



Michael and Aisling Flanagan, of Velvet Cloud

## CLIENT FOCUS

### KEEPING THE NATION REFRESHED DURING THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19

*BEFORE THE ONSET OF COVID-19, EATING OUT, CATCHING UP WITH FRIENDS OVER A COFFEE OR HAVING A JUICE AT THE GYM, WERE PART AND PARCEL OF OUR DAILY LIVES. BUT SO MUCH HAS CHANGED.*

*THANKS TO FORWARD THINKING AND ADAPTABILITY, MANY FOOD AND DRINK BUSINESSES HAVE PIVOTED TO KEEP THEMSELVES AFLOAT AND ALLOW US TO ENJOY A LITTLE TASTE OF OUR PREVIOUS LIVES.*

#### VELVET CLOUD in County Mayo

Set up in 2015 by Michael and Aisling Flanagan, Velvet Cloud produces a range of natural sheep's milk yogurt and cheese on their farm in Claremorris. A well-established supplier to the high end food service sector as a natural alternative to cow dairy, the family business lost half its weekly turnover when the crisis hit our shores. However, with the help of a Trading Online Voucher from Local Enterprise Office Mayo, the entrepreneurial producers were able to offer their product online for the first time.

"Up until the pandemic, Velvet Cloud was on the menus of some of the best establishments in Ireland," says Aisling Flanagan. "But due to restaurant closures and the fact that many people couldn't venture out to retail stockists, we lost 50% of our sales."

"But we have managed to pivot and launch an e-commerce platform online and are now clawing back lost sales and finding new markets."

Aisling, along with Michael and their 'junior shepherds' Ciaran (21), Orla (19), Niamh (15) and Liam (13), adapted quickly to the challenge and have now started a new online delivery service.

"It's amazing how quickly you can learn about online applications and how to set up an e-commerce shop, when your back is up against the wall" she says. "We've been surprised at the uptake as while we're only up and running a few weeks, sales are steadily increasing and Velvet Cloud sheep's milk yogurt is now being delivered to homes across Ireland in insulated ice-boxes, within 24 to 48 hours of dispatch." The online delivery service has coincided with peak cheese-making season on the farm so it's all hands on deck for the Flanagans.

And while they haven't recouped all of their lost revenue, the couple is optimistic for the future as the new venture has also opened up a different and increasing market which hadn't been available to the business before – so the future looks bright.

"The response from customers has been extremely positive," says Flanagan. "In March 2020, 0% of our sales were online but just two months later, between 30% and 40% of business is to customers online. And in June, we will start selling our 'Rockfield by Velvet Cloud' cheese online too. So as a result we are now looking at the export potential of our products for both consumer and trade."

So while this new venture wasn't entirely planned, the Mayo entrepreneur says it's important to be adaptable and try to move with the times.

"Change is always inevitable in business and sometimes it occurs quicker than any of us might predict, but change, while often uncomfortable, has to be embraced," she advises.

"We are always learning, networking, talking to and learning from the successes and failures of other companies who have embarked on similar journeys."

"And we feel it's important to keep monitoring trends both globally and locally, because that is where you will spot the opportunities. Talking to your local support agencies, like your Local Enterprise Office, is also vital, because they offer hard supports such as grant aid and also excellent soft supports such as training, online webinars and mentoring."

[www.velvetcloud.ie](http://www.velvetcloud.ie)



James Coffey,  
of Bean Delivered

#### BEAN DELIVERED in Dublin City

A decent cup of coffee is one of the luxuries many have missed during lockdown. But Bean Delivered, a coffee subscription service, delivers different coffees from various Irish roasters to customers' front door each month and it has been busier than ever as colleagues and friends are keeping in touch by virtual catch-ups over coffee brewed in their own homes.

Before the pandemic hit, the Dublin City-based company availed of a Trading Online Voucher, which has allowed them to upgrade their webstore, create better blog content, run a new digital campaign and make SEO [Search Engine Optimisation] improvements. It also facilitated them to devise a B2B [Business to Business] plan to support business, as well as the needs of employees working from home.

"Bean Delivered has been coping surprisingly well during the crisis as with more people now working remotely and spending more time at home, coffee consumption has risen dramatically," says founder James Coffey. "We did, however, have to put some plans for a couple of projects and concepts on hold but hopefully we can return to them later in the year."

In order to keep business going, the company is offering discounts to customers and they also received support from Local Enterprise Office Dublin City through the Business Continuity Voucher.

