

The best in the business

LLOYDS BANK NATIONAL BUSINESS AWARDS 2020 SPECIAL

Firms head in the right direction on mental health



Sir Tim Peake speaking at last year's business awards – the pandemic has given the awards a different focus this year

Employee wellbeing has become a top priority for businesses

Few will know better than Brian Dow the impact the pandemic has had on our individual and collective mental health. Brian is CEO of Mental Health UK and we spoke to him on the eve of World Mental Health Day.

"Covid-19 has had a huge impact on our mental health," he said. "Lockdown was very hard on a lot of people: the elderly, those with mental health problems, BAME people and low-income families. We have felt isolated, fearful of the threat of illness and grief for the people we have lost," he says.

"At Mental Health UK, we saw a spike in users on Clic, the online peer support community we expanded with seed funding from Lloyds Banking Group, and we noted three times as many searches for advice for people with suicidal thoughts."

Mental Health UK has also been offering pandemic-tailored support through its Mental Health and Money Advice service, which it set up in partnership with Lloyds Banking Group.

"Financial challenges can put both businesses and individuals under a huge amount of pressure, creating high levels of stress and anxiety, which in turn can trigger and exacerbate mental health problems," says Paul Gordon, managing director of SME & Mid Corporates at Lloyds Bank.

"As the pandemic continues,

our partnership with Mental Health UK has never been more important. We are proud to continue this relationship, to help raise vital funds and increase awareness of the importance of good mental health."

"There is only so much charities can do," claims Brian Dow. "We also need employers to step in and help protect workers' mental health."

Invopak CEO Arjen Cooper-Rolfe is a huge advocate of this. "Back in March, we quickly realised we had a role to play. Our goal was simple: to safeguard the health of our people and the business. No one likes uncertainty or ambiguity, so we upped our internal comms, offered clear, structured guidance and invited honest and open feedback. We regularly check in with people to see if there is anything we can do to help," he says.

"It's critical to see colleagues as one person – the same at work as they are at home – and to understand that work has a huge impact on their wellbeing. If we can create the environment where my colleagues feel proud and valued, then this will have a massive impact on their performance and lives beyond work."

The company's people-first approach is relatively new for the business, introduced when Arjen took over in 2011 following the death of both of his parents within two years. Tragically, his brother

killed himself during the same period. "The way I came into the business has been a strength and experiencing what I did definitely influenced my leadership style," he says. "Ninety-nine per cent of people want to do a good job, you just have to help, mentor and guide them to succeed. I see my job as making other people better, giving them opportunities and empowering them to look after our customers' changing needs and demands. If we do that well, we will make money."

When Arjen inherited the business, it was "very inward-looking, doing okay, but merely surviving. It needed revolutionising." He watched, listened and learned for the first couple of years, before introducing the Invopak Values Handbook, which enshrines the company's purpose and values, from hiring and managing people, to culture, customer service and innovation.

His six-year revolution has resulted in 10 years of sustained and profitable growth, a 42 per cent reduction in absenteeism, a 64 per cent reduction in picking errors, 2,000 new customers since 2018, an NPS of 61 compared with 22 five years ago and a £12m investment in distribution centres.

In fact, the business is enjoying its busiest year to date with 50 per cent more orders and a 350 per cent increase in digital sales year-on-year. Unsurprisingly, Invopak is

a finalist in the Give A Grad A Go Employer of the Year category at this year's Lloyds Bank National Business Awards. Cary Curtis is founder and CEO of Give A Grad A Go and a previous NBA finalist. Like many businesses, he has been hit hard by Covid-19.

"I set up Give a Grad a Go in 2009 after leaving my job in the City, and we have started over 4,000 careers globally within over 800 companies. We've grown year-on-year and we opened an office in Australia in March," he says.

"Our target for 2020 was 800-plus placements. Thanks to lockdown, we're on course to do about 500 and that now seems like a massive result. Our team has shrunk from 32 to 20, but we have brought back nine people who we originally furloughed."

"From a professional point of view, it's the toughest patch I can remember. We all went remote when the Government told us to work from home, we watched revenue tumble and I held my head in my hands as I tried to work out how we were going to keep everyone on. That was before the furlough announcement. When

that happened, I shed tears of relief."

The pressure on business owners' mental health was very real during lockdown, as Cary points out. "I really tried to look for the positives: spending time with my boys, exercising every day, but it's been my team who have really kept me going, calling to check in and getting out there to fight for the business. In return, we were transparent from day one."

"We did daily check-ins, revenue updates, removing individual sales targets, increasing personal autonomy and celebrating new wins, work anniversaries and employees of the month just like before. I also learnt not to bear all of the responsibility myself, and the importance of delegating and asking for help."

