

## The Personal Touch Has Been A Key Factor For Willows Ingredients



**Whether it's supplying collagen for shampoos or sourcing crickets as a source of protein, David Scrivens tells how Willows Ingredients in Ashford is all about the personal touch, writes Conall O Móráin.**

Part of the premise and promise of shopping at a TK Maxx store is searching for that one piece of treasure among many pieces of rubble.

It's the same when looking for companies to join us at the That Great Business Show. We are always on the lookout for diamond businesses not already spotted by others.

And lo! on episode 98 of the podcast we came across **David Scrivens** (61), co-founder of [Willows Ingredients](#) in Wicklow, and what a jewel that turned out to be. His family-owned business is an international distributor of raw materials for the food, healthcare, sports and animal nutrition industries — and that final bit of the enterprise threw up one hell of a surprise.

English-born, bred and ‘businessed’ in the West Midlands, David set up his Irish operation in 2007, having met his Irish wife and co-founder Carmelia. To be accurate, the couple had deep industry knowledge before establishing their own venture, but it still was a leap of faith to go out on their own.

David recalls: “Because we had both operated within the food pharmaceutical and chemical sector for many years, we felt that the opportunity was just right. We identified a market for joint care products, and we started with the support of [Bank of Ireland](#). I must give them a mention because we presented a business plan and they got us started with a €25,000 loan and a €10,000 overdraft.”

## BUSINESS BULLETIN

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Willows Ingredients imports product from all over the world and distributes to some of the leading brands in both human and animal nutrition manufacturing in Europe and North America. Its range of dietary supplements and functional ingredients include amino acids, joint care products, vitamins, botanicals and ergogenic aids, as well as protein whey, creatine monohydrate, taurine and caffeine.

The company also sells branded and unbranded products in the pet food, aqua, beef, dairy, poultry and pork segments. Turnover in 2020 was €17.1m.

“At the start we had some very good customers who put faith in us,” says Scrivens. “We dedicated ourselves to the success of the business. This was our livelihood, and if we did not put the effort in there was no livelihood. It’s a very simple fact of life.”

The drive to build a business can come from the founders, but when it’s a family business with three adult children part of the team, the dynamic can be different. There can be multiple views about strategy, something that can lead to potential disagreements. However, David and Carmelia along with the family seem to have found an answer to an issue all family firms can face.

“We’ve had our moments, we’ve had our disagreements, but we’ve been very successful at maintaining our personal relations with the common goal of growing the business,” David explains. “It has been a team effort. I have a business coach who I’m able to turn to. Sometimes when you’re leading a business of 30 people and multitasking, you can’t see the wood for the trees.”

Meeting David Scrivens in person, he comes across as a person who exudes trust. And that personality trait has also helped the company’s success. In the early years, a small SME based in Ashford was taking on large and long-established international companies in its sector.

Gaining the trust of customers was vital to Willows Ingredients’ progress, and David decided that his company’s ‘calling card’ was personal attention.

This was at a time that the world was entering a recession after the financial crash. “Most of our rivals were cutting back on staff. Where there had been two or three people in a department, now there was only one. When customers asked a question, they wanted a response within 24 or 48 hours. If we didn’t have the response, we asked for more time. Because we were guaranteeing the answers, those customers trusted us.”





A CRICKET'S CARBON FOOTPRINT IS MINUSCULE RELATIVE TO COWS, PIGS AND CHICKENS

Willows Ingredients is active in Ireland, the UK, Belgium, China, Germany, Portugal, and the Netherlands. Vietnam is another 'country of interest' for Willows, as a source for fish or marine collagen, used in the worldwide beauty industry. Willow Ingredients has customers who produce collagen 'shots' and collagen shampoos. So why, I asked, would manufacturers not bypass Willows and go directly to the supplier?

"We offer a service importing products, made from animal origin, into the UK and European markets. It's complicated in terms of regulations and paperwork. If you are a brand selling organisation, you don't necessarily possess the skills or the knowledge to handle that side of the business. We offer sourcing, logistics and warehousing, and customers want to be supplied on a just-in-time basis."

Finding alternative sources of sustainable food and nutrition is also a Willows Ingredients mission. Towards the end of my interview, David Scrivens presented me with a bowl of 30 ground-up crickets to eat. Truth be told, the taste was similar to a bran breakfast cereal — i.e. dull, with no big drama after all.

Cricket is favoured in Asia as a source of protein and is used extensively in biscuits, bars and pasta. A cricket's carbon footprint is minuscule relative to cows, pigs and chickens. Sourcing and supplying cricket is part of David's future business vision, and Willows recently inked a big supply deal with Cricket One Asia.

"As the world grows, we have to look at alternative protein sources. There are plant proteins that are very popular but now we have to look at insect proteins too," he says.

Securing EU approval for this food ingredient took three years and outlay of €200,000 for interactions with European Food Standards Agency. Next on the Willows agenda is black flies for use in pet food.

And so to the future. "What's our dream? Our dream and our intention and our strategy is for Willows to grow into the alternative protein space and be a large global player in this market — and hopefully make some money."

*Photo: David Scrivens and the Willow Ingredients commercial team. Conall O Móráin produces and presents the weekly That Great Business Show podcast.*