

Most energy drinks are full of synthetic caffeine, artificial mood boosters and sugar, TENZING are changing that

As part of our quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Huib Van Bockel, founder and CEO of TENZING about his choice to make a positive impact, climbing Everest, the power of nature and plans for a TENZING festival in the future.

I reached that moment in my life where I wanted to make a positive impact. I wanted to see what I was made of and use my experience to make a difference.

There's a brilliant dutch word that I love: *louteren*. The closest translation in English would be 'purifying' or 'humbling', and I really wanted to step out of my comfort zone. Let me tell you, starting a company is really uncomfortable. Going from a salary to no income at all was a big step, and my family and I made sacrifices. We downsized our house and cut back wherever we could because overnight, we were suddenly 50% short of our regular income.

Tell me about the business – what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work with, how you reach customers and so on?

At TENZING we exist to inspire people to drink, experience, and protect the power of nature. It's why we create plant-based energy drinks that are big on energy and low on impact. From being carbon negative, to cleaning up Everest, we take action to protect our planet. Because we believe that nothing beats the thrill of climbing clean mountains, surfing pristine oceans and running through fresh air.

Our all-natural blends provide a low-calorie triple hit of natural caffeine, vitamin C and electrolytes containing about 60% less sugar than other major energy drinks. A big part of our purpose is offering people a low calorie alternative that is free from artificial ingredients but doesn't compromise on taste.

Without nature, we wouldn't be able to create our plant powered blends, which is why we are so passionate about being as sustainable as can be. We've set a new standard in the soft drinks market by becoming the first in the world to implement carbon footprint labels. If you've not heard of carbon labelling before, it means we declare our products' carbon footprint in the hope of driving climate transparency and encouraging more shoppers to consider sustainability when shopping.

How are you funded?

I self-funded the business for as long as possible until I found the right kind of investor. Over the years, I've discovered this was a pretty unique way of doing it, no crowdfunding, no mass investment rounds and no investment whatsoever for a good few years.

Having spent the last two decades in the world of marketing, I shared my knowledge and experience with people and businesses through the London Speaker Bureau and used this as a funding mechanism until 2018. I also used these speaking opportunities to spread the word about TENZING. I wanted to keep TENZING self-funded for as long as possible to ensure we could build our values without outside influence trying to steer us off course. Looking back it was actually a pretty scary time, but it also gave me the freedom to mould the company into what it is today.

Then in 2019, we joined forces with an investment firm with previous experience in beverages and received a \$10M injection. By that point we'd already built a culture, brand and working environment that was fundamental to our growth to date, business goals and commitments and we're lucky to have investors who wholeheartedly support that vision and ethos too.

What has been your biggest challenge so far, and how have you overcome this?

One of my biggest mistakes and lowest moments with TENZING was when I said that everyone could decide their own salary. I thought we're a startup; employees understand that, they'll make a decision based on what we can afford and what they believe they are worth.

But I didn't realise at the time that the psychological side of it is incredibly tricky. Someone could think, 'oh, I'm only going to ask for X, but what if someone else asks for Y?'. Everyone struggled with it, and it began to affect everyone, including my business partner! It became very messy, so we got rid of that initiative pretty quickly. My huge learning from this is the principle of trial and error – short term disruption which fed into a long term solution (of which choosing salaries categorically will not feature!)...

How does TENZING answer an unmet need?

In 2016 I set out on a journey to change the energy drinks game for good. We were tired of traditional energy drinks filled with artificial ingredients and heaps of sugar whilst witnessing billions being invested into petrol guzzling marketing.

People are always in need of energy, but most don't want the high sugar content nor the added preservatives and sweeteners that are synonymous with traditional energy drinks.

That's where TENZING differs. We source nature's most powerful plants to offer a functional and refreshing uplift to help each and every one of our community reach their everyday Everest. Our drinks are low calorie, 100% plant-based and sustainable: energy as it should be.

What's in store for the future?

I've always said from the beginning that there's no reason why we can't be huge, but one of the big mistakes I've seen entrepreneurs make is to focus too much on the end goal and forget the journey. What sets us apart is that we focus on that journey and appreciate where we are right now – it's something our whole team does really well.

My dream is to continue building on what we're doing and having an even more significant impact on our community and our planet. I want TENZING to be an example of how to run a business that doesn't just focus on the numbers, but one that strives for innovation, community and culture. TENZING is so much more than just a new kind of energy drink, we're on a mission to encourage a new way of living with sustainability, wellness and community at the core.

In the near future, we'd love to create a TENZING festival! Bringing together like-minded people, brands, and music by the sea. Sounds like heaven – right?!

What one piece of advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

Don't be afraid to tap into your network and ask contacts for help. Somewhere along the way, you will have given someone a leg up and you'll be surprised how often people remember the small things you've done for them and their willingness to return the favour.

Use that network strategically for help, advice, introductions and support. And most importantly, make sure you continue to put yourself out there to keep growing it.

Huib Van Bockel is the founder and CEO of TENZING.