He adds: "In the early days of lockdown, I was going through a range of emotions in one day that I would normally expect to go through in a month. If you're going to survive highs and lows like that, you need people around you who understand what's going on and who will support you when you ask for it."

The virtual Lloyds Bank National Business Awards ceremony takes place at 4pm on Tuesday, 10 November and is free to attend. Pre-register at www.nationalbusinessawards.co.uk for updates.



I was going through emotions in one day... that I would in a month



Covid has shown firms at their creative and innovative best

2020 has been a strange, stressful and exhausting year. But it has also been an inspiring one. We've really seen the best in people, as communities and organisations have come together to support each other through the coronavirus lockdown.

It has been incredible to see the nation unite during this crisis through the shared everyday struggles: managing childcare, challenging Wi-Fi connections, securing delivery slots and the dreaded mute button on Zoom. We all hope these won't last forever.

And although many firms have struggled, we've also witnessed just how innovative and adaptive the UK business community can be, whether that means helping employees adjust to new ways of working or shifting production towards masks, ventilators and handwash. As you might expect, this year's Lloyds Bank National Business Awards has had to make some changes to adapt to the so-called "new normal", but we're still ready to lead the celebrations for some of the UK's most innovative, disruptive and creative businesses and organisations.

Once again, the calibre of entries has been incredibly high, and we are proud to showcase an outstanding set of finalists. We've been lucky to hear some truly inspiring stories from some incredible businesses and entrepreneurs – big and small, young and old. Many of them have

showcased products, services and programmes launched before the pandemic, while others have told us how they have adapted their business model to cope with the disruption. We hope you enjoy some of the businesses profiled in this supplement that have showcased such resilience.

We're also delighted to have launched the **News Pivot** for Purpose Award, which is designed to celebrate some of the initiatives UK businesses have undertaken during the pandemic to support key workers and local communities. The stories we have heard really highlight the fantastic things British business can achieve during times of crisis.

I hope you'll join me in congratulating all the amazing companies and talented individuals who have made it this far. I want to take this opportunity to thank all our entrants, finalists, eminent judges and, of course, our sponsors, in particular our headline partner Lloyds Bank.

In a challenging year like this one, it's more important than ever to celebrate these achievements and we hope you will join us online for the ceremony.

The virtual Lloyds Bank National Business Awards ceremony takes place at 4pm on Tuesday, 10 November and is free to attend. Pre-register at www.nationalbusinessawards.co.uk for updates.

Sarah Austin, awards director

An upside down way of doing things

A strong workplace and management culture has helped Timpson survive the current storm. By **Charlie Le Rougetel**

James Timpson OBE is the chief executive of Timpson, the British multinational retailer. A family business founded in 1865, Timpson specialises in shoe repairs, key cutting, locksmith services, dry cleaning, mobile phone repairs, jewellery and watch repairs among other services.

James followed in his father John Timpson's footsteps to take over the business in 2002. Over the last 18 years he has received widespread recognition for his "upside-down management" based on a culture of trust and kindness that includes the annual "Happy Index", employing prison leavers and a wide range of employee benefits including birthdays off, access to Timpson's financial health first aider and a full-time mental health nurse. Unsurprisingly, James was recognised as Business Leader of the Year at last year's Lloyds Bank National Business Awards.

Since then, he has faced some of his most challenging and dark times as head of the business. I met him on Zoom for this interview – he was back in the office, wearing his "James" employee badge and cradling a huge cup of tea. I started by asking what it's like as a business leader right now.

"As a leader, the last six months have been horrendous but exciting," he says. "Personally, I've found the whole period incredibly stressful but really interesting intellectually."

"I've learnt a lot and read more than ever to give me the right knowledge to make the right decisions to save the business. But I've had dark days. When I walked out of the office on 24 March, I genuinely wondered whether I would ever go back in."

"It's difficult to understand the complexities of managing in a crisis until you are forced to. Everyone in business is used to dealing with problems, but this was like no other. It demanded so much plate-spinning, and the really hard bit was working out which plates to keep

spinning and which to let crash to the ground but I wouldn't have done anything differently."

"I'm just glad it was me in that position with the experience I've got running the business. If it had been someone new with no experience, it would have been absolutely terrifying for them."

I ask James what the worst thing about the last six months has been.

"Making lots of people redundant," he answers without batting an eye. "No one goes into business with the intention of making people redundant. These people are losing their jobs and their livelihoods and it's not just them, it's their families, too."

"And I know that some of them will be fine, but some won't be fine, and that's really hard."

