

# Cult following

Scott Magill, founder of the South Wales doughnut and coffee chain Whocult, tells **Eszter Gurbicz** how he's using branding and social media to grow his business

Lots of pink and black, custom posters, neon lights and eye-catching oversized doughnuts. That's the view greeting the customers of Whocult Coffee and Donuts, which opened its fifth store – at the Royal Arcade in Cardiff – in April. Talking to *Insider* at the new outlet, Magill says within four weeks it had become his most popular location.

"I think we offer a lot more than your average coffee shop – we're creating an experience," says Magill, who started the business back in 2019. Whocult, originally a small coffee shop accompanying his streetwear business, WhoClo in Bridgend, boomed during the pandemic. Since then, it has been expanding rapidly, with a personnel of 32, and its own bakery to produce those big doughnuts.

Without a hospitality background, Magill had to learn how to run the business on the job. "I've learned that branding is everything, followed by your product. If you've got a good brand and a good product, it's hard to go wrong," he says.

One of the key elements of creating Whocult was its logo and the brand colours. "All our stores are pink and black," he says. "When you go into our stores, I want it to feel like Whocult, just like when you go into a Starbucks. I think some businesses get a bit confused and each store will be too different from the last. So, have a strong logo, pick your colours and stick to them."

Magill also put a lot of effort into the design of the packaging. "It's often overlooked in companies, but packaging is a massive thing for us," he says. The company has its own coffee cups and boxes, which Magill updates regularly. His latest idea was to add a 'peel here' sticker to the boxes, giving customers a chance to win a doughnut or coffee. "It's cheap and it's fun. It only added 2p to the price of our boxes, and in the grand scheme of things, it's good for the customer experience," he explains.

Social media also played a role in building Whocult. "We would be nothing without Instagram. It's literally the backbone of this company," he says. "We decided to give it our



Scott Magill

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all and it paid off in the long run." He posts on Whocult's Instagram account at 10am every day, and his staff constantly update their stories from each location. The stores are open seven-days-a-week, so Magill says he has been doing this work "every day for the last five years".

Each social media post should be well-lit and look "on-brand". The team also does a photoshoot every Thursday to create the content for the following week. Indeed, Whocult's Instagram account feels like an extension of its stores, and it now has more than 40,000 followers. "It's constant word of mouth," says Magill. "Customers visit the

stores which they then post and they tag us."

He also used advertising ahead of the opening in Cardiff, as he wanted to create a noise around the event. With his fifth store running successfully, Magill is now planning ahead. "We've now got five stores on our own, no backing, no funding," he says. "The plan is to rest for six months and focus on the stores we have."

His next project will be upgrading and refitting his shops in Bridgend and Barry. He also wants to expand the capacity of the bakery, which is now "struggling to keep up" with demand.

While Magill would like to open in more locations, he says it is not that easy. "As much as we would love to just open shops quick and fast, it's difficult," he adds. "Being independent, we have to do everything on our own."

Eventually, Magill would love to bring his business to Swansea as well as to England, where Bristol and Bath might be the first places to see Whocult on their streets.



# What's on the menu?

The owner-managers of two hospitality businesses share contrasting experiences of operating in a challenging sector with **Eszter Gurbicz**

Forty Four Group is an independent, family-run business which was started by Natalie Isaac and her brothers, Owen and Tom Morgan back in 2002. It now comprises venues including Bar 44 tapas bars in Cardiff, Penarth and Bristol; the restaurant Asador 44; a hotel, Parador 44; and an online portal, Mercado 44. Asked what it is like to operate in the hospitality sector, director Isaac says: "It's the toughest it's been since I began, it's even harder than Covid was."

Hospitality businesses in Wales have seen increases in their costs in recent years. The latest one came in April, when the business rate relief in Wales was cut. At the same time, the National Living Wage went up. UK-Hospitality Cymru, the trade body, estimates those increases will add a further £143m to the sector's wage bill.

"We have no issue to pay great staff great money, that's not our problem here," says Isaac. But there are knock-on effects: "Our wage bill has gone up hugely this month, because you can't just put up the minimum wage. There has to be an increase for every employee."

Apart from the rising costs of business rates and payroll, companies have seen an increase in food prices due to inflation and rising gas and electricity bills. Many also need to pay high interest rates on loans they took out during the pandemic to cover their bills while they were closed. "We're paying



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**Natalie Isaac**  
Forty Four Group

9 per cent interest for something that was beyond our control," Isaac says.

