

IT'S GOOD TO FLY

Face-to-face meetings around the world can provide the vital spark that growing firms need. But don't take our word for it. Read on to meet the companies that transformed their business thanks to overseas travel...

Lying on a beach in Brazil on a business trip to Rio de Janeiro, Jacob Thundil had an idea. "I was 30 years old, fed up with my job as a consultant, and wondering what to do with my life," he remembers. "I bought a fresh coconut from one of the beach vendors, took a sip and suddenly I knew..."

The result was Cocolina – the company Thundil founded in 2004 to produce organic coconut goods. More than a decade later, Cocolina is available in 28 countries. "Without travel, none of it would have been possible," he says. "My life has been full of lucky chance encounters that have helped my business to grow."

One such encounter took place in 2014, when Thundil visited Tokyo to sample the local cuisine. Stopping off at a local food show, he got chatting to Watanabe Hisaya, who worked for Sanso Boeki, a Japanese importer of natural products.

The next day, he got a call at his hotel. Watanabe wanted to meet up, but Thundil was due to fly home later that day. "My solution was to ask him to join me as I did my last-minute souvenir shopping in Tokyo's Aeon Mall," says Thundil. "He agreed and we caught up over a coffee."

Following this meeting, Watanabe agreed to place Cocolina products in several high-end stores in Japan. He had just one

request. "Before he bought the products, he wanted to go with me to Sri Lanka to see our raw materials," says Thundil. "So off we went on a trip!"

Things clearly went well, as Thundil returned to the UK with a £70,000 order and an established supply chain. "If I hadn't been in Tokyo, we wouldn't have met, and I wouldn't have had this opportunity," he says.

Thundil recommends always being open to new conversations when travelling, recalling another occasion in a German beer hall. "Over pretzels and weissbier, I discovered that the man I'd been talking to was in the business of making health foods," he says. "Once we realised what we had in common, we arranged a more formal meeting to share our contacts and help each other with introductions in new regions." As a result, Cocolina now exports to retailers in Spain, including supermarket chain Carrefour.

Thundil's experiences have fundamentally changed his approach to exporting. "We often get email requests from companies abroad asking to do business with us," he says. "Now I insist on travelling to see them in person before I say yes. I want to make sure they feel as passionately about my product as I do. I like Skype and technology, but nothing beats a face-to-face meeting."

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INTERVIEWS BY HANNAH HUDSON AND BRONY COLEMAN. ILLUSTRATION ADOBE STOCK

SNOW BUSINESS

It's impossible to predict where in the world a chance encounter might lead to a new business partnership. For Shaun Loughlin, managing director of FreestyleXtreme, a family-run business in Bristol supplying clothing and equipment to action sports fans, it happened on an Austrian ski slope in 2012.

"I was there with my brother and on our second day, we met some Swiss guys, who we ended up hanging out with for the rest of the holiday," he says. "After a few days, we got talking about what we did for a living. That's when we discovered that they were actually long-term customers of ours. They'd been buying from our website for years, and had literally spent thousands of pounds between them."

Loughlin says the conversation highlighted the need for FreestyleXtreme to sell directly to Switzerland. "These guys had to place orders on the German website in euros then call the customer care team to arrange delivery. The fact they were willing to go through that convinced us that we needed to act."

The subsequent launch of the company into the Swiss market was "an absolute success," says Loughlin. Switzerland is now one of the firm's top ten global markets.

OPEN WIDE

"We're always meeting interesting people on our travels, with many of these encounters leading to unexpected business deals," says Dominique Tillen, whose company, Brush-Baby, produces oral care products for babies and children. "Dinner with a family friend in Hong Kong led to a manufacturing deal in China, while a recent alliance with a distributor in Portugal has helped to establish links with a distributor in Mozambique."

Tillen says the 'personal touch' is very important to what she does. "Although technology has made communicating with our customers and distributors remarkably easy, you still can't beat face-to-face contact when negotiating deals, signing documents and learning about products and solutions to problems."



"Seeing the situation firsthand gave me confidence. We now supply hotels and restaurants worldwide"

She recalls a recent meeting with a distributor in Dubai, to see how the products were being stored, transported and generally distributed. "E-commerce isn't as big in the Middle East as it is in the UK or the USA," she says. "It was helpful to see in person the importance of getting the product into bricks-and-mortar stores."

Tillen says that travel will continue to be an essential part of the company's growth. "Brush-Baby may be a UK brand, but we have big ideas. In order to become truly global, our products need to appeal to people from all over the world.

We believe we can achieve this through travelling and making connections along the way."

DRINKING PARTNERS

It was while staying at a five-star hotel in Shanghai that Philippe Kalmbach saw the opportunity to expand his company Wine Source Group, which was originally founded to supply fine wines to private clients.

