

My Story

One of the most important things I emphasise in the book is that when it comes to your business, it's not about you. So why should you be interested in my story?

Well, I don't tell it because I think you should be particularly interested in me and my life but rather to show you who I am and what my experience has been so that you can decide if where I'm coming from might be relevant to you.

My story as far as a legal career goes starts in about 1989. I can't be exactly sure of the date but it must have been before the college applications had to be submitted in my final year of secondary school, so I'm guessing late '89 or early '90.

While I don't remember the date so well I remember the location vividly. I was driving with my father back from Cork city to Clonakilty. He was driving and I was in the passenger seat. We were driving on one of the back roads that he loves to take, the road from Killumney through Brinny into Kilbrogan in Bandon.

The subject of college choices seemed everywhere and constant at the time, I was pretty ambivalent about what I might do. My father was a solicitor as was my mother; both are now retired. I had no strong feelings about law, if anything I thought it was far too boring and familiar as you're inclined to think anything your parents do is at that age. Anyway, my father in his gentle persuasive way told me about how he had found it an enjoyable and rewarding thing to do as well as being a qualification that was very versatile. And so I thought what the hell, I'll give it a go.

That was it. No passion. No vision. No ambition or struggle. I ended up doing law pretty much by default. I'm not saying that this is a good thing or something of which I am particularly proud, but rather I cite this to show that I wasn't particularly driven by any of these things to enter law in the first place and if you were, I think that is a massive advantage and something that you should treasure and never lose sight of because I've always been slightly envious of the lawyers who have that (but in a good way!)

That's not to say that I didn't develop passion, vision and ambition in the meantime, but rather it wasn't what drove me to be in this job in the first place. My university career was pretty lacklustre, my interest in the law was secondary to having a good time.

But then I hit the real world and an apprenticeship in Dublin that landed me in a really old school office with some great lawyers. Knowing your stuff and what you were talking about really mattered there, not just in some academic way. And this really got me off my arse to learn about what we were doing. I enjoyed that immensely and Dublin in the late nineties was a pretty exciting place to work as a

lawyer, it was the pre-boom boom and there was a lot going on. There were certainly options there but I got married in 2000 and we both decided that we wanted to live where I had grown up in West Cork.

That's a really important part of the story for me. I live and work in a small town where I grew up. If I wanted to really maximise on the potential of my qualifications and abilities when I first qualified I would have stayed in Dublin. That's where the money was, is and always will be. Big law is based in Dublin, small town Ireland is just never going to be able to provide the opportunities for lawyers that a large urban commercial centre will.

I know and believe that the quality of what I do is as good as any lawyer in the country and that my clients are entitled to that; but that being so, how can a small town client base sustain a quality practice? And when I say small town here, I'm not just talking about remote rural towns like the one I live in I'm thinking of the villages that make up our cities where small firms practice but are outside of the glass and steel offices in downtown Big Law in places like the Grand Canal Basin.

Well, when I started in May 2000 my mother had actually been practising in the town for years. Hers was a slightly idiosyncratic practice in that she did it out of a real love and interest in what she was doing and did it completely on her own terms. She had been rearing a young family and had other things going on in her life, so she hadn't worried about building the business in fact she had been very choosy about what she would do at all. As a result the business that I came into in 2000 was small scale despite having existed on paper for thirteen years up to that point. The turnover at the time was less than my salary when I left Dublin. And my salary wasn't big; despite that fact that I worked in a great office, like all good offices they didn't pay junior lawyers who were still learning their craft big bucks.

But it grew. Boy did it grow. Growth from 2000 to 2008 was dramatic. We worked hard, I was young and enthusiastic; eager to develop my skills and my business and willing to take a chance on cases that I thought had potential. I wasn't a golfer or a rugby club guy or a GAA man and I didn't do anything in the local community. My personal time was my own and I didn't want to spend it pressing the flesh hoping for work. I was the small very junior guy in a small town with one big office and two other smaller but much more senior and more established offices.

And so while I didn't network via sport or social activities I didn't advertise either; that was frowned upon (and truth be told I didn't know how to do it and wasted money whenever I did). What we spent on advertising went on a generic Golden Pages ad that usually just generated nuisance calls from the city with people looking for free consultations on cases that weren't worth taking or price buyers

ringing around looking for the cheapest quote on conveyancing. Apart from that the only advertising we did was the occasional panic purchase when a local event would come around looking for you to take an ad in the event programme to support a good cause. We'd dicky up some utterly banal form of words including "proudly supporting" or some such and gladly write the cheque to get our duty done.

But despite all this business grew and grew. And I told myself, look after the clients and the new business will look after itself. That was what I had heard from older and wiser heads including my father who had heard it from his master. It seemed to work.

At least it seemed to keep working until 2008. Each year the numbers got bigger and when I would plan for the future (in so far as I would plan at all) it was based on the assumption that this pattern would just keep on going on the basis that what I was doing was behind it all.

