
Gym+Coffee - how to build a clothing brand

Gym+Coffee co-founder Diarmuid McSweeney talks to ThinkBusiness about brand building, retailing and startup life.

What is Gym+Coffee?

Gym+Coffee is a new Irish clothing and lifestyle brand. We launched in January 2017, and we're focused on the growing "athleisure" market with a range of hoodies, t-shirts, tanks, leggings, hats, and accessories.

I guess Gym+Coffee was born out of two main things. There's a growing lifestyle shift in Ireland. People just don't want to hang out in pubs and bars as much, and are looking for active things to do at the weekends. And, coffee shops are becoming the new places to meet and socialise.

How are you different than other clothing companies?

I guess we didn't want to just be a clothing company, we didn't just want to be activeclothing.com. For us, it was about growing a brand to encourage this active lifestyle, so we've built our brand around the idea to 'Make life richer' and are focusing on developing a community around this.

I mean don't get us wrong, we sell great clothing, so we're not trying to hide from that, but we're not focused on trying to pretend we're Nike and that our clothing has been technically invented to improve your performance.

Where did the name come from?

[Laughs], the name's a bit weird and people ask us about it. The simple reason is that we wanted to tell our target audience precisely who they are. If you are interested in being active, going to the gym, throwing on a hoodie and going meeting friends for coffee after then you hopefully should be

involved in our brand and clothing.

What's the dream? Who do you compare yourself to?

We are big dreamers. For us, it's about becoming a brand instantly associated with people stretching themselves to do more. So if we can continue encouraging people to make life more productive, then that will be a dream for us.

A brand we really admire is the US brand Chubbies and have met them a few times, they started about five years ago making shorts popular again in the US. They've built a cool community all around the feeling of "Friday 5 pm" and that "weekend feeling." We also really admire everything 'All Birds' do. Irish brands we love and admire include Fulfill, Spotlight, and Glofox.

What's the biggest thing you've learned since launching your own business?

Starting the business has forced us to tackle tasks that took us far outside our experience and comfort zone. Every day we cover so many topics like accounting, marketing, logistics, product design, and customer experience just to name a few. We have certainly taken the approach of just saying 'yes' to opportunities and seeing where they take us but a big lesson in recent times as the business grows is when to say 'no.'

It's becoming clear that we can't take the business in every direction that presents itself. We have to focus on our priorities.

Another big lesson we learned recently is the importance of timing and planning. Being in early startup mode, we are constantly reacting and changing to the most pressing needs of the business. However, through many instances, it's evident that forward planning is everything, particularly regarding product design and the supply chain. For example, rushing both of these stages at one point last year meant that we paid over the top for an item at a source to get to market. Although sales were extremely positive subsequently, margins had been hit, and there was no recovering that.

The big surprise really was how emotionally attached you are to everything. Strangely, everything is high, and everything is low. We feel the pulse of the business much more than anything we have worked on before. I guess maybe it shouldn't be a surprise, but it is incredible how helpful other people are and how willing people are to go out of their way for you.

We have really enjoyed meeting and collaborating with loads of inspiring people in the health and wellness space and the support we have received over the last 12 months has been amazing. We are working in so many different areas every day.

Sometimes it's great to see how adaptable we are, or at least have to be. It does take a great deal of self-discipline though to run a startup. Having to account for your own personal time and also being the driving force behind the business.

What advertising or PR have you done, and what works best?

Our comms are focused on social media and events. We use paid social media advertising along with our own profiles, and it has worked incredibly well for us. Instagram has been fantastic for us in generating awareness and building community. We also regularly hold events where we put on free exercise classes where once again we can meet our community and also give people a reason to come together around exercise and coffee.

Do you manage to maintain any level of work-life balance? Is it hard to switch off?

I guess it is hard for us to strike that balance healthily but when it's your own business, it doesn't feel too much like work. We love what we're doing so you can easily find yourself 'working' at weekends. The struggle at times can be that you're never offline because we are running the business from our phones. Balancing that can be hard.

What's the best piece of advice you've received?

I remember one of my football coaches told me that "You get out, what you put in." I found that

really motivating and I've generally found this to be true. If you work hard, and passionately at something then the results usually come out the other side.

What advice would you pass on now to something else who's noticed a gap in the market?

Just say yes to everything and start. There will always be reasons not to do something but just completely ignore them.

It's much easier to keep the ball rolling than to get the ball rolling. Obviously, there are moments when you question everything, we've all sacrificed different things to work full-time on Gym+Coffee, whether that be careers, incomes, free-time, etc. so if you overthink about it, then that decision can seem crazy. However, we are incredibly passionate about the brand and the community we are building. It feels right, and we're really enjoying it, so we're definitely happy we made the "mental" choice to do it.

What's next?

New product launches very soon. We just confirmed the extension of our Dundrum store. We are opening a new pop-up store in Arnott's. We have huge ambitions for the company, and we see no reason why an Irish company can't be a significant player in this space. A focus for us in achieving these ambitions is putting a dominant team in place, and that will continue over the next six months.