

In The Bag

Global Success Story for Irish company

A small Irish company based in Sandyford, Dublin is taking the world by storm. Stronghold Packaging Distributors and its sister company TS O'Connor, are the creators behind the now famous and hugely successful 'Original GreenBag' that graces homes and shopping trolleys all over Ireland and throughout the world.

This burgeoning global success started life thirty years ago as small wrapping company supplying the trade with paper, adhesive tapes & twine. In the late 1970's, James O'Connor, current Managing Director and son of company founder Tony, joined the business just as the retail industry was moving towards polythene bags. TS O'Connor began providing branded plastic bags to retail outlets throughout the country and did so with great success for many years.

However, in the late 1990's rumours were afoot that soon the ubiquitous plastic bag was to become a thing of the past. Faced with an ever-growing litter crisis, the government of the day proposed to levy a tax on all plastic bags given at point of sale. No longer could retail outlets simply give away plastic bags with their products, from early 2002 it was proposed that consumers would have to pay for them.

Would a tax deter people from buying plastic bags for their shopping purchases? And if so, what was the alternative? Leading business man and supermarket owner at the time, Senator Fergal Quinn, felt that consumers would be more likely to buy a bag which could be reused every week. A consumer habit-changing move, but one which would start a nationwide and worldwide trend towards the use of reusable bags.

One of Quinn's management team contacted James O'Connor and commissioned him to source a reusable bag that customers could buy and then bring with them on each return visit to their shops. The bag would need to be strong enough to hold heavy items such as milk or plastic bottles but not overly big so that it would be cumbersome to use. James sourced various materials around the globe and eventually settled on a sample bag made from non-woven polypropylene, a strong and versatile fabric used primarily in the medical industry up to that point. An initial sample run of 1,000 bags was produced and trialled in Superquinn's Ballinteer store over a six-month period. Taking on board customers' feedback and with some minor modifications and adjustments, the famous "Original GreenBag" was born. Superquinn immediately placed an order for a million bags.

The 'Original GreenBag' was the first of its type in the world and with the arrival of the plastic bag tax on 4th March 2002 the invention proved insightful as consumers all over the country shunned plastic bags and rapidly made the switch to the reusable bag.

The bag was to prove a popular item for shops too. Up to then stores had been providing free plastic bags to customers at a cost of millions per year, now customers were buying their own bags, making them a profit centre in their own right.



The Superquinn connection proved to be a profitable one for TS O'Connor. Not only did they supply Superquinn with all their 'Original GreenBag' requirements but soon after the launch, Fergal Quinn introduced them to the Payless chain in South Africa who were impressed with the Original GreenBag concept and placed their own order. Overnight the company became an international supplier and the story was only just beginning.

The company took a stand at the global retail trade fair, Euroshop, in Dusseldorf in 2005. Held every three years the fair brings together more than 1,600 exhibitors from some 50 countries, in what has become known as the premier innovations platform and trend barometer for the retail industry. It proved to be a hugely successful in the development of the Original GreenBag. At the show, the company made contact with retailers from over 43 countries interested in the 'Original GreenBag'.

12 million reusable bags annually

At around the same time a leading North American distributor made contact with TS O'Connor about their "Original GreenBag" programme. The company was planning to launch a 'Bring your Own Bag' (BYOB) campaign in Canada and the US in early 2006 and were impressed with TS O'Connor, their innovative products, dedication to quality and strong associations with leading suppliers in China and the Far East. At this point, James and Chloe decided to set up a new company, Stronghold Packaging Distributors Ltd (Stronghold) to manage developing trends and sales of reusable bags worldwide. The Canadian company appointed Stronghold as the official supplier for the BYOB programme, sourcing quality products and researching innovative new reusable packaging concepts. Stronghold now supply 'Original GreenBags' to many of North America's biggest supermarket chains such as Krogers, A&P, Overwaitea, Shoppers Drug Mart, Topco and Top Value. In addition, their Original GreenBag has helped one Canadian town, Leaf Rapids, become the first town in North America to ban all plastic bags.



While TS O'Connor continues to manage the domestic market and its impressive paper bag business, Stronghold has overseen the ever growing international rollout of the Original GreenBag. The company now exports over 12 million reusable bags annually to North America, the EU, South Africa and the UK.

In 2006, Stronghold were approached with a proposal to source and supply a bag containing 20% to 30% Recycled Post Consumer Polyester (RPCP) - i.e. items that consumers have already used such as PET plastic bottles and food containers.

Stronghold, liaising with their partners and suppliers in China, put extensive resources into the research and development of sourcing the ideal material. Six months later, after many visits and extensive sampling, the right combination of suppliers were found to produce material that met Stronghold's high quality standards and resulted in bag that is made entirely from Recycled Post Consumer PET (RPCP).

RPCP involves taking bundles of post consumer PET bottles, cleaning them and cutting them into flakes. They're subsequently melted and re-extruded into fibres. This fibre when produced resembles a fleece like material and is often used in clothing and padded jackets. The fibre is stitched flat with polyester thread, creating a strong fabric suitable for use as a shopping bag. Initial trials were very positive and a new, even greener, bag was born.

The current RPCP bags are the most environmentally friendly bags to be found in the world and will enable consumers and retailers alike to continue reducing their carbon footprint. UK supermarket chain Morrisons will launch their Stronghold Original RPCP FabBag in early 2008, making them the first major outlet in the EU to do so.

Stronghold will publically launch their Original RPCP FabBag at Euroshop in February 2008, where they are almost guaranteed to be met with a huge wave of interest and orders from all over the world. To cope with this expected global demand for their premium products, Stronghold are in the process of establishing an office in Shanghai which is close to their suppliers, and will enable them to ensure their products remain of the highest quality and where they can continue to extend their position as one of the global providers of environmentally friendly products.