After pausing for a moment, he adds: "At the very beginning of the pandemic, a colleague died of Covid and I went to visit his wife and kids, and that was truly awful. That was by far the lowest point of the whole of lockdown."

Like most retailers on the British high street, Timpson is now open for business once again. But, as James points out, even that has come with its challenges.

"Yes, we've reopened but everything is different. It's not as simple as cracking on from where we left off. At the start of Covid, the Government was quick to jump in and give us money to keep going – and we're grateful for that – but the furlough scheme has proven to be a double-edged sword."

"When we brought our colleagues back in – and we were lucky enough to be able to pay our furloughed colleagues 100 per cent of their salary all the way through lockdown – we realised exactly where our

sweetspot is for efficiency and that some roles are no longer needed. When you don't have sales, you learn exactly what your cost base is, and that's been an interesting realisation."

So, I ask James, what would you do next if you were Rishi Sunak?



James Timpson, who took over in 2002, was last year's leader award winner

"Speaking as a retailer," he says, "the business rates holiday until April has been a massive saving for us, so I would extend that. But, you know – and this isn't a political statement – the Government forced me to close my shops and damaged my business so, yes, what they've done has been helpful, but it's also been essential."

"The biggest threat we face in the short term is what is going to happen to our economy. At Timpson, we need to work out how to repair the scars from Covid and how we're going to get better and better."

"This pandemic and the damage it's caused to our economy will leave a lot of people unemployed and many of those will be younger and lower-paid people, so if I were Rishi I would extend the National Insurance payment exemptions for two or three years past the age of 21 and to include prison leavers and carers, so that companies are

incentivised to take on more young people." James's mention of prison leavers leads me to ask him about his management style. You run your business very differently to many others – your upside management approach, lack of rules, focus on trust and kindness, your Happy Index, the way you recruit based on personality – but, sadly in my opinion, this is not the norm, I say. Do you think all businesses will be run like this in the future?

"I hope so," he answers. "I am really commercial – don't get me wrong – I don't run Timpson this way to be nice. But I do believe if you run your business with kindness and trust, and support your

colleagues, they will outperform. And if you recruit people who have different life experiences and come from different backgrounds, that's a massively positive thing."

"I don't see how – in the future – it will be possible to run a business without social purpose. You just can't. When you look at successful businesses – the ones that have run long term – they have all invested in a strong culture with a strong set of values based on treating people as equals."

"They need people running the company who have clarity in leadership and purpose, so everyone knows what they are here to do."

"I don't do mission statements – I don't believe in them – they are written by people who don't run the business or serve customers, so they have a real lack of clarity. And I don't do politics or processes. As soon as you start introducing processes, you're knackered."

"We need to be having grown-up conversations before things become a problem." They call him the "whirlwind" in the office, because he's quick and gets on with things. "I'm a great simplifier," he explains. How does that differ from his dad, I ask? "My dad was a great communicator. He's 77 – he did 10 store visits today!"

James also points out his dad always says cobblers come second, which is why he was so surprised he won Business Leader of the Year at last year's Lloyds Bank National Business Awards.

"I was amazed that we won – we don't enter many competitions and when we do we never win, we always come second. But I think people recognise that there is more to running a business than making money – it's about values, culture and giving back, and that's our focus – so maybe that's why we won. "And, in a world where people look for the negatives, we should

be celebrating the positives and that's why the National Business Awards are so vital – they celebrate success." We're about to come to the end of our 30 minutes together, so I fire three last questions at James. What are you most proud of, I ask, since taking over from your dad?

"That the business is still here. That we are acknowledged by colleagues and customers as a company that does good things."

And when you've handed the business on to the next Timpson (James has a daughter and two sons with his wife Roisin), how would you like to be remembered?

"As someone who took the business to a completely different level." And, finally, I ask James to complete this line: If I were starting out in business today, the one thing I'd want someone to tell me about leadership is... He stops and thinks for a while, then smiles and says: "It's an amazing opportunity to inspire other people."

the finalists

The Artificial Intelligence Business Award

Tractable
Luminance
Deepzen
Streetbees
Olvin Ltd
Phrasee
Trint
S-Cube
Senseye
ServiceRobots

The Business Enabler of the Year

James and James Fulfilment Ltd
Recursyv Ltd
AccountScore Ltd
DCSL Software Ltd
fulfilmentcrowd Ltd
Unily
Vizolution
Impex Parts Group
Hermes

The Castle Corporate Finance Scale-Up Award

Utility Bidder
Lintbells
Cornedel
Creams Cafe
SourceBreaker
Sullivan & Stanley
Totalmobile
Bella & Duke
Adarma Limited

