



Peter Groves

General Manager at The Good Whey Co.

Upbeat, the dairy protein drink made by Hertfordshire based The Good Whey Co. has achieved a turnover of over £4m in just over two years. Nigel Wright caught up with General Manager Peter Groves who explained how creating a fun and inspiring place to work has helped build the brand to where it is today.

You left a twenty six year blue-chip career to take up the reins at The Good Whey Co. What was it about the business and the opportunity that made it attractive to you?

When I was at Mars I was always inspired by the stories of the founders building global brands. When Upbeat approached me in 2013, it still hadn't established a presence in the market and I immediately identified it as an opportunity to actually build a global brand myself.

So the combination of innovation, entrepreneurial spirit and a brand that really excited me was too much to turn down. I mean, how often do you get the chance to create a totally new category? I am also very fortunate that we are a private company, with owners who are passionate and offer a great level of support.

Together we want to help consumers live healthier lives through the benefits of dairy nutrition. Everybody needs protein and deserves great tasting products; Upbeat offers health, taste and convenience in abundance.

Upbeat was originally targeted at 'busy people interested in a healthy diet' but its growth has been driven by sales to women who are increasingly turning to nutrient-rich foods instead of fatty snacks. Why is that?

I will spare you the science lesson, but we all need protein - men, women, young and old. Protein is the building block for healthy skin, bones, teeth and hair; but most of us, because of the busy, frantic lifestyles we lead, don't always make the right snacking choices and get the protein that we need in our diet. Upbeat is aimed at anyone who is looking to take care of themselves and knows the simple truth – that to live longer we need to eat well and keep active.



Image: Peter Groves, General Manager at The Good Whey Co.



We actually use the tag-line 'a bit of extra willpower in a bottle' in our marketing because the product genuinely helps consumers avoid unhealthy snacks and keeps them fuller for longer. It's fair to say that a lot of our communication has been directed towards women because (sorry fellas) they just get it; but ultimately, we remain focused on helping busy people make the right choices and feel more Upbeat.

The brand is now featured in 4,500 stores across the UK, including all the major supermarkets. Are you investigating other channels or markets?

That number increases every day, and we have received great support from many retailers, not just the grocers. We are available at Boots, in the petrol channel, travel outlets, independent retailers – you name it. As a ready-to-drink, on-the-go product, we want to be listed as broadly as possible. Basically, anywhere consumers gather we want to be there.

Upbeat is currently focused on the UK and Irish markets, but we're sure opportunities for growth exist in other markets too. I was lucky to have worked in the emerging central European markets during the 1990s, and I can't wait to use my experience to grow Upbeat internationally.

Did you anticipate your success or has it been a surprise?

We listened to consumers, built a plan and worked hard. It's always best to strive for success but remain paranoid that it's not going to happen.

Upbeat was the first of its kind but, as expected, other established companies such as Danone are now entering the whey protein drink segment. How are you different? How will you stay ahead of the competition?

Our brand is unique, that always helps, and new entrants coming into the market is never a bad thing because it expands the market and keeps us on our toes.

Mark Neville is obviously the founder of The Good Whey Co and is still involved in the business through Volac. Do you work alongside Mark? Does he have an influence over the direction of the brand?

As one of the fathers of the Upbeat brand, Mark still has a say in its direction. He is great to work for because he's passionate about the brand and really supportive of what we do. I also have a great marketing team who rise to any challenge. Do we always agree? No. Do we always agree to get on with it? Yes.

You've worked alongside a variety of creative agencies including The Independent Orchestra, 7Stars, Frank PR, Disrupt and Velo Marketing. Moving forward, will you maintain these relationships or gradually bring skills in house?

Firstly, as a small brand, we will always spend money wisely. However, we are also smart enough to know when we need external help because we don't have all of the answers. We currently work with a great set of agencies who share our passion for growing Upbeat and I expect those relationships to continue moving forward. There are no plans to build a big internal team.

Where do you focus marketing activity?

One of our biggest challenges is making limited funds go far, so we have to be extremely creative in order to build a genuine connection with customers. We drive the Upbeat van and get out there and meet as many people as possible. We attend events such as the 'Race for Life', we do a fair amount of sampling and give away Upbeat to people so they can spread the word.

We have been on TV too, with a fun creative ad that really raised awareness and drove sales. A key part of our marketing is actually raising awareness of protein, because it's a bit of a forgotten nutrient. We also focus a lot on showing people the benefits of Upbeat and how it can fit into their lives.

You've successfully built a team of experienced FMCG commercial people. What's the secret behind your talent attraction strategy?

Certainly the biggest challenge so far has been finding the right talent. When I joined I needed to quickly establish a team of vibrant, committed and enthusiastic people all inspired by the opportunity to help others make healthier choices. From the outset, I've tried to make this a really fun and inspiring place to work. No one wears a suit, and I've made it absolutely clear that you must bring your sense of humour to work with you.



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We describe ourselves as 'Upfront, Up for it and Uptimistic' which means we are open and honest, passionate about building a brand and are always positive. I believe that everyone must share in the 'Uptimism' and that means getting people excited about what we are trying to do here.

We always make sure recruiters visit our offices and get a sense of the Upbeat vibe and understand our vision, so they can then share this with prospective candidates. If we can bring the excitement of working here to life, then we will always be an attractive employer. We now have an exceptionally talented team, where everyone is completely clear about and committed to the role they're playing in building the Upbeat brand.

How do you get the best your of your teams?

By not complicating things, but rather keeping objectives simple and focussed. I like to be clear about what we are trying to achieve and make sure that people are having fun doing their job. I never underestimate the importance of having fun and working hard.

How have you found the transition from working for 'big corporates' to managing a smaller, agile business? What advice would you give to other people looking to make a similar career move?

I was very lucky during my career at Mars because I was given the opportunity to manage a number of smaller teams focused on emerging markets. That team ethos is so important and you build really long lasting friendships. So the transition to Upbeat was actually very easy for me. I would recommend joining a small business to anyone who has learnt the ropes in a big corporate firm. You can take all of the skills you've learnt throughout your career and use every single one of them every day - it's incredibly fulfilling.

Which brands do you look to for inspiration?

The plucky challengers and the ones that inspire brand love through clear consumer insight like Dove, Harley Davidson, M&Ms and, obviously, Innocent Drinks.

