

THIS: the ultra-realistic plant-based meat company shaking up the vegan market

THIS is no stranger to controversy. The plant-based food brand is known for their stand-out packaging, ultra-realistic plant-based meat products, and provocative marketing. Though, according to Andy Shovel, who founded the company alongside Pete Sharman, being contrarian is all part of the plan.

“We want to be the brand that recruits the most meat eaters to [the plant-based] category. And to do that, we feel we have to have comms that are not super wholesome, and green, and virtuous. We have to hold ourselves to the same content standards as a non-vegan brand.”

The tactics are playing off. Having launched in 2019, the brand successfully raised £5M in 2020, an £11M raise in 2021, and are about to embark on a crowdfunding campaign, hosted on Seedrs. Their pre-registration phase is the second largest in Seedrs history, with the real thing opening on Monday 20th June.

Below, Maddyness speaks to Andy about what goes into THIS’ ultra-realistic meat, the plant-based market, and their innovative marketing strategy.

How do you make your non-meat look and taste so realistic?

So you have to break down all the different components of meat. I'm talking about each part of the flavour, not just the flavour itself. So if you take a bite of a beef burger, you'll taste a bit of cheesiness, a bit of iron, and quite a bit of sweetness. So you need to get quite granular with every part of the eating experience, including the smell, the appearance, the texture, and the mouthfeel.

Within those building blocks, you then have to break down the various different characteristics of the flavour. You then do the same for the texture and the same for the mouthfeel. So it's essentially a very granular exercise in identifying what makes meat meaty, and then trying to reproduce those various characteristics and granular details from plant based ingredients.

How much of that process was informed from your time at Chosen Bun [the animal meat takeaway burger company Andy founded with Pete prior to founding THIS]?

I think quite a lot, actually. We became meat experts. We had a very, very in depth knowledge of the meat that we were selling alongside a close relationship with the butchers. And we also got to understand how meat lovers make purchase decisions, which burgers they enjoy, and what they love about meat. It also more widely taught us about building a consumer facing brand and social media, that sort of thing.

Our takeaway business was really quite a good training ground for THIS, especially because the whole mission of THIS is to recruit meat eaters to the plant-based category. And with that in mind, it was super helpful to come from such a meaty background.

How have you found toeing the line

between enticing meat eaters whilst advocating for meatless eating? To speak broadly, the two demographics appear incongruous.

It's quite a difficult balance to strike because quite a lot of brands in our space are quite neatly configured for vegan customers. And the trouble is, and this isn't publicised, is that selling vegan food just to vegans isn't taking any animals out of the supply chain at all. You're having no net savings to the environment because you're just redistributing the vegan spend.

And the way you make a difference environmentally and ethically and save animals is by selling vegan products to meat eaters who weren't buying it before.

So that is why our communications and videos are quite controversial and why they're geared towards meat eaters. We do upset vegans, and we don't want to, but sometimes we do. We're the home of quite a lot of debate.

Making sure that you hit the right note is sometimes quite challenging because you can't please everybody. But it's very important to us to stay laser focused on reducing the net animal intake in the country. And that means that we have a very clear role as head of recruitment, as we see it, for the plant based category.

We want to be the brand that recruits the most meat eaters to this category. And to do that, we feel we have to have comms that are not super wholesome, and green, and virtuous. We have to hold ourselves to the same content standards as a non-vegan brand.

Whose idea was it for humour to play such a large part of the marketing strategy?

That was me. I'm the sort of unofficial creative director of the company and I'm quite passionate about the content side. The humour is quite a calculated effort to try and shatter all the preconceptions that people have about plant-based food. People think that it tastes weird or that it's boring. I came to the view very early on that people needed to be jarred out of these misconceptions.

You can't reach all people by some benign communications strategy with benign packaging; you have to make them feel something quite strongly.

Do you have any data on how successful you've been at getting meat eaters to lessen their meat intake through consuming THIS products?

