

How to enter and succeed in the entrepreneurial food and drink space

In part 3 of our careers special, we delve into life as an entrepreneur and speak to several founders who have launched businesses in the food and drink industry

From consultancy and manufacturing to marketing and product roll-out, many food and drink enthusiasts are choosing to take the entrepreneurial route to combine their passions with a gap in the market and the opportunity to create their own businesses.

The Food Launchpad: innovation and product development

Valia Christidou is the founder of innovation and product development consultancy for the food sector, The Food Launchpad. With a long-spanning career in industry that included roles as head of product design and head of research and development (R&D), Valia set up her product development blog “It’s only biscuits” in 2020 and officially established The Food Launchpad in January 2021.

Despite her well-established career, Christidou didn’t plan to enter the world of food and drink: “I studied food technology a bit by accident – but it was the best accident I could ever have had!”

“I loved how science could be applied to something as ubiquitous as food,” enthuses Christidou. “Science together with creativity and innovation can really change the world and make a positive difference,” adds Christidou.

From industry to entrepreneurship, the founder created The Food Launchpad from a desire to pass on expertise and passion on innovation and product development, and to help small businesses and startups who have a great idea but are struggling to make it big and to navigate the technical challenges so that they can launch it safely.

Opportunities are plentiful throughout today’s food and drink industry, offering a plethora of areas for entrepreneurs to enter into. “What we see today is that nothing is out of bounds,” says Christidou. “Market sectors can be disrupted both by product offerings like short shelf life chocolates and by business models like cooking kits or direct to the consumer,” Christidou adds.



Valia Christidou,
founder, The Food
Launchpad

When asked what some of the key questions Christidou is asked about new product development (NPD), she emphasises: “It is more what questions am I not being asked.”

“Often entrepreneurs without a technical background do not appreciate all the various elements they need to take into account to create a financially viable and consistent product that delivers on the brand promise,” Christidou elaborates. When launching, entrepreneurs need to consider a variety of areas ranging from how to achieve consistent quality and optimum shelf life to having the desired nutritional profile, sourcing sustainable materials, and ensuring food safety.

The other area is when the product is a success and they need to scale up. “Making small batches is ‘easy’, scaling up is a different matter,” says Christidou.

Advice for entrepreneurs

Valia Christidou shares her tips for entrepreneurs wanting to start their own food and drink businesses:

1. Have a clear vision and mission – and do not compromise. But do not overload your product with features that detract from your core.
2. Ask for help and support early on, sometimes “you don’t know what you don’t know”.
3. Connecting with someone who can guide you, be your sounding board and innovation coach, right at the start of their journey can save a lot of time.



Richard Horwell,
MD, Brand Relations

Brand Relations: branding and marketing

Richard Horwell is the managing director of Brand Relations, a food and drink specialist consultancy that focuses on development, branding and marketing. Prior to setting up Brand Relations in 2007, Richard developed a four-minute wine cooler for retail and then a domestic version for the home.

“I set up Brand Relations to work with FMCG but particularly in food and drinks,” says Richard Horwell, managing director, Brand Relations. “We specialised more in drinks but we have been involved in some food products – but I think my heart lies with drink products because I know that inside out,” shares Horwell.

After establishing Brand Relations, Horwell founded a drink called Ibiza Ice, after seeing a market for an alcohol sparkling wine-based drink with flavours in it for the nightclub and festival market. Following a successful six years running the brand, Horwell sold the business.

