

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER CENTRE CASE STUDY:

Simon Dale | Ella's Kitchen



About Me:

My name is Simon Dale, I work for Ella's Kitchen UK, and my title is 'Runs Making Things Safe'. This is an Ella's title, which in the real world means I am Senior Technical Manager and look after the safety of our products.

Can you describe your experience of working with the University?

I have worked with the University of Reading both personally and professionally for a number of years now. It has been a very valuable process for Ella's Kitchen, which has allowed us to bring in a lot of new knowledge to the company, whilst building on our own knowledge and experience. Working with the University has also enabled us to work with various Academics, access research relevant to our business and what we're trying to achieve that we otherwise wouldn't have been aware of, and has opened up a whole world of opportunities.

What's the best thing about collaborating with the University?

It has allowed us to tap into resources that we wouldn't have had without the partnership. This has permitted us to do two things: firstly, to simply develop a whole raft of knowledge, and secondly to develop some amazing people within the business. We've been able to do this by working closely with the Academics, by taking advantage of the opportunities we've had via our projects with collaborations such as Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, and also by absorbing the wider breadth of knowledge in order to train our team.

You've had the 3 KTPs now?

We've had 3 KTPs, yes; the first enabled us to tap into the psychology department at the University and do something that was unheard of in food, getting some real science behind what babies like to eat and why. Since then we've had two further projects, both looking at the packaging and raw materials we use with our products, and both allowing us to develop members of our company to grow from complete novices to leading experts in their field. We've developed some great managers in the business as a result of that, and we've even help generate some more knowledge in our supply chain, bringing even more to our suppliers as well. It's a complete win-win.

In addition to those, what other benefits have you seen as a result of the collaborations?

It gives us a far greater sense of security in our knowledge and understanding of our own products, which means we can go to our customers and be confident saying we have the best comprehension

of what we're selling plus have access to even more knowledge through our relationship with the University. It also means that we have an advantage over our competitors as we have the skills and expertise readily available to us to continue growing and developing. The collaborations we've had with the University mean that we've been able to transition from being a one-man-band, to being the biggest baby food brand in the UK, meaning we're in a position where our customers are asking our advice on what they should do with baby food in their aisles. This of course leaves us in a very powerful position in the market.

This has now doubt contributed to your impressive statistics. Is it right to say that £1 in every £3 spent on baby food is now spent on Ella's Kitchen products?

Pretty much; there's an overall share which leaves us somewhere in the region of 28%, but with wet baby food we're actually at around 40% of all sales in the UK.

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We know University of Reading is local to Ella's Kitchen HQ, but Ella's are still working with Reading after all these years. Why the University of Reading?

Ella's Kitchen is a relationship business; we have an excellent relationship with our customers, our suppliers, and even our competitors. One of the key things for us is to make the most out of our relationships, and we have a long-standing relationship with the University of Reading. But it's not just about that; yes they are only a few miles up the road from our HQ, but they have the right mix of knowledge, expertise, and departments. The University also have a fantastic facility in the Knowledge Transfer Centre which enables us to access the departments that you may not have thought about in the first instance. Rather than spending time trying to find the right Academics or the right departments, you can make one call to the KTC who have all the right expertise to point you in the right direction. The KTC just make everything that much smoother and easier, and they enable us to focus our time on other things. We keep coming back to that one-stop shop, because we keep getting great service.

Is there an 'if it isn't broke, don't fix it' element?

To an extent, and to be fair we do build relationships with other Universities too. But Reading is always our main point of contact because of the service that we get there: it just works.

Why do Ella's Kitchen work with a University?

It's about looking at us as a business; although we are market leaders in what we do, we are essentially still a small business. We have very limited resources, and we are not a knowledge-based institution. For us it's about looking at how we can access the resources we need in order to stay ahead of the market, and we have to network in order to gain that knowledge. Where better to gain knowledge than a University? It's a bit of a no-brainer.

What benefit do you think the University gains from collaborating with companies like Ella's Kitchen?

I know from both personal and professional experience that although universities produce some fantastic research, they can sometimes be guilty of forgetting that there is a 'real world' out there, so the research isn't always linked to what's happening in industry. Through working with companies such as Ella's, we can help universities see what is going on in the 'real world', and we can expose students to the things that we're doing which are commercially viable. A classic example of this is that the University of Reading runs development projects with their BSc students, and we are in a position to show them how a development project works, how we get a product to market, and what the realities of industry are. Additionally, our partners can draw on us for case studies to showcase some of the collaborations we've had and how the partnerships have benefitted both parties. It's a real win-win; we get an abundance of knowledge from the University, and they can get a vast amount of industry experience from us.

Would you recommend a collaboration with a university to any other companies, and if so what advice would you give?

I would absolutely recommend it to other businesses and have actually pushed various SMEs to talk to a university about projects such as KTP, or even just tapping into the resources available. I think the link between industry and Academia can be fantastic but is very underutilised, and most SMEs simply don't know how valuable and easy it actually is. What I would say is that as an SME you need to be very clear on what it is that you're trying to achieve. But if you talk to the right people such as the Knowledge Transfer Centre, then you can gain some great support, and it can provide a fantastic material input on your business; it certainly has here as we've grown from a one-man band to a £80 million turnover company.



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Can you sum up Ella's Kitchen working with Reading in one sentence?

Hugely valuable. It's been a fascinating journey which has brought vast amounts of knowledge into Ella's Kitchen as a business, which underpins everything that we do and without University of Reading there's no way that we could have done it.