

'Don't be afraid to swim upstream' - John Sherry

DUBLINER John Sherry set up [Gardenrooms.ie](https://www.gardenrooms.ie) in 2003, growing turnover to €1.8 million in 2007. When the recession hit he pared the business back and also started selling children's outdoor play equipment, under the brand [Gardenplay.ie](https://www.gardenplay.ie). By 2010, the business had returned to growth and, in 2015, he launched a third brand, [Simplyextend.ie](https://www.simplyextend.ie), to meet customer demand for house extensions. The Finglas-based business employs five people.

What's your business pitch in one sentence?

We build architecturally-designed, contemporary home extensions and garden rooms.

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

Surviving the downturn and returning to growth. Our turnover imploded between 2008 and 2010, falling by 80%.

What was the lowest moment?

By 2009, no matter what I did, the business wasn't coming through. In the end, I had to lay off my four staff. I also had to think very seriously if the business was even viable enough to carry me.

All the while you're like a swan, trying to look calm on the outside while, down below, you're paddling like crazy. It was so important to look calm too because in construction you're selling trust. People needed to feel reassured that I wasn't going to go out of business. I needed to inspire confidence even when I didn't feel it myself.



How have you coped with setbacks?

Diversifying. Our garden rooms business slowed around the time my wife and I began having our children. I realised that even though people were no longer spending on themselves or their homes, they were spending on their kids. I started adding children's play equipment to our product range and, 2,500 units later, we're now one of the biggest sellers of outdoor play equipment in the country.

What's your attitude to risk?

As long as it's calculated, and I feel I've a good idea of both the potential pitfalls and the rewards, I'll take it. I'm quite happy to take a calculated risk. I don't think you can be an entrepreneur otherwise.

Who has inspired or motivated you and why?

My Dad. He was an aircraft engineer who sadly died aged just 56. He always instilled in me the importance of being in control of your own destiny. In later years, it was Steve Jobs of Apple. The approach he took – do it properly and people will come – is something that applies just as much to a small business as to a large one.

If you focus on building a quality product, with a premium finish and excellent functionality, people will come see it. After that, they decide whether they want to buy into your concept or not. It's the opposite of the hard sell.

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

Well, family comes first but after that I do triathlons, including Iron Man events. My most recent one was a 1.9 km swim, a 90 km cycle and a 21 km half-marathon in six hours and twelve minutes.

The appeal of exercise, apart from keeping you fit, is the mindfulness you get. It takes you away from the constant thinking and planning that goes with running a small business.

“I started running as a reaction to all the stress I was feeling in the downturn. Now I reckon it keeps me sane.”

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

I'd shout from the rooftops more. It took me a long time to mature into the business, to see the importance of building a brand as much as bringing in revenues. It's a balancing act that is

important to master early on if you are to grow your business to its full potential.

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

Don't fall into the turnover vanity trap. Profit is sanity. Despite the fact that I'm an accountant by training, with a marketing degree behind me, I started out so keen to build revenues that for a long time I was a busy fool.

During the boom years that didn't matter so much because there was always enough left over for me. It was only during the recession that I realised how little profit I was generating and so learned to batten down the hatches and ensure there was value in everything I did. The downturn taught me to be much more focused on the bottom line.

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

Don't be afraid to swim upstream. Go with your idea, stick with it and you will make it happen.