Case study: Rockabill Seafood

The Price family has been involved in the fishing industry for over 30 years. Bill Price became a fisherman, like his father, and bought a truck so he could purchase and sell fish. Later, he secured a boat: the first of fourteen trawlers owned by the company today. In 1983, Bill established Rockabill Seafood Ltd. and built the company’s processing plant in Balbriggan in 1998. The plant processes shellfish from live to frozen for retail own brand and company brand, “Taste of the Sea”. The founder’s son, Alan, has driven internationalisation in the company which is now almost 100% exports. The Rockabill Group has nine operations including three processing plants nationwide and a crab factory in England. The group is an exemplar of internationalisation, exporting to 24 countries, and selling to 200 suppliers globally.

Interview with Bill and Alan Price
Father and son joint managing directors of Rockabill Seafood Ltd.

Family Involvement

The founder Bill, and his son Alan, co-manage the Rockabill Group. There are two other sons who work as employees in non-managerial roles. From a young age, Alan became involved in the business. He spent considerable time on the fishing vessels learning the skills and knowledge of the industry, just as Bill had from his father. Once Alan began working in the business full time, he introduced ideas for business growth and success. “I wanted to grow and expand the business. I asked for a fridge van as my first vehicle so I could buy cockles for the company.” Bill welcomed the ambition Alan showed. “It (Rockabill) grew from strength to strength based on Alan’s involvement.”
Horizontal integration through exports has been a major strategic feature of Rockabill Seafood Ltd. The company was named “Seafood Exporter of the Year” at the Export Industry Awards 2013. With 200 international suppliers against only ten Irish, Rockabill is almost completely export driven. The reason for this is due to Irish consumer tastes, says Alan: "Irish consumption of seafood per annum is 16 kilos per adult compared to 70 kilos on the continent”. In 2000, the company embarked on its first international venture by selling fish to Spain. Alan drove international growth, with the company now supplying to 24 countries globally.

Later, BIM (Bord Iascaigh Mhara) approached the company to arrange a joint marketing venture in China with another Irish seafood company. In 2012, Rockabill and Atlanfish joined together to target Chinese exports and established a new brand, Atlantic Gold. Rockabill sells live product to their international markets, including €6m worth of live product into Hong Kong. “We’re developing the Dublin Bay prawns over there (China)” says Alan. Alan and Bill quickly learnt the nuances of the Chinese market, including consumer preferences and price setting, finding that when they first branched out there the “competition between companies was cut-throat”.

In another important international move, Alan and Bill bought a crab factory in Scarborough. The business was a family firm, left to a son after the sudden death of his father. “We’ve been with them a couple of months and already we’ve increased employees from 5 to 25. We’re bringing a full management structure to the business” — Alan. Undoubtedly, their combined experience operating a family firm was an important factor in this acquisition.