The Data Excellence Award

SEC Group
JCURV
S-Cube
AccountScore Limited
Recursyv Ltd
Interlink
Zephro
Diligencia
Clinical Informatics Research Unit (University of Southampton)
Hyper Group (Method Analytics Ltd T/A Hyper Group)

The Give A Grad A Go Employer of the Year Award

deVOL Kitchens
Croud
Shopper Media Group
La Fosse Associates
DCSL Software Ltd
Opus Telecoms
Invopak
Bibby Distribution Ltd
ServiceMaster Clean
Contract Services Guildford
Hermes

Making a difference

Firms explain how they balance their profit with purpose. By **Elizabeth Anderson**



Three of the crew of Mindful Chef, a finalist in three categories. The organisation has donated 4.5 million meals to schools since being founded in 2015

Businesses need to be profitable in order to thrive and grow, but many entrepreneurs say their motivation goes beyond money: instead, they want to make a difference to people's lives. As the finalists in the Lloyds Bank Positive Social Impact Award category prove, it is possible to achieve both strong financial returns and a sustainable business model that benefits wider society. One business acutely aware of the role it plays in society is Octavia House Schools, which specialises in education and therapy for pupils who have suffered from childhood trauma. Through three schools in south London, it works with pupils aged five to 17 who have a range of social, emotional, mental health and learning needs.

Octavia House is a private school, with places funded by local authorities. Chief executive James Waite says almost all profit is put back into improving facilities. A fourth school is currently being built in Nine Elms and the school is about to expand to Essex.

James decided to keep the schools open during lockdown, as he felt it was safer to encourage children to continue attending rather than staying at home. When the national schools attendance figure fell to 1 per cent at the height of lockdown, Octavia House was at 20 per cent.

"I'm immensely proud of what we do. We want our children to leave and do something different from the cycle of their family life, which usually includes long-term unemployment benefits, involvement in criminal justice and gang activity," he adds.

For InvestIN, an organisation that provides students aged 12-18 with an immersive experience of their dream career before they start university, lockdown also brought many challenges.

The company aims to create

the "ultimate work experience" programme through interactive simulations, site visits, networking sessions and career coaching.

"Pre-Covid we were rapidly expanding with thousands of students attending our career



Consumers' priorities have changed, health is front of their minds



Octavia House Schools educates children who have suffered from trauma

experiences every year," says co-founder Shameer Thobhani. "We shifted our programmes online during lockdown. This allowed us to give our students what they need, and to keep all our 18 staff in a job."

He now plans to continue offering students a mix of online learning and in-person experiences.

Mindful Chef, a healthy recipe food subscription service, says business has boomed this year. New customers have soared as more people stay at home.

Mindful Chef is a finalist in three categories in the Lloyds Bank National Business Awards. It is a certified B-Corp, which means it balances purpose and profit, and has donated 4.5 million school meals to children since being founded in 2015. Giles Humphries, co-founder of Mindful Chef, expects sales to continue growing as the emphasis on healthy eating becomes stronger.

"We have noticed a behaviour shift. Consumers' priorities have changed, health is front of mind and shoppers are looking to invest more time and money in the food they consume," he says.

For the finalists in this category, the emphasis is on making a positive social impact, rather than being recognised for their business strength.

"We work tirelessly to go above and beyond to make a special contribution to society," adds Shameer.

the finalists

The Inflexion Entrepreneur of the Year Award

Brie Read CEO/Founder, Snag Group Ltd
Parry Malm CEO of Phrassee
Kevin Kane CEO, PHASTAR
Ian Shott CBE, Executive Chair, Arcinova
Hugh Griffiths CEO, Inzpire
Jim Darragh CEO, Totalmobile
Dean Forbes President, Access Group
Sean Taylor Global CEO, Redwood Technologies Group
Tim Clover CEO, Rayner Intraocular Lenses Ltd
Paul Cox CEO, Reconomy Group Ltd
Justin Whitston CEO/Founder Fleetondemand

The LDC Growth Through Innovation Award

LEEC Limited
Touchlight
Vision Modular Systems UK Limited
WaveOptics
S-Cube
Global Procurement Group / Northern Gas and Power
DPD UK
BDR Voice & Data Solutions Ltd
CPOMS Systems Limited
thebigword Group

The Lloyds Bank Exporter of the Year Award

RS Components
TVSquared Ltd
Bladnoch Distillery Ltd
SMA WORLDWIDE LTD
TechNiche UK Ltd
nDreams Ltd
Premier Ship Models Ltd
Invenio Business Solutions
SD Ramsden & Co. Ltd t/a Ramsden International
Aire Global - Aire Adaptical Design Ltd

