

How Jill & Gill fashioned its digital future

The omnichannel future: How art and design house [Jill & Gill](#) used the challenges of Covid-19 to fashion a new, sustainable future combining e-commerce with bricks and mortar.

Jill & Gill is an award-winning Irish brand with a fresh approach to illustration and print across fine art, fashion and design.

This multidisciplinary studio is made up of creative duo Jill Deering 'illustrator' and Gillian Henderson 'printmaker.'

"Jill was working in music and I was working in Hang Tough framers and gallery, when we met in 2016, because Jill did a range of illustrations for a show and I was framing them," recalls Henderson. "We soon realised how similar our philosophies to design were and how well we worked together. Straight away there was an appreciation for what each other could do and we both saw the endless possibilities of collaborating

"We launched Jill & Gill in 2017, with a solo fine art show called 'The Iris Collection'. We continued then with other projects, while still working full-time in other jobs, before moving to working part-time, and by the end of 2018 we were working full-time on Jill & Gill, launching Jill & Gill Apparel during CREATE Brown Thomas 2018.

"This made us realise that we had something dynamic and new to bring to the market. Since then, we've been featured in numerous other high-end fashion retailers including Wolf and Badger, as well as developing our online presence, jillandgill.com, where we have a selection of high quality sustainable printed clothing and fine art. We also currently have a pop-up store located on Stephen's Green, through the support of Visa and Kilkenny Group's Champion Green initiative."

Many businesses like Jill & Gill have had to accelerate their digital plans or pivot rapidly to digital to keep engaged with consumers who increasingly expect digital, omnichannel offerings. Over the coming weeks ThinkBusiness will focus a series of articles on the omnichannel future of retail including how to go online and sell as well as case studies of businesses that have adapted, including SMEs that have successfully received funding as part of the Government's Online Voucher Scheme and the Trading Online Scheme.

An estimated 60pc of all online commerce conducted by Irish people leaves these shores direct into the coffers of global giants. Before Christmas there was a surge of support to buy Irish online out of a public recognition that shopping locally online saved businesses and jobs.

As an independent Irish business, what makes your company different and how do you stand out from the crowd?

GH: One key thing is that we don't have a set demographic. We have women in their 70s and 80s who constantly shop with us and then we have nine-year olds who want to wear our products. We sell to boys, girls, men, women, anyone. If you like colour, you're definitely going to like what we do, because you're always going to get our personality in the product. We aim to create meaningful and impactful products and experiences that give a sense of value in what it means to invest in Irish Design. It's our collaborative make up that sets our studio apart from others in Ireland. We describe ourselves as 'not a one-trick pony but a two-headed unicorn', a vibrant brand that injects creativity into everything we do and always with a unique approach. We like to step outside the box, challenge ourselves but never be fearful to ask for help.

Did the pandemic have an impact on your business?

GH: Around Patrick's Day this year we were having a conversation wondering 'what if we couldn't keep the business going through this pandemic?'. It was a pinnacle moment of realising what we had to lose. It threw all our projections for the medium term out the window and suddenly we were back to being a start-up again. This year has flipped our mindset to become more commercially focused. Our online sales doubled for each of the last three quarters as people really supported the idea of backing small local businesses during the first lockdown and then even more so into the second. This spirit is what gave us the confidence to keep going and enabled our business to thrive and even grow again.

How did you adapt (did you begin selling online for the first time, offer takeaway service, etc) and what has the response from customers been to date?

GH: Unlike most businesses who started to sell online for the first time, we ventured into our first retail operation after getting to set up our own pop-up shop in Stephen's Green thanks to Champion Green.

It's an ideal way to expose our brand to thousands of shoppers over the festive season and into the new year, particularly at a time when more people are eager to support Irish businesses.

The support we've received has been fantastic in terms of sales, feedback from people coming in store, and the overall exposure.

How did you invest/fund the changes (i.e. your online journey, starting a delivery service, etc)?

GH: We were able to apply for the Local Enterprise Office's trading online programme to optimise our e-commerce operation during the initial Covid-19 lockdown, which was priceless as it meant we could grow our online sales; vital in terms of cashflow.

