

WN World-Class
Belfast

Gerard McAdorey
GM Marketing



During pleasantries, Gerard McAdorey shares that he has recently moved back towards Belfast after several years in the countryside. The kids are growing up and moving onto college and the business celebrates its coming of age as it turns 21 years old in 2021.

“I couldn’t stand the 30-minute commute,” he half jokes when he explains the move next to a golf course on the fringe of the city. (His house is across the road from the seventh hole). “But I haven’t had a chance to hit a ball in anger yet either.”

I wonder if he just wanted to be closer to work: a passion that clearly drives him.

McAdorey and the company that bears his initials have made a name for themselves by building a mid-sized Sales, Marketing & Distribution operation that is home to well-known household names such as Fox’s Biscuits, Tilda, Nando’s, Filippo Berio, and the most recent addition to the portfolio, the Costa Coffee At Home range for the GB Wholesale & Convenience channel.

“From the beginning, we were trusted by some very strong brands to, literally, deliver for them in the north. I have contacts in the industry from previous roles and I spotted an opportunity to serve them with great personal relationships. That’s something that’s as true of our business today as it was when we began.

“I’d always wanted to go off and do something myself, always asked myself if I could. At some point, when I was working for a household brands business here in Ireland called Punch, the desire overcame the self-doubt and the rest is kind of history. I took a leap of faith, the brands that worked with us from the outset took a leap of faith and that’s what’s got us to where we are today.”

Where is GM Marketing today as it enters its third decade?

A 50+ employee business which acts for brands that the 70million people in the UK and island of Ireland would recognise. It has two distribution hubs, Belfast and Leeds; enabling the business to easily drive distribution in both the UK and Irish markets.

“We help get brands on shelves. That takes more than diesel, heavy lifting and miles and miles of driving. It requires us to negotiate and position these brands with some of the world’s most sophisticated buyers: UK supermarkets. We’re not dealing with your P&G’s or your Unilevers, we know our place in the market and we’re happy with it. We’re a mid-sized operation that’s looking to grow significantly over the coming years. We’ve doubled our business over the last three years, and our ambition is to do the same in within the next three. The values and approach that have got us through our first two decades will be what helps us grow over the next couple too. Relationships are key for us.”

“We already have a strong foothold in GB wholesale and convenience channels, and are working with some of the leading grocery and High Street brands in GB. But our ambition doesn’t stop there – we’re hungry to deepen our existing footprint, while also breaking into new channels and customers. With a distribution hub already established in Leeds and a recent recruitment drive to bolster the GB team completed, we’ve now got the right structure in place to really accelerate our growth in all territories of the UK and Ireland.”

And opportunity?

“Sure. Some people call it luck, but that’s often just shorthand for the right idea, well executed, at the right time, and with the right circumstances. There’s no luck in that, really. There’s just knowing your sweet spot and sticking to it.

We don’t just want to be an agent that moves boxes – we want to be an extension of our brand teams in the local markets and channels – showing them we really understand their brand and how to build it with purpose, to deliver results. We’re never complacent about those relationships and that means something to our partners.”

“At the heart of what we do is this: We take away all of the noise and complexity of their business. You know, we have over 1,000 accounts between Ireland and the UK for Fox’s biscuits that they just frankly don’t have time to deal with. We do that for them.

“Plus, we also have our own skin in the game – we have our own household fragrance brands and a low sugar, better-for-you snack brand called FREE’IST. Having developed and built products from scratch, we understand what it takes to develop a brand, and we wouldn’t ask our principal partners to do something we wouldn’t do ourselves – which is good for our clients to see.

The conversation turns to other opportunities, and the B word finally emerges: Brexit.

What does he sense is going to be available to his business as a result of Brexit?

“Brexit has thrown a complex mix of issues and administration for Brands accessing the Irish market – a lot which were unforeseen or unknown before January this year, allowing no time to prepare. While everyone was preparing commodity codes and inco-terms, I don’t think anyone was ready for the complexities caused by Rules of Origin and movement of products of animal origin.

At the beginning of Brexit, we formed a committee of internal finance and operations heads, coupled with external tax, customs, and legal experts, and started communicating with our agency brands to say, we know change is coming and we are prepared for every eventuality – we’re here to help and prepare your brand for the transition.”

Since the start of January, GM Marketing have been approached by multiple brands seeking help to navigate the complexities of the situation. McAdoey says, “because we’ve now built the expertise and knowledge within our team to ensure we can get products into Northern Ireland and distributed into ROI, in the most efficient way, and at the most competitive price, we’ve been able to move quickly, find solutions to problems, and ensure a seamless transition and continual supply for brands, whilst avoiding unnecessary tariffs and paperwork. The message from McAdoey is clear “if you’re struggling to access and supply your customers in the Irish market because of any Brexit issue, we are here and we want to help.”

What does he think about the business turning 21?

“It’s the same as if it were a real person, turning 21 is a perfect time to reflect on what you’ve done so far and what’s next. Some things have got you this far, and some others got you this far but don’t work for where you’re going next, so you have to leave them behind. We’re ambitious about the business for the next few years. Growth is important and this next phase is going to take different thinking and new approaches.

We’ve just acquired a local Herbs & Spice brand called FAVOURIT which marks our first move into Manufacturing, and we’ve also recently relaunched the main GM Marketing brand. As we look to the future, we’re going to restructure the business a little so that it’s set for growth and rewards those who’ve played a fundamental role in getting us this far. We don’t have any external investors so that makes it a little easier.”

Has technology played a role in their success?

“We have a data analyst and a couple of commercial finance data analysts who have helped us gain insights that we simply didn’t have before. Twenty years ago, you could rely purely on relationships. Now, the relationships get you through the door but having the facts to back up your story and show people how you’ll deliver for them, showing them what financial commitment you’ll make, that’s what delivers today.

“It comes down to this: every space on every shelf in a supermarket has a price, a value. Every other brand sees your product on the shelf and has an idea of what they could do with that spot. The competition for space is huge. They’re willing to put money on the table to get that spot. That’s what you’re up against, so you need to be able to demonstrate how you’ll be a great investment for that spot.

“But, look, we’re up for that kind of challenge. We’ve done a phenomenal job for Fox’s, we’re doing a phenomenal job for Costa Coffee, and we’re doing a great job for Tilda Rice and Filippo Berio too. We’re actively considering how to fill the gaps in our household goods offer. We’ll get there.”

You've also grown headcount in the last year when many were losing their jobs?

"We've grown headcount by 20% this past year and we still have a few roles to fill. We've been very strategic in the roles that we've been looking for, investing in a structure that we will know will drive the next phase of growth. And for us, it's all about the culture, people are the heart of the business - we actually brought a guy back from Bristol who went to uni there and his partner was offered a job back in Northern Ireland. We interviewed him through an agency and we immediately said, 'just get us that kid, whatever he needs, he's an absolute superstar.'

"We have the people and the work ethic. We've got the deep ports, the expertise, and we also have the opportunity given we're on Europe's doorstep."

"We've got to take advantage of the hand we've been dealt. Listen, if we can convince brands to import via Belfast rather than GB, then we can take advantage of our being a free gateway to Europe via Northern Ireland for other clients. That'll require vision, headcount and growth."

He ends our conversation just as he began, talking about inhabiting the precise spot just outside the centre, but not at the fringes either, perfectly positioned to take advantage of the opportunities and spot gaps in the market.

For a man who's spent his life positioning brands, metaphorically and physically, it's a masterclass in how to do so. In terms of what's next for GM Marketing? Watch this space.



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