The Lloyds Bank Mid-Market Business of the Year Award

Designer Contracts Limited
La Fosse Associates
Global Procurement Group / Northern Gas and Power in UK
Invpak
Content Guru
Riverford Organic Farmers
Invenio Business Solutions
ROCKWOOL Ltd
Burlington Care
Company Shop Group

Meet Our Finalists

Scotland

Adarma Limited
Bladnoch Distillery
Bella & Duke
Brie Read, CEO/Founder - Snag Group
TVSquared
Leigh Fell, CEO
- Caritas Neuro Solutions

North East

Global Procurement Group / Northern Gas and Power
Hugh Griffiths, CEO - Inzpire
Ian Shott CBE, Executive Chair - ARCINOVA

Northern Ireland

Jim Darragh, CEO - Totalmobile
Totalmobile

North West

Bibby Distribution
Emma Powell, Founder - Epiony
Faith in Nature
fulfilmentcrowd
Haroon Danis, CEO - Skin HQ
Invopak
UKFast

West Midlands

BDR Voice & Data Solutions
DPD UK
Fortel Group
Paul Cox, Chief Executive Officer - Reconomy Group
ServiceRobots

Wales

RBS in partnership with Vizolution
Rockwool
Vizolution

South West

Invenio Business Solutions
Millbrook Dairy Company
Riverford Organic Farmers
VIKA Books - Victoria Forrest, Director

South East

ANIMONDIAL
Clinical Informatics
Research Unit (University of Southampton)
Content Guru
Contract Services Guildford
Dean Forbes, President - Access Group

Diligencia
FRENCHIC PAINT
Goto.Energy
nDreams
Pareto Facilities Management
Premier Ship Models
Purple

Sean Taylor, Global CEO - Redwood Technologies Group
Senseeye
ServiceMaster Clean
SMA Worldwide
TechNiche UK
Tim Clover, CEO - Rayner Intraocular Lenses
Unily

Yorkshire and the Humber

Aire Global - Aire Adaptical Design
Burlington Care
Company Shop Group
CPOMS Systems
Hermes
Hyper Group
Impex Parts Group
Justin Whitston, CEO/Founder - Fleetondemand
Powersheds
ProDog Raw
S.D. Ramsden
thebigword Group

East Midlands

Designer Contracts
deVOL Kitchens
James and James Filfillment
LAC Conveyor Systems
LEEC
Linlar
Reflex Vehicle Hire
Thomas Willday, Founder - Willsow
Utility Bidder
Willsow

London

AccountScore
Archie Wilkinson, CEO - Lifesaver
Baljinder Gill, Director - Balfort Legal
Berkeley Capital Group
Corndel
Creams Cafe
Croud
DCSL Software
Deepzen
Deirdre Mc Gettrick, CEO - ufirmish.com
Interlink
InvestIN Education
JCURV
JogPost
Kevin Kane, CEO - PHASTAR
La Fosse Associates
Little Freddie
Luminance
Mindful Chef
Octavia House Schools
Olvin
Opus Telecoms
Parry Malm, CEO - Phrassee
Phillip Bruner, CEO - ENIAN
Phrassee
Privalgo
proSapient
Rekursy
S-Cube
Shopper Media Group
SourceBreaker
Streetbees
Sullivan & Stanley
Touchlight
Tractable
Trint
Vision Modular Systems
WaveOptics
Zephir

East of England

Blue Badger Financial
Jade Holly Smith, Director - The Saddle Bank
Lintbells
Sanctuary Personnel
SEC Group

the finalists

The Lloyds Bank New Business of the Year Award

Willow Limited
Little Freddie
proSapient
Zephr
Privalgo
Berkeley Capital Group Ltd
Goto.Energy
Millbrook Dairy Company Limited
Hyper Group (Method Analytics Ltd T/A Hyper Group)
Powersheds Ltd

The Lloyds Bank Positive Social Impact Award

Liniair Ltd
Sanctuary Personnel
InvestIN Education Limited
Mindful Chef
Touchlight
Purple
Pareto Facilities
Management Ltd
Octavia House Schools Limited
ANIMONDIAL
Fortel Group

The Lloyds Bank Small to Medium Sized Business of the Year Award

LAC Conveyor Systems Ltd
Utility Bidder
Lintbells
Sullivan & Stanley
Mindful Chef
Trint
Faith in Nature
Totalmobile
Adarma Limited
FRENCHIC PAINT

The New Entrepreneur of the Year Award

Thomas Willday Founder, Willow Limited
Jade Holly Smith Director, The Saddle Bank Ltd
Baljinder Gill Director, Balfort Legal
Archie Wilkinson CEO, Lifesaver
Deirdre McGettrick CEO, ufirmish.com
Phillip Bruner CEO, ENIAN
Emma Powell Founder, Epiony Ltd
Haroon Danis CEO, Skin HQ
Leigh Fell CEO, Caritas Neuro Solutions Ltd
Victoria Forrest Director, VIKA Books

Businesses bite back and begin to boom

For some owners, economic disruption to their firms has enabled them not just to adapt and innovate, but to thrive and grow. By **Elizabeth Anderson**

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted all our lives in some way and for businesses it's been a test of innovation and endurance as they adapt to the new normal.