The change in the market gave us a lot more direction and drive. We knew we had to improve when it came to the online side of things. Because we were already an online business, we were more fortunate than most in that we already had that head start. We had already begun putting the grassroots work into building our new website, so when the pandemic hit, we were able to accelerate that process, relaunching our website at the end of April. We launched the illustrations that are on our T-Shirts as a downloadable colouring book in the first week of lockdown, and people reacted to that really well, actively posting their coloured in versions on Instagram. That started a conversation with our customers, enabling us to ease back in to promoting our product.

We have even managed to hire an additional staff member in the middle of all of this, enabling Jill and I to spend more time working on the business rather than in the business.

What was your biggest challenge and how did you overcome that?

GH: This time last year we applied for a mentorship programme called Going For Growth, which is funded by KPMG and Enterprise Ireland, that backs female entrepreneurs in Ireland. There were about 98 participants selected last year and we were allocated mentors, and we were incredibly lucky to be selected by Chupi Sweetman. Chupi has an incredibly successful brand and business, so being able to get her advice as someone who has faced numerous challenges, has overcome them, and grew a brand through a recession has been invaluable.

We have needed all the advice and support we can get as we had to move out of our old studio when the lockdown hit, so for a period we had literally nowhere to base ourselves other than our own homes. After probably seeing every available unit in Dublin we have found a new studio on Francis Street, which allows us to create new lines once again, but from April to July we had nowhere to physically create. This just meant that, for a period, our mind-set had to change to the other parts of the business that we could work on: marketing, website, sales, research and development, and logistics.

Two weeks later we were offered a pop-up space by Champion Green, so we suddenly had to think about things like licencing, fitout, packaging, maintenance, and budgeting to make sure that our revenue from the previous six months of online only would give us the cash flow to support us. So that has been a huge learning curve, but we've always seen challenges and the idea of fear as something we like to play with. We are both extremely supportive of the other. We believe failure is part of the process, accept it, and worry about the solution not the problem. We always say feel the fear and do it anyway. You will be at least happy you faced it. This work ethic has stood to us.

What was the most important thing you learnt and what would you like to teach

other businesses?

GH: I think the most important thing we've learnt, particularly this year, is to listen to our customers. Communicating with and listening to our customers via social media, and now face to face in our store, has been vital to the growth of our business. You can do all the surveys and online analytics you want, but Instagram in your hand is a direct line to your customer. They'll be honest with you, and if you are an approachable brand it results in a lot more customer loyalty and gives customers the confidence when they go onto your website, knowing that they had the one to one interaction. Having a bricks and mortar store is brilliant, but you can only sell to those who are passing your door. Having that online presence for a small business means that you can sell to anyone, anywhere.

What are your plans for the future?

GH: We'll still have the shop on Stephen's Green into early 2021, so once that is finished, we'll consider whether to launch a more permanent premises somewhere else in the city. We have also been incredibly fortunate to be stocked in Design Ireland in Terminal 2 of Dublin Airport from this month, so we'll be re-examining the possibility of more international trade, possibly in more European stores. Then for the fine art side of our business we will be looking to link in with more American galleries to grow that market. We are also looking at what different kinds of industries we would like to be in beyond fashion, textiles, and fine art. Quality will always be paramount and we'll always come back to the idea of something that's been illustrated and hand printed no matter what we do.

Video: How to get your business selling online

With Christmas 2020 now past, the year ahead 2021 still presents retailers with a challenge to go online to not only deal with closed premises if they are deemed non-essential but to address the expectations of an increasingly digitalised consumer.

To get the message out to SMEs, Bank of Ireland [collaborated](#) with online shopping platform [Shopify](#) as well as [Pointy](#), the Irish platform recently acquired by Google that helps shoppers find via the internet the products they need in your physical store, and [the E-commerce Association of Ireland](#) (eCAI), to highlight the opportunities that exist online.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZsjVLonNeE&feature=youtu.be>

Pictured at top of page: Jill Deering and Gillian Henderson, founders of Jill & Gill

Jill & Gill is one of the small businesses featured in Visa's Where You Shop Matters campaign – a long-term commitment that recognises the essential role that small and independent businesses play in our communities. For more information, go to [visa.ie/wysm](https://www.visa.ie/wysm).

By [John Kennedy](mailto:john.kennedy3@boi.com) (john.kennedy3@boi.com)

Published: 13 January 2021