And then in 2008 the music stopped and it turned out there weren't any chairs. While I had been thinking to myself that I was an entrepreneurial and legal genius generating continuous growth for the best part of a decade, it turned out I had just been riding the crest of a debt fuelled property bubble. Who knew?!

2009 was awful. 2010 kind of plateaued and I thought "ok maybe this isn't so bad after all". Then came 2011 and a double dip and involved a drop so fast that you could feel G forces on the way down. The end of 2011 was really bad.

Property had driven everything. Of course this meant conveyancing was good, it was. But the asset values meant that probate was good. The equity in family property meant family law was good. If you had an equity dispute the obvious solution was for one party to buy out the other. And property was liquid, mortgage finance was ridiculously easy to arrange. This meant that there was always a transaction coming down the line where you could get paid. You didn't have to worry about credit control, there'd be a sale or re-financing down the line where the money would flow, you'd get paid for the work done in the past and there'd be a transaction fee into the bargain.

And I'm not talking about any of the whacky or dodgy stuff that went on in the boom, that's for another book. I'm just talking about the levels of business that we became used to and the way in which the money in the economy from property greased the wheels of many other practice areas at the time. When this money left the building, all of these practice areas suddenly just ground to a halt.

In the midst of it all I hadn't been a completely innocent bystander in everything that went on; to coin that terrible phrase: I too partied. If I had been able to rein everything in and wait for things to get better that might have been an option. But I

had nice big mortgages of my own to service along with a young family to support who I couldn't just ask to put growing up on hold until the economy improved; relentlessly month by month the cash just kept flowing out the door.

But while the years from 2009 onwards were incredibly difficult in business, looking back I wouldn't give them up for anything. It was like someone poured a bucket of cold water over me. I couldn't keep doing things they way I had always done things; something had to change.

So during those years I started to read, watch, listen and learn. I soaked up everything I could about business and how we did things and spent pretty much all of my waking hours thinking about nothing else. And there were good ideas and there were better ways of doing things, none that were guaranteed to provide overnight success or to put cash in the bank account this month but the old ways weren't doing that anyway.

So then I started to implement and to change, to see what worked and what didn't. I did more of what worked and stopped doing what didn't work after having given it a reasonable chance to develop and prove itself.

And the conclusion that I have come to after all of that is that it is possible to do what I had always wanted to; to work as a solicitor serving the local community in which I live; providing value to those I serve.

If you're interested in doing something similar, then I wrote the book for you.

When I first started out on my own I travelling to a Law Society seminar on setting up in practice. It was in Athlone and I travelled across the country from west Cork to find out what I needed to know. What I took from that seminar was everything that I couldn't or shouldn't do. The whole thrust of the content was to reinforce what we were required by regulation not to do. Solicitors accounts regulations; solicitors advertising regulations; professional negligence and other good reasons not to do things tended to be the predominant thing on the agenda. I recall one excellent slot by the great Charlie Russell which included some tips on premium pricing and business planning as the only positive start-up business advice provided in the session.

But that was years ago back in 2000. Things must have moved on you say. Well, at the time of writing this I went to the Law Society library and website and looked for everything current on setting up in practice in Ireland. The content has been updated, but the thrust of the information is exactly the same: without Charlie's input who has since retired from practice.

Of course we need regulation in the profession and anyone setting up in practice needs to be familiar with them. Intimately familiar with them. That is your stock in

trade and if you don't know it inside out, you shouldn't be allowed out on your own with a practising cert in the first place. But what about everything else? And there is actually a regulatory dimension to what I am talking about: if legal practice doesn't have a viable business model it creates a systemic risk that solicitors accounts regulations will be breached. Who do you think is more likely to be tempted to dip into the client account, one who can't pay the bills or once who has a thriving practice? Not that I'm for a moment justifying client account fraud, but you just can't ignore the fact that profitable businesses don't have the motivation to bother.

In recent years I have become consumed with marketing and business development for solicitors and the book draws together my study and experience in that area for your benefit.

While the only important measure of any of this are the results it has produced under the bonnet in a real life Real Law firm, there have been some more externally visible successes too. One of these came when our firm's website which was designed entirely along the principles outlined for you here won Legal Website of the Year at the Irish Law Awards 2014. Another was when I was shortlisted as one of four Marketers of the Year at Ben Glass's Great Legal Marketing Summit 2014 in Arlington, Virginia, where I was asked to present the results of our success to over 350 lawyers from all across the USA, Canada and the rest of the world. Another was when our firm won Munster Law Firm of the Year (under 5 solicitors) at the Irish Law Awards 2015.

The reason I wrote the book is that I passionately believe in a better and brighter future for Irish Real Lawyers in private practice.

That is why I have shared the benefit of my research and experience with you.