

Going Global? Keep your Mouth Shut in the Shower.



We were absolutely delighted when Barry Leahey MBE, the Managing Director of Playdale Playgrounds, agreed to speak to us as part of our member profile series.

Playdale are a fantastic example of a successful British company that are taking things to the next level. An industry leader in the manufacture, design and installation of playgrounds, they've embraced the export market and are now winning awards for their achievements in international trade.

Barry kindly took time out of his busy schedule to give us a glimpse into a world of playgrounds and global expansion.

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Speaking to Barry Leahey, you quickly realise you're dealing with someone who is knowledgeable, passionate and blessed with a dry wit. Put simply, it's an enjoyable experience, time well spent. You go away feeling good. All things which tie into Barry's thoughts on the Playdale success story.

“Ambition, a vision to be the best, and hard work. Lots and lots of hard work.”

It's said with a smile, but there's a serious undercurrent. Back in 2008, Playdale were doing well. Firmly established in the UK, the biggest market in Europe for playground equipment, they took a huge step and decided to expand their horizons. A choice that reflects both his and the company's attitude toward business - getting too comfortable can be dangerous. Going global may not have been easy, but it was the right thing to do. Bright futures don't create themselves. What followed has involved careful planning, an enormous amount of effort and a willingness to adapt. One of the things which gives Barry the most satisfaction is how his team have risen to the challenge, developing alongside the growth of the company.

“We've every right to be proud of our people. They make us what we are and, in return, we do our best to help them fulfil their potential. There's nothing better than seeing someone do that.”



Barry has mixed feelings about the current UK trading environment and the inevitable shadow cast by Brexit. Playdale are ready for any outcome, indeed they were used as an example by the DIT, and have made every possible preparation. Whilst something like WTO tariffs are manageable within his sector, Barry acknowledges that it would mean hard times for some in UK manufacturing and spell disaster for others. Like many, he would welcome more direction and leadership from government. His opinion on why Playdale are excelling on the export front echoes his thoughts on how others could do so.

“Imagine the possibilities and then plan how to realise them. Really think about what you're doing. Commit to the concept, but don't jump at the first opportunity.”

These days, 50% of what Playdale Playgrounds manufacture goes abroad. An outstanding achievement which is founded on vision, engaged employees and long hours. They aren't relying on an outdated belief that 'Made in the UK' automatically generates a sense of reverence in those that read it. They're building their own reputation. Meeting people face to face on distant shores and upping the ante with customer service levels. Continually looking to improve quality and meet ever-changing demands.

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My more flippant questions are answered with characteristic humour. Pick one person to add to your team - living, dead, real or fictional? He's happy with who he's got and has no intention of getting into the disinterment business. As far as the best advice he's received, this dry response became an instant favourite.

“Keep your mouth shut in the shower. It's all very well following advice, being careful what you eat and all that. But there's not much point drinking bottled water, if you're going to swallow gallons of local stuff in the shower.”

It might be a joke, but it's one based on reality. Barry has done enough miles to know. Checking into less than salubrious hotels at 4 a.m. after economy flights isn't living it up in the sunshine. It's just work - the same as the guy welding bolts back in the workshop. Horses for courses. Odds are that the scenery in Cumbria is better. When pushed, he likes the idea of disruptors. Those folk that don't accept the status quo and do things to change the equation.

His vision for the future can be summed up by two words: smart growth. On a wider level, beyond his own company, he'd like to see engaged teams as the norm and transparency taking centre stage. He sees the API as having a genuine value. It provides credibility, rules and safety standards, and an environment to discuss concerns. The key to its relevance lies in effectively communicating those concerns to government.

What would I learn if I spent 12 months working with Barry Leahey? A helluva lot about global trade, that there are two fives in the twenty-four hour clock, and travelling light is an artform. Life would be tough, but I think it would be fun. Why? Well, he's just that kind of person.



PLAYDALE PLAYGROUNDS

Playdale playgrounds have become expert in new frontiers. They believe in the essential truth that we live in the era of opportunity. Those new frontiers include next generation products, but also represent the boundaries they're breaking. Success in the USA and Australia means adjusting the customer service response and making flexible working fair. That's not a problem, just part of a new and age-old frontier.

To learn more about Playdale Playgrounds visit: www.playdale.co.uk. If you want something of superior quality for your garden, their domestic website is here at: www.playdalegarden.co.uk