But some firms have found that business is booming – as the finalists in this year's Lloyds Bank National Business Awards demonstrate.

One sector that has flourished during the pandemic is delivery and transport. Internet sales as a percentage of total retail sales peaked at 33 per cent in May, according to official figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) – almost double the proportion of last year's sales.

There are three delivery companies among the finalists in this year's awards: DPD, Bibby Distribution and Hermes.

Hermes, the UK's second-largest delivery company, transporting around 400 million parcels a year, says that business has since hit new heights since the pandemic began.

Shortly after lockdown was announced on 23 March, Hermes witnessed record daily parcel volumes of around 2.5 million, which was higher even than the Black Friday shopping bonanza weekend in November. Numbers have

continued to increase since then and it has employed an additional 10,500 staff to cope with demand.

The rise in homeworking as a result of the pandemic has led to more family time and there was a 166 per cent rise in Google searches for “buy a puppy” in the three months following 23 March.

The three pet food companies among this year's finalists – ProDog Raw, Lintbells, Bella & Duke – say

sales have grown considerably as the demand for doorstep deliveries has increased.

John Howie, co-founder of pet supplement specialist Lintbells, says: “Businesses in the pet industry often do well in times of challenge. The British public love their pets, and they are a real source of joy in difficult times.”

Stuart Toogood, the founder of quality dog food manufacturer

ProDog Raw, adds: “The increase in online commerce was exponential during Covid, for obvious reasons.”

Jack Sutcliffe, the co-founder of garden shed manufacturer Powersheds, has also seen sales grow as a result of people spending more time at home.

His company, which was launched in February 2019 and specialises in “flat-pack” sheds, is on track to reach £5m in sales this year and employs 36 full-time workers.

“The demand for home and garden products since lockdown has been incredible. With people spending the summer at home rather than on holiday, it seems everyone wants to do their garden,” he says.

For Pam Gruhn, founder of Frenchic Paint, winning the National Business Awards would be a stepping stone to future success. The company, based in Surrey, specialises in eco-friendly chalk paints for furniture. Frenchic has seen a 500 per cent increase in sales this year as lockdown prompted people to tackle home renovations.

“I am not sure we would describe Covid-19 in any way as an advantage but we adapted to deal with our increased demand. The joy of being a finalist in the National Business Awards is shared amongst every one of the team,” adds Pam.



The pet industry does well in times of challenge, says businessman John Howie



It's what I am most passionate about – that our customers know that we accept and love them,' says Brie

Stretching to the top

Founder of Snag Brie Read explains how customer inclusivity is at the heart of her tights firm. By **Charlie Le Rougetel**

Brie Read is the CEO and founder of Snag Group, and a finalist in this year's Inflexion Entrepreneur of the Year Award category. She set up the Scottish hosiery startup in 2017 after a lightbulb moment on Edinburgh's “posh” George Street when she felt her tights slipping down.

A Google survey of 3,000 people

later, and she realised she was far from alone: 90 per cent of the women she polled complained they couldn't find tights that fit either.

“Tights is a really interesting market,” she explains. “Until now, they have been made by men and bought (commercially) by men, so it's not surprising they didn't fit and, as women, we are so used to putting up with things even when they're

not good enough, that there was this broken feedback loop where nothing changed. And that got me thinking.”

Brie is a psychology and computer science graduate and former owner of a specialist Facebook marketing agency working with clients including Ralph Lauren and Hush, giving her a unique perspective on marketing

and entrepreneurship. “When starting a business, the first thing I ask is whether the opportunity is big enough to properly invest in – whether it's scalable. The global market for tights is valued at £38bn and 90 per cent of customers are unhappy. That's a massive yes.”

Thanks to Snag's “every size, every shape” product offering that caters for sizes 4 to 36 with seven width options, Brie has so far been proved right.

“Last year, we turned over £14m. This is forecast to rise to £40m next year. Our monthly sales will double from £2m to £4m over the next 12 months.