"While the hotel had all the trappings of a luxurious international chain, the wine list revealed a very limited, ordinary selection," he says.

It was a "pivotal moment", according to Kalmbach, highlighting the enormous potential of the Chinese market, as well as the opportunity to supply fine wines to businesses across the world. "Seeing the situation firsthand gave me confidence," he says. "We now supply several luxury hotel chains in China, as well as hotels and restaurants worldwide."

Wine Source Group currently has offices in London, Paris, Singapore, Macau, New York and Los Angeles – all staffed by people passionate about wine. Kalmbach estimates that he met

Slope for the best Brothers Sean and Jake Loughlin had a lucrative encounter in Mayrhofen.

Below: grape man Philippe Kalmbach knows good wine travels well. Left: Dominique Tillen wants to teach the world to smile



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more than half of them while travelling. "The world of wine and service is all about the people. So if I meet someone who cares about what they do, I try to find a role for them," he says.

Kalmbach met the man who would become the Wine Source Group's Asia president one cold night in upstate New York. "There was a snowstorm and I found myself trapped with Seck Wee Tan in a Russian restaurant," he says. "We'd never met before, but we both reached for the wine list and started to compete over who knew more." This encounter (which ended with them sharing a red Bordeaux) led to Tan setting up the Wine Source Group offices in Singapore in 2012 and Macau in 2013.

Kalmbach plans to expand further into China, and has already booked



trips to establish new relationships and connections in the region. "I've travelled the world since I was 17 and have no plans to stop," he says. "Meeting people and experiencing new things is one of the most rewarding things I do."

POPPING OVERSEAS

"The best way to meet international buyers is to stand at a trade show for a few days, but we've also had 'accidental' meetings that have generated new business," says Adam Sopher, who co-founded the gourmet popcorn company Joe & Seph's with his father, Joe, and mother, Jackie. "On my flight back from a large confectionery show in Cologne, I was randomly sitting next to the founder of a successful chocolate company. One-and-a-half hours of popcorn-related conversation later we came up with a new product idea that we then followed up. I also once delivered the classic 'elevator pitch', when I met a buyer for a large retailer in a hotel lift as I was going to check out – a 15-second elevator

Snack attack Joe and Seph's popcorn is stocked in jars and bars across the globe – as well as in the British Airways Club World cabin

ride to explain how great our popcorn is was challenging!

"And, of course, when I travel Club World on BA, I love catching up with the cabin crew on how our popcorn is received on board. Apparently regular travellers reserve their pack for their inflight movie as soon as they get on the plane!"

A DOG'S CHANCE

The beef jerky aisle of a supermarket in Orlando was the last place James Milbourne expected to make a new business contact. But that's exactly what happened when the director of Canagan luxury pet food visited Florida last year. "I was stocking up on jerky for my journey home and pondering the idea of making jerky treats for dogs," he says. "All of a sudden, the man standing next to me said hello and started talking in great detail about the jerky I was looking at. I thought it was strange at first, but it turned out he was a cow farmer and the jerky I had in my hand was his product."

Milbourne saw this coincidence as a good omen. "I remember thinking it was fantastic luck," he says. "The farmer explained that he'd also been considering branching out into jerky for dogs, so we exchanged details and I got in touch once I was back in the UK."

Canagan is a global business, exporting to 5,000 pet stores in 35 countries, which means travel is a huge part of Milbourne's life. He's taken plenty of flights all over the world in the last few years – earning him British Airways Gold Executive Club status. "I try to visit all our major distributors and retailers twice a year, wherever in the world they might be," he says. "It's a great way for us to show our commitment to them. Doing business over the phone and by email is easy, but there's no substitute for a face-to-face meeting."

PET PROJECT

When Andy Peck came up with the idea for TrustedHousesitters, a website matching people who want to travel the world with home owners who want their pets to be cared for while they're away, he realised that he needed to get out into the world and meet potential customers.

"We knew our biggest challenge would be understanding our customer needs around the world," says Peck, who persuaded wife

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It's a dog's life
Rachel and Andy Peck travel the globe meeting pet owners. Below: Nick Farnsworth shares his toys with the world. Right: Adam Cox has taken his pianos from Yorkshire to China

Rachel to join him in the business. "So we sold my car and Rachel's flat and bought round-the-world tickets in order to sign up our first few hundred members in person."

Peck says the experience of meeting customers face to face was invaluable. "We asked people all over the world about their pets and their travel aspirations and quickly realised our business would solve a genuine need," he says. "Pet owners told us they couldn't travel as much as they wanted because they didn't want to leave their pets in a kennel or inconvenience a friend. And potential house-sitters relished the opportunity to travel to places they might not otherwise have considered – while enjoying the therapeutic benefits of spending time with an animal."