"One of the first things we did in March was offer customers a three month, one-off subscription for €50 - a discounted offering of over 15% which was as close to cost price as we could make it," says Coffey. "Secondly we invested in equipment which would allow people to brew better coffee at home. This is something we had thought about for a



long time and since we started stocking it, have sold out twice and regularly have to send French Presses, Aeropresses and coffee grinders to all parts of the country. Investing in this stock was a risk for us, but thankfully, one which has paid off."

"We have also updated our website, web hosting, created a host of new collateral and been able to lock in longer term contracts with vendors thanks to the Trading Online Voucher from our Local Enterprise Office."

James Coffey says the ethos at Bean Delivered has always been to support local, Irish coffee roasters. He believes the combination of helping others and relying on support is vital and would advise other companies to do the same.

"We think supporting local is so important and during times of crisis, even more so," he says. "It's one of the reasons we have been successful to date and during Covid-19, Bean Delivered is very fortunate to have several resources to lean on for help and guidance - from our LEO to friends in other businesses as well as family members being extra supportive."

"Being able to sound out ideas, discuss new plans, and just have someone to listen to us has helped us survive and be successful during this crisis. I'm also aware that everyone isn't lucky enough to have the fantastic support we have and I would recommend they reach out to their LEO to see if there is support available, or at the very least, reach out to us as I'm always more than happy to have a chat, or a virtual cup of coffee."

[www.beandelivered.ie](http://www.beandelivered.ie)



Derek and Anna Walker, of Natnoot

### NATNOOT in County Donegal

Established in 2014, Natnoot specialises in cold pressed juice drinks using locally sourced produce and superfoods. The company, headed up by Derek and Anna Walker, had been going from strength to strength since its inception but the onset of Covid-19 decimated a huge section of their business overnight.

However, having received an Expansion Grant from Local Enterprise Office Donegal in 2019, the health food entrepreneurs were able to keep their business afloat and adapt their product to suit the ever-changing market.

“The last 10 weeks has really been a period of change and adaptation,” says Derek Walker. “We had goals and projects which we were working on when literally everything just stopped. Our products had very much been a grab-and-go item which needs a volume of customers looking for a healthy drink option, but when Covid-19 hit, this segment of the market vanished as offices and gyms closed and most people were working from home.”

“Like everyone else, it took us by surprise, and we had spent a period of time after lockdown wondering what the impact of the pandemic would be on our business and what we could do to counter the damage.”

“So we evaluated our product range to identify vulnerabilities and realised that while there was a decline in convenience and snack buying, grocery shopping was growing significantly so we saw an opportunity.”

The couple spent the first month of lockdown ‘ramping up’ their social media output with content which told their story and made sure to highlight the importance of supporting local.

“We created a lot of content and introduced two products which fitted into the grocery section but still had a strong health focus,” says Walker, who also completed the Food Academy Programme with LEO Donegal, SuperValu and Bord Bia.

“We introduced blast-frozen options of wheatgrass juice and Turmeric root shots and these superfood shots are now being included into people’s weekly shop and incorporated into their daily routines at home.”

“Next, we ramped up our website and created ‘juice cleanse bundles’ with the help of a nutritionist friend. These, we bundled together with our fresh juices and frozen shots as we felt they would fit into the growing trend for home workouts and healthy living during lockdown.”

Online sales for Natnoot grew by 400%, as did their social media following. And thanks to their intuition and hard work, May 2020 has been their best month since the company started in 2014.

They are now taking on a full-time employee to help with demand and the Donegal man says their success is down to a combination of support and courage and he would advise other companies to follow suit.

“Without the support of Local Enterprise Office Donegal, this would all be impossible,” he says. “We were very grateful to receive a grant in 2019 which left us in a good position to adapt to the changes Covid-19 has brought about.”

“So I would advise other companies to look for opportunities as they are definitely there, even if they are not what you initially expected and are probably outside of your comfort zone, but don’t be afraid to try something new.”

“Now is the time to critically evaluate to survive – and as things can be overwhelming if you let them, acknowledge the changes and take control again. It might be hard to put goals and targets on the shelf, but many are unrealistic right now so just put them aside and concentrate on what you have to do. And don’t fear change, just embrace it and keep going.”

[www.natnoot.ie](http://www.natnoot.ie)

TO FIND OUT HOW YOUR LOCAL ENTERPRISE OFFICE CAN HELP YOUR BUSINESS RESPOND,  
PLEASE VISIT [LOCALENTERPRISE.IE/RESPONSE](http://LOCALENTERPRISE.IE/RESPONSE)