ear to the Ground, Bobby Kerr and more recently on Nationwide. It has all been of great benefit, as in the immediate aftermath, sales go through roof and we ship them everywhere across the county.

## New product

We have since added to our range a product called proFITSTICK Massager which retails for €49.99. During my rehab, I used to get intensive massage for my back, four times per week, geeing my muscles into shape. That's where the idea of producing a massager came to mind, to help massage your back and legs. It's a rubber roller with 'knuckles'. It bends and rolls and is also very helpful for people who spend a lot of time sitting down and working at a screen and deals with tightness in the shoulders, back and neck.

## Tip for fellow start-ups

The best tip I could give anyone is to research their route to market in detail. When I was farming, I was able to deliver my produce into five main depots, which in turn delivered on a weekly basis, into 600 supermarkets nationwide. When I walked into supermarkets across the country, I was very proud to see my produce on display there. Unfortunately, this ease of distribution hasn't been the case with proFITSTICK, as the market is more scattered and consequently more difficult to access. However, at the end of the day, I am delighted to have solved a problem and brought a product to the market that wasn't there previously - and my focus now is on securing external investment, to help bring the business to the next level.