

Business Spotlight: Ovenu

Business Owner Rik Hellewell on delivering the ultimate oven clean - that's as good on the environment as it is for its customers.

It is 1993/4 and Rik Hellewell challenges a group of chemical engineers to make caustic soda with no caustic soda in it...

If you haven't come across caustic soda before, it is a chemical that is a staple of the cleaning industry.

✓ It is the most powerful and strongest cleaners available

✓ It is cheap to produce

✓ It is cheap to ship

✓ It is cheap to buy

✓ It works brilliantly

✗ It might not come as a shock, that it is also extremely harmful to the planet and to people's health.

And that's what motivated Rik to find a better solution.

Ovenu's Head Office Support team at their 2023 AGM

Building a Better Business

The most dangerous 7 words in business might just be 'We have always done it this way'. Rik simply set out to create the ultimate oven cleaning experience for his customers and his staff. That meant prioritising their safety and caustic soda is nasty. It is asking this one question that led him to

- 1. Develop a suite of environmentally-friendly cleaning products**
- 2. Which they manufacture in the UK**
- 3. While keeping as much of their supply chain local to these shores**

When Rik set out to create the ultimate oven clean experience, the only option available at the time was the 'spray & pray' service using this caustic soda chemical. Rik didn't set out to save the planet. In fact his motives were primarily one of safety - how to keep his team and customers safe. The chemical engineers took on his challenge and developed a suite of water-based cleaning agents they now use across their entire service offering.

"There's one way to do anything and that's properly." — Rik Hellewell's family motto

Rik says his speciality is 'having the ability to identify where common sense could/should prevail and tending to get things done' - his Yorkshire roots shine through despite spending the last 5 decades in Wokingham in Berkshire. Developing a range of cleaning products that did not require special breathing apparatus and that didn't strip skin off seemed like a common sense thing to do. The byproduct: a cleaning agent that also doesn't cause harm to the planet.

Rik explains that we use chemically-based products in everything. Even water is a chemical material known as H2O but in his experience, when you break materials back into their chemical components, you find anything is possible - with a sprinkle of imagination. The challenge is that caustic soda is just so cheap but Ovenu has nevertheless found a way to manufacture their products in the UK, prioritise local suppliers and remain competitive in the market.

There's no doubt, Rik was ahead of his time - and still is given the cleaning industry's continued reliance on caustic soda. He made this happen before the world wide web, relying both on his network and Wokingham Library, decades before corporate Environment, Social and Governance plans (ESG) and Impact Reports became all the rage. Interestingly the 90s was when John Elkington first introduced the notion of a triple bottom line: where a business model can account for people, planet and profit.

Clean & Green

Rik admits that while clean & green is something that runs through the soul of his company, it is not something they lead with in their marketing...yet. He does see a growing awareness from customers but believes customers are still choosing Ovenu because they offer the ultimate oven clean where everything in an oven, down to each screw, is cleaned and brought back to life - saving many ovens from early graves.

With sustainability now becoming ever more mainstream, having such a strong differentiator, combined with 30 years of 5 star service, this must surely be Ovenu's moment. Their impact on people is equally as impressive given that Ovenu operate a franchise model. The network of business owners that are part of the Ovenu family have a myriad of backgrounds and an age range of between 20 to 70. Most have never been entrepreneurs before so Ovenu has not only prioritised safety, they have made it possible for 90 franchisees to become entrepreneurs in their own right - giving them a work/life balance, rewarding careers and financial freedom.

Duty of Care

Rik credits his strong values to his upbringing thanks to his very caring and knowledgeable parents who instilled that "there's one way to do anything and that's properly". His grandfather, a Justice of the Peace (modern day magistrates) used to say

“near enough isn’t good enough” and that motto has driven Rik’s determination to take his duty of care very seriously.

Some of Ovenu’s decisions seem frankly pioneering - they replaced their plastic packaging to cardboard boxes 12 years ago - but not because of the impact of plastic pollution but because plastic can be very brittle and their products could survive transit better when not in plastic containers.

As Rik now sets his sights on achieving full UK coverage, his biggest challenge is what seems to be a fall from grace of the franchise model but he points to the advent of AI as game-changing technology for providing access to a worldwide pool of talent, knowledge especially about raw materials from anywhere in the world. But doing things differently does take a little imagination, staying curious and asking new questions.

If you want to learn more about Ovenu or about going green with an oven clean, head over to Ovenu’s website.

Conversation Highlights

- 💡 Business leaders can use their position and influence for positive impact**
- 💡 A positive impact on the environment can be a byproduct and not your motivation**
- 💡 Ovenu’s motivations came from its owner’s concern for safety - for employees and customers.**
- 💡 The cost of doing the right thing is not always prohibitively more**
- 💡 Businesses need to ask more questions and do more research**

Rik Hellewell is the Founder & Managing Director of Ovenu and a member of the Approved Franchise Association. He established Ovenu in 1993, cleaning 4,000 ovens and proving his concept over five years before starting the franchise business. Since then he has helped over 200 franchisees achieve their dreams of running successful businesses of their own. Established for over 25 years, the Ovenu concept has proven successful across the UK, New Zealand, Australia and the USA.

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