We do, actually. It's not exactly to that end, but we have lots of data on penetration, calculating how many new customers to the plant based category we are attracting. We can pretty safely assume that if someone wasn't previously buying plant-based protein, they were buying animal based protein, unless they were having no protein at all, which is very unlikely.

Last time we checked, THIS has the highest penetration rate in the plant-based category. I know that our penetration growth Year-on-Year has been around 226%. Part of that is a function of the brand growing, and part of it is that we've been attracting more meat eaters.

Your revenue growth far exceeds your rivals. What do you put that down to?

For the year 2021, we were the fastest growing brand in the plant-based market. I think a large part of that is our product, the quality of our product is definitely at the leading edge globally in terms of texture, flavour, mouthfeel, etc.

I think our brand is proving to be relatable and engaging for people, and I think we're getting to the stage where people are wondering what we'll do next as a brand. We're getting notoriety in a good way, which is helping.

Another reason for our success in the category is how our restaurant partnerships have been supplementing our retail growth. We've been successful in that lots of restaurant chains are putting THIS on their menu and their marketing materials, they're proud to be aligned to the brand. And that's been extremely supplementary to the retail reach because people try THIS in their favourite restaurant, whether its Cafe Nero or Prezzo or Honest Burger, and then they look for it in retail afterwards.

THIS has raised £5M in 2020, a huge £11M raise last year, and you're about to launch a crowdfunding campaign. Where specifically is this money being invested?

So we're going to start switching on the marketing this year. Since we've launched we've only been spending a relatively small amount considering the size of the brand. So we've been raising brand awareness through PR, social, and the stunts we do. Later on this year, we're going to be switching on above the line, which means things like TV ads, for instance.

We're also going to be doing a really big sampling campaign, going to some massive music festivals, and we're going to try and sample around 400,000 people.

We're also going to be spending money on increasing our manufacturing capacity. We're also going to be growing the team. So the investment will help us support that.

And also it's going to help us with our innovative work. We're launching the

Innovation Centre in West London, which is basically going to be a big R&D lab, essentially, where the innovation function will live and do their research work. So it'll help us fund that.

I saw it called a 'Willy Wonka style plant-based innovation centre'. How is that coming on and do you have an opening date?

Yeah, so it's been quite slow. Usual London property issues with difficult neighbours, all that kind of stuff. So we've been quite delayed; however, we should be open toward Q4 this year.

Why have you decided to go for a Crowdfund this time round as opposed to looking towards an institutional investor again?

Well, we're doing both. So we do have some institutional investors this round. But we love crowdfunding because it engages the community. It builds our loyal community as well, making people feel engaged and brought into the brand. I just really like the concept. There is something wholesome about your fans and customers funding your growth, rather than more agnostic capital who's just doing it for perhaps more financially oriented gain.

In your Seedrs campaign, you talk about expanding from just meat alternatives to creating plant based alternatives to other animal based foods. I wondered if that was a hint towards your creation of a plant based fat?

It's not. We do have a plant-based fat, called Fat 2.0, we've patented it and it's made of olive oil and it adds succulence to our products, so it's currently in our

sausages and meatballs. But we don't sell it separately.

It's a nod towards other products – I always get told off for announcing things too soon – so basically we're looking at totally different categories within replacing animal-based foods. Watch this space!

Environmentally, a concern is the diet of developing nations. What does your international outreach and expansion look like?

To start with we'll be focussing on a couple European territories, probably Germany will be one of them, perhaps Belgium, and the Netherlands. We want to be quite careful about not diluting management time too much on too many different territories. It's a massive stretch on resources launching internationally. We're mindful that we don't want to go into too many countries too fast.

I'm not an expert on the dynamics of the plant-based category within developing economies. I would say that my feeling is that the markets for plant-based alternatives would be quite nascent, because they're semi-premium products. So I suspect that there's a lot of potential locked up, but that the time may not be quite right yet for us to go into those markets.

Article by JAMIE WALKER