“We sell to 82 countries around the world and our second biggest market after the UK is the US. There's absolutely nothing stopping us from being a billion-pound brand.” Despite Snag's phenomenal growth trajectory, Brie confesses that the business nearly died during the Covid-19 outbreak.

“We went into the pandemic with the belief that if the Government says everything is going to be okay, then it will. So, we turned our attention to the NHS and launched a campaign where, for every pair of tights bought, we donated a pair. We delivered 24,000 free pairs to frontline workers.

“But then sales dropped by 75 per cent and no government help arrived. We had a black hole of £800,000 that, if we didn't fill, meant we wouldn't survive beyond July. So, we came up with a ‘two for one buy now, get your tights in November’ scheme.

“We launched the deal on Monday and by Friday our customers had bought £1.25m of vouchers. It was the most amazing thing I've seen in my life. I couldn't stop crying.

“We got 10,000 emails, which we split between the five of us. It took 10 days, but we answered every single one of them to say thank you.”

When you consider how customer- and people-focused Snag is, this immense outpouring of loyalty is not surprising. There



It is possible to run a successful business while being kind

are no models on the Snag site, just customers. “From day one, we wanted to move away from aspiration, to inclusion and acceptance. It's the thing I am most passionate about – that our customers know we accept them, and we love them – and it's essential this is represented in our marketing.

“Sixty per cent of women are size 16 or above, yet the lack of representation of women in fashion is terrible. There shouldn't be plus sizes, there should just be sizes.”

Brie adds: “Everyone should be included and be able to buy the same product. We had a meeting with a big high street retailer who explained they didn't merchandise plus size clothes with ‘normal’ sizes because smaller people didn't want to be seen in the same clothes as someone sized XXXL.

“It's time this changed, and we would love more retailers to adopt our way of thinking.”

Proving that businesses like Snag – that do things differently – is exactly why Brie would love to win a Lloyds Bank National Business Award. “We're size inclusive, we don't do email marketing, don't follow people around the internet, we use real people on our site, are direct and honest and our customers' interests are at the heart of everything we do.

“Winning the Inflexion Entrepreneur of the Year Award would be recognition that it is possible to run a successful business while being ethical, inclusive and kind,” she says.

“And if more business leaders can see that, then hopefully more will follow in our footsteps and do the same.”

How to navigate a course in the post-EU world

In spite of the additional challenge of the pandemic, the focus should be on Brexit, says **Allyson Stewart-Allen**

No doubt your business has been juggling the dual demands of Covid-19 and life after Brexit. While each brings uncertainty and upheaval, the latter gives you the chance to take charge of how your organisation responds to the market opportunities that will arise.

With Brexit a reality in a matter of weeks, your organisation should have a plan to master its destiny and keep

people motivated while there is still a lack of clarity. This might mean selling your way out of the uncertainty by building demand in – and beyond – the European Single Market and finding out how to quantify the sales opportunities in even more countries. And finally, once the data is gathered, how to localise your offerings for those territories so you can attract more customers and sales.

Selling Your Way Out of Brexit

UK companies should be looking to export globally, a key opportunity presented by departing the EU. Besides China and the US, there are fast-growth markets in Latin America and Asia with vast potential for British companies. For example, Mexico has a population of over 125 million and an economy worth over £930bn, with the top foreign direct investment sectors including those where the UK has a competitive advantage: automotive components; software and IT services; industrial machinery and transportation.

The US, Britain's largest single trading partner, presents the chance to scale at pace for those that are prepared. This means understanding its unique business culture and appreciating its readiness to embrace innovative goods or services.

Another demand driver in your favour is the weak pound, making your products and services even more affordable in most regions

of the world. This is welcome news for the UK's highly regarded luxury sector and also for its many innovative services and entertainment properties, as BBC Studios has discovered.

For useful information to help decide where to focus your international sales activities, you can consult the Lloyds Bank International Trade Portal which offers data on most of the world's markets.

Quantifying Your Opportunities

While there are several good and free secondary sources of information about a country, there's no substitute for gathering the information first-hand.

The more time you and your top team can invest immersing in the target countries,



understanding consumer and B2B behaviours, the more likely you will succeed. Alternatively, polling from the UK via online surveys like Survey Monkey or its web-based competitors, can be done cheaply and quickly to measure the size of your opportunities and what adaptations may be required by the culture or legislative frameworks. Areas to probe include the market size, trends, the role of culture, distribution channels, competitors, pricing and the existing products/services already on offer in that market.

Localise for Relevance

Now that you've done your research and know the size of your international selling opportunities, adapting your offering is critical. Those who have done it well

– McDonald's with its McArabia for the Middle East, Netflix with local content, Pandora with country-specific jewellery charms – realise that one size cannot fit all. While standard templates deliver economies of scale, they also alienate target markets by demonstrating a lack of understanding.