The sector has also faced a shortage of qualified hospitality professionals. Isaac says that, while there are always lot of students looking to work, qualified staff such as chefs, sommeliers and managers are

essential to provide a high level of service. "There's a huge shortage. A lot of people have either left the industry or have moved home after Brexit," she says. As a result, recruiting staff has been challenging.

By contrast, Scott Magill, founder of the doughnut and coffee business Whocult (featured on page 13), says he has been lucky with recruitment so far. "I have heard horror stories of other companies struggling to find staff, but I think because we've built such a cool brand, we find that people want to work here," he says. Magill, who started the business in 2019, says Whocult can have as many as 500 people to apply for a job in a day, so "it's been surprisingly easy to hire".

Despite the difficulties faced by some hospitality businesses, Whocult has done well since the pandemic. Magill originally started the business as a sister brand to his streetwear company, WhoClo, "but it quickly became its own monster", he says. When Covid hit, Magill decided to shift his focus fully on Whocult, and started doing doughnut deliveries. A time period which was difficult for many businesses saw his brand grow. "That propelled us a few years ahead," Magill says.

However, being independent and having no outside investment means growing the business was not easy. Magill tries to run his company organically: "Every penny I've made with Whocult has just been thrown back into the business," he says.

With five stores across South Wales, Magill says Whocult is not planning to slow down, and he is looking into expanding the business further. "We've got a great team and our own bakery, so it is time to just try and push more stores open without losing that quality," he says.

For her part, Isaac says Forty Four Group is now focused on "getting through to the other side". She says: "It's a rollercoaster, but we're very determined people and we have to try everything in our power to weather the storm, keep the team happy, the customers happy, and hopefully we'll still be here for another year."





# Train to retain

Contract manufacturer Philtronics has set up an academy to boost skills and keep staff on board. Chief executive Simon Pritchard tells **Eszter Gurbicz** about the thinking behind it

Helping staff to develop can play a key role in retaining talent. With that idea in mind, contract electronics manufacturer Philtronics has launched its in-house training scheme, the Philtronics Academy. Simon Pritchard, chief executive of the Aberdeen-based business, tells *Insider*: "There's not a short answer to retention. There isn't a magic wand that we can all wave that makes that happen, but you've got to start somewhere. Starting this academy and helping employees to upskill and develop in their roles is part of this."

"It's about creating an environment where people feel that their opinions are valued."

Pritchard, who has been leading Philtronics for 20 years, says: "You could argue that if you threw enough remuneration at somebody that would retain them. That's exactly what the industry's doing at this point, it's pushing the wages up."

For Philtronics, employee retention is also about creating a long-term strategy rooted in opportunities and company culture. Speaking after *Insider's* Made in Wales round table discussion in Cardiff, Pritchard says: "It's about creating an environment where people feel that their opinions are valued, what they do is worthwhile, their personal growth is being considered, and they have the flexibility between work, life and family."

Their academy provides training in a variety of skills. These include core competencies in electronics such as crimping, wire preparation and soldering, as well as soft skills such as team building, leadership and mentoring. The courses are open for every employee, from cleaners and van drivers to members of the executive team.



Simon Pritchard talks to Eszter Gurbicz

Their goal is for everyone to be able to get something out of the academy's sessions, according to Pritchard.

One of the opportunities the academy has provided is a semiconductor leadership training session for managers, supervisors and senior team. The company paired up with a business psychologist, who runs a course that teaches emotional intelligence. According to Pritchard, this opened people's minds to different ways of thinking.

Training staff comes at a cost, and trained staff members can still leave. But Pritchard is comfortable with that.

"If their philosophy is developing and their next step is to grow in another business then so be it," he says.

"We embrace that. But by that point there is a conveyor belt of other people behind them. So yes, there are costs

"There are costs associated with training, but it also costs not to train your staff."

associated, but I think it also costs not to train your staff."

Eventually, Philtronics' goal is to change the perception of what working in manufacturing means. Pritchard says: "People think going to university is the only way to get on to progression pathways. It's not."

Working in a factory should not be a barrier to career progression. With the launch of its academy, Pritchard hopes that Philtronics can create pathways for everyone and make sure employees can "become the best they can be".