

Growing a successful business takes more than blind faith

Willow and Weave has been providing Cork with custom blinds for more than three decades, but has made some big changes and diversified in recent years. Founder Brendan O'Sullivan tells us how the business grew.

How did the business start?

We started at home as The Blind-Maker. My grandfather was a master tailor. I'm claiming that I got the gift of sewing from him, whether there's any truth to that or not. I started out making curtains using his machine for a few weeks, but then I took my little Fiat Uno van up to Brother International in Dublin and drove back down with a machine of my own.

I had it set up in the middle of the dining room one weekend and my wife, Miriam, came home.

She wasn't happy at all. It took up the whole room. So we eventually moved to a house in Douglas with a basement, and I was able to set up properly there. We built the business together. She looked after all the appointments and I went out to meet them. We had very humble beginnings.

We had a premises on the Kinsale Road, then we moved to Vicars Road, and now we're in the Southside Industrial Estate. We've moved in a semi-circle. If we move again we'll be back where we started.

How have things changed since you started?

We grew over the years. At one stage we had 24 staff. We had been growing a lot through word of mouth and ads in the *Examiner*. But, like many people, we suffered during the recession. We went from having 24 staff to two at one stage. Now we're back up to about 10.

We started to change what we were doing. So many people fell by the wayside, God help them, there was very few people left in the industry. The gap was there and we had space and the hunger.

We changed from The Blind-Maker to Willow and Weave about two years ago. We had expanded what we were doing and felt pigeonholed by that

Brendan and Miriam O'Sullivan in the showroom of Willow & Weave at Southside Industrial Estate, Pouladuff Rd, Togher.
Picture: Larry Cummins



name, although we do keep it on our sign in the window. My daughter, Niamh, is a qualified interior designer, and she has pushed a lot of the change.

What do you offer?

Plantation shutters are very popular. We have one of the very few dedicated plantation shutter showrooms in the country.

We have two carpenters, and we sent them to training schools in Lisburn and Nottingham, so we have an expertise in that. We have great experience with that, and we are choic-a-bloc fitting shutters.

We also do wall-panelling, wall-paper, wall art, made to measure cur-

tains, carpets, and we have a new range of rugs. We are also looking at paints, and are testing those products at the moment.

What are your customers like?

We are, to a certain extent, steered by the interior designers we work with. We can do all the measuring and making, so we are a sort of back-up to them. We have a lot of people coming to our showroom too.

They might have seen an ad or heard about us from someone else. Things are picking up.

This week, with the weather a bit dull, we had one day where we were busy all day. It was like a supermarket in the showroom and the phones were ringing off the hook. We're praying for a few more dull days.

We get a lot of repeat customers. Someone might have got their blinds off of us a few years back and will come in again looking for something else. They'll bring their business back to us. We're all the same — we like to keep it local. The devil you know is easier to deal with than the devil you don't.



Interior designer Niamh O'Sullivan of Willow & Weave. Picture: Jed Niezgodza

What's in the future?

It depends what's coming around the corner. We are very careful. We are not about the cheap and cheerful.

Apart from our rugs, nothing we do is off the peg, and even the rugs are specially ordered. Other people cater for ready-made items, but there is a market for what we do. There is no such thing as standard sizes.

In America, you could go into Walmart and buy your windows and all the fittings to go with them, but here you could have two windows next to each other in the same house that are different sizes. With blinds, you have to get them custom made.

You can get off the peg curtains and you might strike lucky and get the right size, but they almost all come with eyelets, which are going out of fashion. You have to go custom made to get something different.

We have had to update our practices too. I did a course in digital marketing. If you want to have a high ranking on Google, you have to have all your keywords optimised, otherwise, you won't come up when people search for you.

When we started doing plantation shutters a few years ago, we got the first job and were afraid we would never get the second job. Now we might five or six new jobs a day. We have a good page about that and we update it regularly to keep up our traction. We will have to do the same with other things too. Time will tell how it will go.

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