Today, TrustedHousesitters is the world's biggest house-sitting website, with nearly half a million members in 140 countries. This year it expects to facilitate more than one million nights of pet sitting. Peck credits frequent travel for this success. He wangled a TV appearance in New Zealand after meeting the friend of a neighbour while house-sitting down under, and met the company's future MD on a paddleboard in Turkey.

"I never start talking to someone because I think they might be somebody useful, but I often meet people who are interested in the business or who want to help to spread the word," he says. "And I've been lucky. While I was backpacking in Nicaragua, I met a man who introduced me to the editor of *Travel + Leisure* – who then featured us in the magazine. And just recently, I was on a train in the USA and got talking to someone who happened to be the head of partnerships for a US bank."

Peck says he relies on the "old school" way of doing business. "Yes, technology is amazing, but it's much better to go to a new market and meet people in person. So much of our world would never have

"Yes, technology is amazing, but it's much better to go to a new market and meet people in person"

come to light if we hadn't been travelling. It's helped us to build personal relationships we couldn't have achieved with an email."

PLAY AWAY

One day Nick Farnsworth, founder of Little Sport Star, a range of cuddly sports-themed toys for babies, received a shipment of "faulty and totally unsellable" products from China – and considered himself lucky. "Ironically, it was the best thing that could have happened to me," he says. "I'd spent all my savings on that shipment, so it forced me to reappraise the international side of my operation. It was the first time I hadn't been to personally visit the manufacturer – and look what had happened."

The experience reminded Farnsworth just how important face-to-face meetings are for growing his business. "Perhaps it's my Yorkshire heritage, but I'll talk to anyone," he says. "You never know who you'll meet. I once got talking to someone who had extensive experience of manufacturing toys while I was standing in a queue for coffee."

Farnsworth has this attitude to thank for the company's success in the USA. Little Sport Star supplies to several major retailers, and travel was a key part of the journey. To crack the market, Farnsworth decided to seek out a US business partner, so he booked a ticket to a nursery industry trade show in Las Vegas.

"I'd tried contacting several companies I wanted to work with by email and phone to arrange meetings, but I'd had no luck,"



GABRIEL SZABO/GIZELIAN

he says. "So I decided to go and stand in front of them and present my brand instead."

Farnsworth took other steps to help him in his quest. "I had a plan, but I also wanted to create some luck," he says. With this in mind, he made sure he was on the same flight as many of his competitors going to the trade show and booked into the hotel where he knew they'd be staying. When he arrived in Las Vegas, his planning paid off. He approached established toy company, Kids Preferred, at the show and kicked off a conversation. "I struck a deal within the first hour," he says. "The trip was essential for helping me take the next big step."

For other companies considering exporting, Farnsworth has the following advice: "Go to meet your contacts. Exporting relies a lot on trust, so you have to get to know the people you're working with. Don't rely on email and Twitter – go out there and shake some hands."

AN INSTRUMENTAL MEETING

"When you're working away in the Yorkshire Dales building pianos, it's quite difficult to get a sense of what's going on in the rest of the world," says Adam Cox, co-owner, with wife Charlie, of award-winning Cavendish Pianos. "So you've got to get out there and meet people who share your passions."

As part of their quest, the Coxes visited the Shanghai Music Fair in October 2013. "What we discovered through talking to locals was that there was a gold rush going on in Shanghai," says Cox. "In China, piano ownership is a phenomenon, it's a hallmark of the rising middle class. Success in the arts is prized as highly as success in science and that means being able to play a musical instrument. And a British piano is the ultimate status symbol."

"We went to see Jin Ling Road in Shanghai, which is an extraordinary traditional street of piano sellers – like something you would have encountered in 1890s London. European manufacturers were descending on the city. It was so exciting, and we realised we needed to do something, but didn't know how to proceed."

"The following year we returned to Frankfurt and met a wonderful Chinese couple called Susan and Rubin Wang, who shared our passion for British pianos and offered to help us distribute the Cavendish in China. They had a piano shop in Beijing and suggested that we took a stand in



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Shanghai in 2014. They said, 'It's now or never to make your mark in China'. So we worked hard to create a show piano for the exhibition. The Chamber of Commerce helped, as did the Musical Instruments Association, who gave us a grant and held our hands the whole way. We had the ideas, but they were able to navigate us through the considerable paperwork."

"We spent a lot of time with Susan and Rubin. They came to Yorkshire to look round our factory and were fascinated by the sheep in the fields and the dry stone walls. It's important to grow a relationship built on friendship. I know that jaded businesspeople might not agree, but it's important to get to know someone really, really well and to have complete and utter trust in them. They were instrumental in us setting up a £1.75m contract to export 500 Cavendish pianos to China over the next five years. I doubt it would have been possible if we'd never bumped into them." ■

JOIN ON BUSINESS

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