

Are you a Saint or a Sinner? Gunner Cocktails has the answer

As part of our quick fire questions series – or QFQs – we spoke to Dannie McDonald, Managing Director at Gunner Cocktails about eureka moments, entrepreneurial flair and how COVID meant time for R&D and product development.

The idea for Gunner actually came from the company's founder, Giles Fuchs, who is the owner of *Burgh Island Hotel* and the founder of *Office Space In Town*. After years of ordering a round of Gunner cocktails following an afternoon of tennis or a round of golf, which then had to be made by the poor bartender, Giles had his eureka moment and thought why hasn't anyone put this into a canned form? As someone with an entrepreneurial flair, Giles immediately went about trying to fill this gap in the market. Since then, Gunner Cocktails has gone from strength to strength, with sales doubling year-on-year and availability across the hospitality sector tripling!

Tell me about the business – what it is, what it aims to achieve, who you work

with, how you reach customers and so on?

We are all about the traditional Gunner cocktail, we manufacture Gunner drinks from all natural ingredients, the original recipe is a non-alcoholic cocktail, our Gunner Saint, which we launched in its new 330ml sleek can in 2021.

We will only focus on products that are based on a Gunner, and this September we just launched The Sinner, which adds a healthy measure of aged dark rum.

We aim to be listed in all major supermarket multiples, and moreover to have a great reputation in the sector providing a quality product, and no matter how big we grow to maintain the same exceptional personal service we offer today.

We have focused working with on-trade customers, working with them directly or through a small network of distributors, supplying sports clubs, pubs, bars and hoteliers and other leisure venues to raise the profile of the brand.

We of course use all the usual methods of brand exposure; social media, selective advertising etc. but we have found that our customers like the personal approach, so we are contacting them directly, and then visiting with, or sending samples for them to try, or working with the sales teams of the Distributors to ensure the same personal touch is extended.

How has the business evolved since its launch? When was this?

The company was formed in 2016, we spent a long-time trialling products with key venues, and ensuring the product was as good as it could possibly be, officially launching in mid-2019 with a draught version of the Saint.

We then had the pandemic hit in early 2020, and everything externally stopped in regards to sales of course, so we used this time for R&D and more product development, lots of housekeeping and supplier reviews and raising second round funding for the business.

During that time, we carried out R&D on a low sugar version of the Saint, and five alcoholic versions which are all tried, tested and ready to go whenever we decide to add them to the range.

After Covid, we have rebuilt and of course extended our customer base, as so many sites and companies were sadly affected by the pandemic and the issues that all hospitality venues suffered as a consequence; we hired our Sales Director in February 2022, and our direct to consumer sales via our own web shop, and via Amazon, are growing every day; so all in all we have had an amazing first full year trading and are forecasting to grow by 500% next year.

Tell us about the working culture at Gunner Cocktails

The working culture at Gunners, is in the same vein as we created the drink, quality always – we take great pride in what we do and that should pass down to the end drinker through whatever route we are selling. The F&B sector, drinks specifically, is a very busy marketplace, so it was essential that we took the right steps and actions at the right time.

Many entrepreneurs will know- whatever the company or services – you get ‘once chance’ and if you fall or fail at any point, it’s so difficult if not impossible to get that traction and reputation back. So, we have planned meticulously and actioned (so far!) at the right times (you know the old adage, ‘measure twice-cut once!’) and have seen steady and consistent growth.

The only thing I’d say is that we all wanted to have some fun along the way, so our ethos is definitely work hard, play hard and that coupled with our Founder’s business mantra – ‘Confer and conquer’ means that lots and lots of communication, and we understand what we are good at, and then refer to specialists in other disciplines to ensure our knowledge is complete!

How are you funded?

Giles our Founder funded the company personally until late 2020, we issued a private placement in September 2020 and have raised the funding we were seeking for 20% equity of the business to take us through the next stages of

growth.

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

Launching any product or service without a colossal marketing budget is always tough, so getting the brand out there organically in the early days before we engaged with our Brand Agency and PR Agency was probably the key one; many start-ups don't have big marketing budgets to launch, so we overcame this by ensuring our marketing messages were clear, thinking about growth of our client base and sticking to one sector at the start.

Ours was Golf Clubs, so everything you do and achieve can be built on for the next new client acquisition. If you aim for loads of different customers all at once, it's difficult to maximise the benefit of one customer to encourage the next – so FOCUS is the word!

How does Gunner Cocktails answer an unmet need?

A Gunner is known by lots of bar staff and mixologists, but wastage and time is a key part of cost control in any venue. So we have taken away the wastage and time spent whilst hand mixing, maintained the premium quality of the product for the server and drinker, and of course you can now buy to have in the comfort of your own home, or wherever you spend your free time. We know we have a great product, and feedback from our customers supports that.

What's in store for the future?

Well, we're aiming high, we laugh about taking over the world, but if we're as well-known as Coca Cola, that would be fabulous! So, the future brings lots more hard work, maintaining the premium British brand we have created, more product releases as we grow, more development for new lines as the market consumer demands, and most importantly not losing sight of the detail we are really good at.

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

Oh, the pressure of ONE thing..... there are so many small nuggets of advice I'd share; however, I think if I was to pick just one- then plan, Plan, PLAN! Know exactly what you want the company to achieve, who your customers will be, and how much it will cost you to get to a 'ready to go' product or service, and take it to market - planning will allow you to know exactly what you need to deliver your aims - you can always change the plan, but having one is paramount, as you are creating it should bring to light all the factors you need to consider, and more importantly mitigate, or hopefully remove the surprises - they generally can/will be costly.

And finally, a more personal question! What's your daily routine and the rules you're living by at the moment?

Early start always, I find that giving myself at least an hour before business hours allows me to prepare for the day and complete any small 'bitty' or admin tasks before the phone starts ringing; keep hydrated - even if you're at your desk all day- the brain works best if it's fed and water is essential; don't be afraid to step away from your desk if you need to think about something, and try and schedule similar tasks together to ensure you are using your time effectively.

Finally, if you are booking Zoom/Teams (other providers are also available!) calls (as we all to be spending more time on video conference services) never book them back-to-back, give yourself at least 15-20 minutes between calls, it allows a little overrun so you don't have to end a call short or abruptly, and also gives you a few minutes to stop and sense check and be ready and fresh for the next one as if they are your only call of the day!

Dannie McDonald is Managing Director at [Gunner Cocktails](#).

