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## Limerick start-up making difference to global issue

***ThinkBusiness talks to Brian O’Callaghan, founder of EcoStraws and guest speaker for next month’s Friday breakfast club in Limerick. Here he discusses his company.***

Research has shown that Ireland uses approximately one million plastic straws every day. Similarly, the US goes through 500 million every day.

EcoStraws aims to offer people an eco-friendly, high quality, fun alternative to the plastic drinking tube. The company supply many different types of eco-friendly reusable straws and 100% biodegradable disposable straws. Here’s what Brian had to say:

### **Starting out**

After 17 years running my own hospitality business, I was keen for a change and pursued a career in air traffic control. The entrepreneurial spirit never left me though and after attending the National Geographic Symphony for our World event at the Gaelic Grounds, three of us, running buddies coincidentally, decided to try and do something about it, and EcoStraws was born.

It took two months from the initial concept to our first online sale. We have pivoted somewhat with

regards to our initial two target markets of domestic and trade and have added retail outlets and corporate gifts as two more. Online sales make up about 50% of our total sales.

## **Networking**

Vital. Not only are events important with regards to contact making and activating certain sales funnels, but there is also a certain degree of integrity and respect garnished by attending such events.

## **Finance**

We are self-financed up to this point, although the time is fast approaching where we know we will have to apply for funding to grow, particularly internationally.

We keep our spending very tight, and only plan to spend when the money is in our account. We do not want to fall into the trap of just being a facilitator for the movement of money, we monitor it extremely carefully.

## **Importance of advice from peers**

Advice from peers is always important, but ultimately, in business, the buck stops with you, the decision maker, and you need to trust your own judgement on what advice to take on board and on what advice to disregard. It is these decisions that deliver success or failure.

## **Role models**

I admire any man or woman who goes out to do an honest day's work. From a personal point of view, my parents have engrained that work ethic into me so I should be thankful to them. In business, at the high end I admire the likes of Richard Branson, Alan Sugar, Michael O'Leary, and more locally I look at the likes of the Fitzgerald family, Mark McConnell and Colm O'Brien, who possibly without knowing, have been extremely helpful through the years.

## **Biggest challenge**

The biggest challenge is time, and not enough of it. The decision will have to be made very soon, whether we remain a cottage industry whilst holding onto our day jobs, or whether we bite the bullet and commit to it fulltime. There are obvious pros and cons to both. The biggest mistake to date was in our early days when we sided with the cheapest supplier quotes we received. Quality of the product was compromised and we ended up binning a lot of stock because we did not want to be associated with inferior quality.

## **Future**

Our business plan has already been cast aside, so there is no concrete roadmap to success for us. We will continue to progress both here in Ireland and internationally. Success for us is not defined by money in the bank, we are not necessarily motivated by money. That said, we are obviously a commercial enterprise, but for us, and me personally, it is about making an impact on this planet, and leave something worthwhile behind when it's all over.

### **Advice for others**

Don't be afraid, people on the whole are very helpful. As a nation we tend to help others until you reach a certain point. Then when you have got high enough, the help stops. As long as you understand that, you will be ok.

Friday Breakfast Clubs take place every first Friday of the month across Bank of Ireland's Workbench network and are free to attend – to register for September's Friday Breakfast Club on 6th September at Limerick Workbench [click here](#).

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