



The Wonky way to build truly sustainable growth

ROD MACRAE learns about the secrets of growth from The Wonky Food Company

IN 2017 John and Ashley Cavers and their friend Laura Snook were stirring their own large pans of chutney and preserves at home trying to perfect their recipes ahead of launching their business, worrying if they would find enough customers. Today is quite different. Their time is now spent managing production capacity, supplier deliveries and making sure they have enough stock to meet demand.

"It's been a really hard, but exciting learning experience for us," John Cavers tells me. "We have developed the products, created a brand, entered into a joint venture with a key supplier and grown from nowhere. That's quite a journey."

The first priority was to create a local market through independent retailers and securing a regional presence in the Co-op. "We've worked hard to get into major outlets such as Burford Garden Company, Cotswold Cheese Company and Millets Farm. Oxford's covered market is important to us as well. But the hardest thing has been getting into national outlets."

The big breakthrough came earlier this summer when they started supplying the online to doorstep delivery supermarket, Ocado.

Their achievement has created a sustainable business too. Wonky Food is using rejected or unwanted fresh produce that has been left on the farm. "It might be a wonky shape, an unusual colour, too small or too large or surplus to market demand, but that's perfect for our company. All we care about is the taste. The alternative for farmers is to let heaps of perfectly good harvest rot and plough it back into the ground."

Such rapid growth has brought challenges. "We changed manufacturers twice in the last year before we found the right one for our business which was capable of consistent high quality. Now we are in a position to meet growing demand."



Wonky Food Company says rapid growth has brought unforeseen challenges

It has been a close-run thing at times. New customers created a surge in demand which at time put pressure on Wonky Food's stocks and a rush to get more produce made. They have had to learn about retaining the right level of stock to respond to these peaks in orders.

Throughout their growth they have had support from OxLEP Business. "We were new to this and have had to develop our knowledge and skills at the same time as managing Wonky Food. OxLEP Business helped us to find people willing to share their experiences of running joint ventures and we've been to workshops on marketing, sales, new product development and branding." John Cavers says it's been excellent to make connections with other local businesses especially those battling with the same issues.

"There's a whole lot we have learned – sometimes by making mistakes, but

we've always remained positive about making the business a success. We used the support we have had to fine-tune our plans and it is paying off. Now we're rolling out catering packs of relishes to cafes, restaurants and pubs and have begun our own direct online sales shop. We'd never have been bold enough to do that without the encouragement we have had."

Here's what Wonky Food have learned in their rapid success and growth.

1. Everything takes longer than you think. As business owners we grew up really fast. It is like you have created a beast which will consume all your time.
2. Managing your day-to-day operations is a challenge. You suddenly need to let go of things which might have been done by you when you were small. Now, other people are doing it for you and you need to manage how that is done. It can be stressful.
3. Your key suppliers need to be right for your business. We wanted to make sure our manufacturer's values and standards were aligned to our own. They are vital to your own brand and trust is essential. Now we have a farm-based manufacturer which is ideal.
4. Sales are never easily won. It takes time to knock on doors to find new customers. You need to be persistent and strong enough to take the knock-backs and rejections. Not everyone will share your enthusiasm.
5. Money, investment and cashflow are under massive pressure when you are growing. We used every opportunity we could from our joint venture partners to help us reduce overheads. We saved on things like storage costs by using space they could give us for free. It all helps. By being careful, it is possible to fund your own growth and new product development too. The last thing you want is to be in debt to people who don't share your passion for your business.

More on Wonky Food Company at wonkyfoodco.com
For free help for growing businesses see oxfordshirelep.com

MOVERS & SHAKERS

Willmott Dixon secures Uni contracts

Oxford-based contractor Willmott Dixon will deliver projects worth £5-£20m for Oxford University.

Willmott Dixon director David McCallion, pictured, said: "The appointment marks a significant milestone for us and we are delighted to be building a strong relationship with the University of Oxford."

"My team and I are looking forward to delivering high-quality, future-proof facilities for the university."

The contractor recently received the Queens Award for Enterprise in the category of promoting opportunity.



The firm, whose head office is at Clarendon House in Cornmarket, previous projects in Oxfordshire include the RAL Space facility at Harwell Science Campus and residential projects for Oxford City Council.

Over 4.5k receiving Universal Credit

New Government figures show 4,541 people in Oxford are receiving Universal Credit.

The total number of people in the South East receiving the support is 228,000, the Department for Work and Pensions figures for August 2019 show. Will Quince, Minister for Welfare Delivery, said claimants are also supported with training courses, CV writing help and confidence-building sessions. The credit, a single monthly payment, has replaced six previous benefits. Those eligible include those who are unemployed, in low-paid work, or unable to work due to a disability.

Help to Buy axing will hit Oxford hard

Oxford will be hardest hit when the Government's Help to Buy scheme is axed in 2023 according to property services firm Cushman & Wakefield's report Future of Demand.

The city tops a list of 24 places likely to see demand for property fall as a result of changes to be introduced in 2021. These include regional maximum value caps and unavailability for non-first-time buyers.

Report author Lee Layton said: "As the scheme begins to be phased out, there is a

real risk that demand for new homes in certain areas will be impacted significantly by its withdrawal."

Research by estate agent Savills, meanwhile, reveals that temperature and lack of quiet space are Oxfordshire workers' biggest gripes. The report What Workers Want, which questioned 1,500 office workers in the UK, found comfort at work is important to 94 per cent of workers.

Other concerns were lack of crèche facilities.

Traders group seeks own market unit

Independent Oxford is aiming to raise £5,000 via crowdfunding to open a store in the city's Covered Market, featuring 20 small businesses.

The idea behind Indie Oxford Market Place, which will run from September to December, is to encourage people to shop locally.

The shop will host workshops and talks to help business owners improve their skills and also hold events for the general public.

This is the second Indie Oxford Market Place – a smaller pilot in December last year attracted



thousands of shoppers.

Independent Oxford was set up by Oxford businesswomen Rosie Jacobs and Anna Munday, pictured, in 2015.

For more information, see independentoxford.com