

# TAKING BACK CONTROL

Fusion's success has been the result of plenty of hard work and some substantial risk taking – including taking back distribution and selling direct. *MIN's* Hannah McAdams speaks to **Nicole Szekeres** to find out more

Since entering the market in 2008, Fusion has become one of the gig bag-makers of choice for musicians of every genre. Led by a trio of enterprising and creative professionals, Fusion has certainly proved itself a force to be reckoned with. With over 30 distributors worldwide and UK stores jumping on board, we were keen to find out the secrets of their success. We spoke to Fusion's director of marketing and sales Nicole Szekeres, who was happy to share the origins of the company.

"In 2008 one of our co-founders, Amanda Wheatley, was working as a freelance designer for one of the UK's biggest MI bag manufacturers, who like so many businesses at the start of the recession, declared bankruptcy. It was at this time that Amanda, myself and two other co-founders – Wendy Caldwell and Theli Renwick – sat around a dining room table and created Fusion.

"The idea and putting a plan together was the easy part, but then came the hard work. Amanda and I headed out to China to visit a factory, which Amanda had worked with years before while in the sports industry. I am sure they didn't know what hit them – the two of us were trying to explain what we wanted to achieve without taking a breath – but thankfully they agreed to work with us. In short, that's how it all started."

**What was the original concept behind Fusion as a company?**

The original concept was to create a functional bag for the travelling, commuting and

gigging musician. A bag that is comfortable to wear whether walking, cycling or travelling by public transport, hence the reflective materials we use on our products – their purpose is to be seen.

Rather than produce gig bags with a price point benchmark, we decided to go that extra mile with our designs. We use superior materials and add in clever ideas, so our bags give so much value that it's worth the investment on the part of the musician. The idea of attachment bags came from this concept too, giving the musician space to carry extra gear wherever they need to go.

**Your products are quite high-end – how did you manage to make Fusion successful during a recession, when you would expect people to cut back on luxury items?**

We believe that people in general want value for the money they spend, whether in or out of a recession. Our bags give value; you can see and feel it when you handle our products. If musicians spend a lot of money on an instrument and don't want to carry a hard case, why would they want a cheap bag that has no protection at all? Time and time again stores told us that they would not be able to sell our products, as they were too expensive. Yet at the same time, musicians were contacting us asking to buy direct, as our bags were difficult to locate in stores. The market was there, and it has always been there. When the recession hit us, most companies were cutting back on quality to save money, so we did the opposite and invested in an expensive product.

**"TO DISTRIBUTORS AND RETAILERS, FUSION IS ONE OF MANY COMMODITIES THEY SELL, BUT TO US, FUSION IS EVERYTHING AND WE ARE THE BEST PEOPLE TO SELL OUR PRODUCTS"**



The Fusion management team (left, Nicole Szekeres, Amanda Wheatley and Wendy Caldwell)

We have always put ourselves in the shoes of the modern musician on the move, from students to professional players, and to try and eradicate all the pitfalls of travelling with an instrument and reduce unwanted baggage. We have musicians in our team, and we research the market and react to feedback in an effort to constantly improve our products.

**Fusion was created by and is run almost exclusively by women, which is unusual in the music industry. Would you say that Fusion's approach to business is different from other companies' as a result?**

I think that the ideal scenario is to have both men and women in a company, as both sexes bring a different approach to the table. The women of Fusion had one thing in common which drove the company forward, and that was pure determination. Looking back, we may have made more decisions ruled by our hearts rather than our heads, but we just wanted a company that had integrity and a good energy. We weren't afraid to lose some ground to achieve that, maybe that's where we differ.

**So would you say that you've taken a lot of risks to get to this point?**

It's not an exaggeration to say that most things we have done had an element of risk. Starting a business in a recession with no support from the banks was no easy task. We invested all our savings, time and energy to make Fusion a success; there was no room for failure. We just knew what we wanted to achieve and never abandoned our vision, no matter how much negativity was around us.

**You certainly took a big risk this year, making the decision to take back UK distribution and sell direct. What was the motivation for making this change?**

Since the beginning we've been receiving

an enormous amount of enquiries, where musicians wanted to order directly from our website, so in 2014 we decided to handle our own distribution in the UK and Ireland and sell direct from our online store. To distributors and retailers, Fusion is one of many commodities they sell, but to us, Fusion is everything and we are the best people to sell our products.

**Quality of retail, as well as quality of production, must be something that you strive for as a company, then?**

We want to work with stores who believe in the value of selling a high quality product and support them in every way possible. We also want to sell direct and give excellent customer service and product expertise to musicians who buy from us. We have a very clear plan for the way that we want our products promoted and sold. We don't want to see Fusion products for sale on Amazon for example. We see this as an auction site, where retailers continually undercut one another in the race to sell a bag. The only company who make money from Amazon are Amazon themselves, we have to look after our retailers and not the giants.

**You've managed to achieve a lot in just a few short years. What's next for Fusion?**

We started by making bags for brass, woodwind, guitar and cello, and attachment bags. The keyboard, DJ and ukulele bags came at a later stage. The brass and woodwind cases have been an unexpected but incredible success, so much so we are continually adding new models. We've just revamped our whole range of products, which has taken us the biggest part of two years to achieve, so we will take a rest for a little while. We already have some great ideas for the future that we look forward to sampling, so in pure Fusion style, I guess we won't be resting for too long. **MIN**