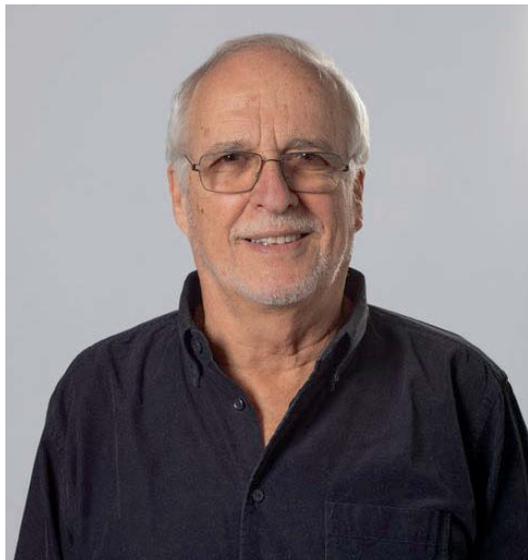
Entering the drinks market is competitive. “When people come to us and they want us to help develop a brand, unless we are very confident that it will be successful we won’t touch it because there are more complications involved,” Howell warns. One of these complications is that people are often using their savings and borrowing money from their friends and family to launch their idea. “I have had people come through my door that have spent well over a million pounds on their brand and gone nowhere,” warns Horwell.

Making your business a success

After having its busiest 12 months yet, Richard Horwell details his tips for how entrepreneurs can create a business that gets off the ground and has the best chance of success:

1. Research. Understand the industry you are going into. If you have come up with an idea, look at the competition and the marketplace. Prove that your concept, market and timing are correct. Know who your target audience is and where they shop, where your product will fit in, why it is bigger or better than what is already on the market, and why it is going to be a gamechanger.
2. Have a point of difference. Showcase your innovation on that point of difference and market trends too.
3. Consider using your seed money to get the brand going and your early production out there. Once you have something tangible to show the buyers, you are in a position to raise money. >>

“ I set up Brand Relations to work with FMCG but particularly in food and drinks...my heart lies with drink products because I know that inside out ”



Eran Baniel, CEO and co-founder, DouxMatok



The engineered form of sweetener allows bakers and food companies to reduce sugar content by 30-50 per cent while retaining the same level of sweetness

DouxMatok: brand and product creation

DouxMatok, a global food technology company, all started with Professor Avraham Baniel – CEO and co-founder Eran Baniel’s father – who recently celebrated his 102nd birthday. As a consultant to leading producers of artificial and natural high intensity sweeteners, Baniel notes how his father: “Came to the conclusion that children, the most vulnerable population to obesity and diabetes will not consume sugar substitutes owing to their aftertastes.”

“The only way to reduce sugar’ he kept telling me must be while using sugar,” reveals Baniel. “In 2013, he almost burnt down his kitchen concocting solutions, so I figured his early successes and his safety justified us establishing DouxMatok,” adds Baniel.

The food technology name launched in 2014 after spending years theorising on the sugar concept. Before taking the official step, while testing in his father’s kitchen, the team met

with food manufacturers who assured them that the most acute health-related problem in the industry is sugar overconsumption. “The manufacturers encouraged us that ‘solving this problem with no aftertastes has huge potential!’” confirms Baniel.

DouxMatok started with one bench as guests of a friendly startup and gradually with its seed financing began building a team, researching, testing, tasting and scaling up the production of our sugar. The brand has developed Incredo Sugar, a sugar-based sugar reduction solution which strives to achieve an enhanced perception of sweetness while using less sugar.

Teaming up with collaborators in industry is often a much-needed pillar of support for entrepreneurs, and DouxMatok found this to be true. The brand entered the discovery and innovation platform, Foodbytes! in 2016. There, it participated in its pitch program and presented its sugar reduction solution.

Eran Baniel provides an insight into his top lessons for running your own business:

1. Stay true to what has motivated you since the beginning.
2. Remember food is there not only for people to be healthy physically, but to be happy.
3. While entrepreneurship often starts as more of an individual pursuit, without an incredibly dedicated team and supportive network of individuals, success would be nearly impossible. “Running a startup like DouxMatok is like riding a rollercoaster, you’re up, then down, then up again,” shares Baniel.

However, it seems it is all worth the ride. Commenting on what he is proudest of as an entrepreneur, Baniel highlights: “I am proud to say that innovation and entrepreneurship can come at any age.” 



Incredo is the ‘real happy sugar’ based on natural cane or beet sugar enables substantial sugar reduction without compromising taste, mouthfeel, or texture