

Guy Clothing: hitting the target

“If we could start and survive in a recession, we should flourish in a normal environment.”

In 2010 Anthony Kearns left a management job with Dunnes Stores to open Guy Clothing, a menswear shop, in his hometown of Tullamore, Co. Offaly.

Convinced that he had spotted an opportunity in the midst of the recession, two years later he was proved right when he and wife Kara opened a second shop called Kode, a women’s boutique.

In the summer of 2014 the couple opened a third store, K&G Kids, which specialises in childrenswear. Within months they went on to relocate Guy Clothing from its original 1,500 sq ft unit in the Bridge Centre, to a 9,000 sq ft store in the same shopping centre. By 2015 he was employing 24 people.

What’s your business’s elevator pitch?

What makes us different is that we are independent and local. Because we have our independence we can go to the kind of extra lengths to keep our customers happy that big chains can’t because they are so systemised. Our tagline is ‘style for all ages, tastes and pockets’.

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

Setting up, surviving and thriving in a recession. Retail was taking a hammering, but we realised Tullamore was not well served with menswear shops. Ten years ago there were 10 men’s shops in the town. By 2010 there were just two.

We didn’t have the kind of offering other towns of its size had. For some reason all the big chains had stayed away. We filled that gap. We could have opened the same shop half an hour away in Navan, Portlaoise or Lucan and I don’t think we would have had the same success.

What was the lowest moment?

The first bank we went to knocked us back but the second one said yes. We were the same people, giving the same pitch about the same business plan. It just shows you, there’s an element of luck involved so don’t give up.

Other than that, we haven’t had any low moments. We’ve been lucky enough to have had steady growth and continuous expansion. And if we could start and survive in a recession, we should flourish in a normal environment.

What has been your biggest challenge?

Credit, or lack of it. On Day 1 only half of our suppliers, the Irish half, would give us credit terms, typically 30 days. The other half, almost all UK suppliers, would only supply us on a pro forma basis, which means payment up front. That was really hard but we learned to cope by ordering little and often.

So instead of ordering €10,000 worth of stock in a week, we'd order €3,000 three times every week. We managed, we built up a track record and now we get better credit terms. But it made managing cash flow hard in the beginning.

What's your attitude to risk?

We both left good jobs to do this. Kara worked for Vero Moda, so we are risk-takers. But calculated risk-takers. We measured it up first. I play Gaelic football and I'm a forward. If there's any chance at all of scoring a goal I'll try. I'm the same in business.

Who has inspired or motivated you and why?

If the business went belly up we'd have big debts to pay, mortgages to fund and jobs to find, fast. That'll motivate you.

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

We have a baby, so it's all about her at the moment. Other than that we play sport, walk and head off for weekends to Kara's home turf in Kerry from time to time. I know it's important to get a break, but when it's your own business it's different. I'm really loving it. If I'm on a day off and I haven't heard from a shop by 4pm, I'll call.

What would you do differently if you were starting your business today?

I'd make changes more quickly. We've tried some stock lines that didn't work. It cost us money, but if something is not working you have to cut your losses and move on. You can't stand still in any business. Just because something worked before doesn't mean you can be sentimental about keeping it.

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

I always tell staff that I don't pay their wages, the customer does, and it's true. You have to listen to what the customer wants and provide it. Also, you get back what you put into a business, and hard work beats talent every time. It's true in sport and in business too.

To have a closer look at Anthony and Kara's offerings, check out the website for [Guy Clothing](#)