Only a few years ago, Starbucks put its “Trenta” paper cup (“Trenta” for 30 ounces, the number in Italian) on counters in UK stores. While a popular size in the US, the company merely communicated a lack of local cultural understanding, given super-sized food and drinks are seen as over-the-top and indulgent.

While Covid-19 has thrown a huge economic spanner in the works, it is Brexit that all companies need to focus on now. Knowing what's in your control and how to move the dials that secure new sales is the route to survival.

Allyson Stewart-Allen is CEO of International Marketing Partners

Top Tips for Focusing Your Brexit Plan

How will you decide which international markets deserve your sales and marketing effort? Here's a useful checklist to help you choose:

Is there demand for our products/services/solutions?

Putting a number on the opportunity is essential in order for your business to be able to rank which regions, countries or cities deserve your resources.

Are trade regulations favourable in the new market?

Understanding which non-EU markets are easiest to enter will help you know in what order to tackle them. Highly regulated sectors – pharma, energy, alcoholic drinks,

banking – will usually require a licence to operate.

Who are our competitors and how will we get market share?

Knowing what will make you better and/or different from existing players is at the heart of your success.

Who is the target for our products/services/solutions?

Being clear how your target customer or client is the same and different from those at home will give you the answer to what localisations are required.

Do our target markets give us a gateway into others for our future long-term growth?

For example, using Mexico or Canada as a means of accessing the US is a strategy that might be adopted. Seeking partners in nearby geographies is a strategy used by many.

A recharged business model

Sales may be low for entrepreneurs but confidence is up. By **Elizabeth Anderson**

Covid-19 may have dented sales and knocked confidence, but the UK's entrepreneurs are keeping their spirits up and transforming their business models to get through the pandemic.

For these finalists in the New Entrepreneur of the Year Award, open to founders who started a business in the previous 24 months, 2020 has certainly been a memorable year.

Whether a year of highs or lows, what this diverse range of entrepreneurs have in common is their resilience and determination to thrive. Take Archie Wilkinson, the co-founder of sustainable rechargeable battery specialist Lifesaver Power.

The company supplied events including Formula One and British Summer Time Hyde Park last year. But the cancellation of many live events this year has caused the firm's revenue to plunge by 97 per cent. "We were making £27,000 a month before coronavirus. Now it's £800. Revenue probably won't ever recover," says Archie.

But he is evolving the business



Lifesaver Power has switched from supplying Formula One to the NHS

to sell directly to consumers. The company has also gained support from large corporations, including Nissan and Octopus Energy, to donate 1,455 power banks to 19 hospitals. Another business that's transformed the way it works is SkinHQ, which provides non-surgical facials and treatments and employs 50 staff.

Haroon Danis, the founder of SkinHQ, says business was thriving pre-Covid but income

was wiped out when the UK went into lockdown. However, he is positive about the future and is now focusing on a franchise model for the business. "The beauty industry is resilient in times of economic downturn. People want a boost and to be the best version of themselves," he says.

For Jonny Ohlson, the founder of biotechnology company Touchlight, which creates DNA to be used in vaccines for infectious

diseases, the Covid-19 pandemic means his product is in high demand. "Covid-19 has accelerated the advancement of genetic vaccines, and this is going to transform the field," he says.

Thomas Willday, the founder of plantable children's vegetable book maker Willsow, says lockdown gave entrepreneurs the chance to stand still and take stock. "The situation has pushed businesses to expand into areas that will make them fit for the future," he said.

It's rare to find a sector that has not been impacted by Covid-19 in some way. Even food businesses that sell through supermarkets are having to transform the way they operate.

Piers Buck, the founder of organic baby and toddler food brand Little Freddie, says the nation's eating habits have changed as a result of lockdown. Parents are spending more time at home and therefore more time cooking from scratch, meaning sales of "on-the-go" baby food are falling.

"We think the shift to online channels will be here to stay," he says.

the finalists

The Virgin Atlantic Customer Experience & Loyalty Award

Reflex Vehicle Hire
Lintbells
Blue Badger Financial Ltd (t/a Synergy Commercial Finance)
JogPost Lt
Mindful Chef
Interlink
UKFast
Invopak
RBS in partnership with Vizolution
ProDog Raw Ltd

400% growth. 100% electric.

Henry. ECOMOVE, BRISTOL. 8th September 2020.

We provided EcoMove with the finance to open a new flagship store. This led to a 400% increase in sales because demand for e-bikes, e-scooters and e-mopeds has been, fittingly, electric.



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