

Case study

Forerunner Personal Catering



Delivering hundreds of nutritious meals every day to older people in their own homes as well as to schools and nurseries has created a solid business for Forerunner Personal Catering's owner Declan O'Toole.

The former chef bought the Bournemouth-based firm four years ago when he moved to the UK from Australia. The company itself has been operating since 1992.

Declan has since invested in its website, including buying the domain name www.hotmealsonwheels.com, employing a professional chef and building up a strong customer base.

But the firm has not been immune to the downturn and Declan now faces a few challenges after several years of growth.

BUSINESS ISSUES

Turnover is down by about 20 per cent on the previous year as a result of cancelled orders from older customers struggling with lower incomes and higher utility bills.

Declan said: "We were okay until March this year, then in April we noticed customer numbers were falling.

"Older people are finding their income has dropped significantly and so are cutting back – they're buying frozen ready meals instead.

"We have had to consolidate by cutting back on some rounds, but we have not lost any staff."

Forerunner is facing the challenges head on with help from Business Link.

BUSINESS LINK SUPPORT

Forerunner decided to move into new markets following a business review with Business Link adviser Beryl Griffiths.

Beryl recommended targeting schools and nurseries as a way of widening its customer base.

The company has also introduced several new products to its range and has been trialling a new way of presenting the meals it delivers. On one of the rounds, Forerunner has stopped using foil cartons and is now delivering food on a plate under a silver dome, which is proving popular.

Beryl also referred Forerunner to the Manufacturing Advisory Service South West, which helped the company improve its kitchen production line.

Business Link supported the creation of Forerunner's website, as well as helping

Declan access Leadership and Management training for himself and his staff in areas such as food safety.

Beryl said: "Declan has always been open-minded and taken on board advice that can help the company ride out the recession and grow in the future."

Declan is also planning a rebranding exercise and has been able to talk to Beryl about his plans over the next couple of years.

EVALUATING SUCCESS

Forerunner now supplies meals to a number of nurseries and schools in Bournemouth, Poole and Christchurch.

The food is the same as its meals-on-wheels service but delivered in bulk, allowing the schools and nurseries to portion it themselves.

Beryl has played a key role in helping Forerunner over the past two years and Declan is full of praise for her continued support.

He said: "Beryl has been fantastic. She's really helped the business grow.

"Business Link is a great service for getting information and advice on a whole range of business issues."

FUTURE PLANS

A new product range is being introduced along with the rebranding and cost-cutting that has already taken place, Declan is confident that the next year will be a successful one for the business.

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