

ONE

In the beginning, there was a decision

Sometimes, very rarely, you come across a genuinely big idea. An idea that stops you in your tracks. An idea to make or do something wildly groundbreaking and completely novel. Perhaps even an idea that can change the world. This is not a book about big ideas like that.

In truth, there are few big, transformative ideas to be found. Most ideas (even the ones that do go on to change the world) are variations on previously explored themes—take Uber, which started out as an idea for a limo service that showed where your car was on a map (which, itself, was inspired by a device Daniel Craig’s James Bond used in the film *Casino Royale*). Or take the ‘idea’ to make gin. It’s hardly new. To make gin is simply to follow in the footsteps of Dutch genever makers from the 1600s and British gin barons from the 1700s (more on the history of gin in Chapter 3).

So, this is not a book about big ideas; instead, it’s about small ideas. The small ideas that, together, can help grow a business (and a brand...we’ll touch on that distinction later too). The small ideas that result from countless daily acts and decisions. So, really, this is a book about decisions.

Lessons from Gin

As you get older, you realise there are so many truths no one tells you when you're younger—like how much of parenting is actually logistics. Or, in this case, how much of the founding and leading of a business is just the seemingly endless task of making decisions (and living with the decisions you make). No wonder I felt so exhausted after the three COVID-affected years of 2020, 2021 and 2022. We had made so many rapid decisions on the fly and against a background of such uncertainty and constant change. It wasn't the school at home that exhausted me...it was the decision making at work.

Starting a business is merely a decision, one decision that leads to many others. Each of those decisions amounts to a small idea. Even the decision to not do something is, itself, a small idea with consequences and impact. Get enough of these small ideas right, execute enough of them brilliantly and you might be onto something. This is the truth of most businesses. There are no shortcuts. No magic bullets. No game-changing big ideas. Just decisions, choices, priorities, compromises, mistakes, hustle and execution. But I'm already jumping ahead because we haven't got to the first decision yet.

The decision to make gin wasn't mine. It was Stu's and Cam's.

Cam is an Olympian. Both literally and figuratively. Literally, because he dragged his body around a running track fast enough to make Australia's 400-metre relay team at Atlanta in 1996 (he made the semis, if you're wondering, and in some very questionable running shorts). Figuratively, because he has a capacity for determination, execution and excellence that puts him in the top-three people I would take into any battle with me. He also happens to be wildly creative, have an extraordinary palate and is one of the funniest, most engaging people I've ever spent time with. Yep, in short, if you were designing the perfect co-founder and distiller for a craft gin business, you'd end up with Cameron Mackenzie.

And then there's Stuart. If generosity was an Olympic discipline, Stu would doubtless be an Olympian too. Like Cam, he's genuinely hilarious. Like Cam, he has an extraordinary palate. And, like Cam, he had spent decades in the Australian booze industry. Unlike Cam, Stu had gone on to build one of Australia's great communications agencies, specialising in the food and drink space. So Stu knew people, he knew business and he knew stuff. Between the two of them, we had the raw material to do something special in gin.

In the past, Stu and Cam had decided to make wine together (twice), buy stakes in racehorses together (too often) and not work in the same office together (again). And now here they were making a new decision. To make gin together. But this decision was different. It came with a caveat. This time, they would get a third partner involved: me.

Cam and Stu had both worked in and around the wine industry for years, both with a deep knowledge and passion for wine and spirits of all types. Cameron had spent time getting his hands dirty in production, operations and distribution roles, while Stu had built an extraordinary PR and communications business, Liquid Ideas, and had become arguably one of Australia's most sought-after strategic partners for wine brands (and all kinds of food, drink and hospitality businesses). These two, in other words, were made to make gin together.

If Cam and Stu were both made to go into the gin business, I was the less obvious contributor to the success of Four Pillars. My background is an eclectic one, starting off as a UK Government economist, moving first into politics as a policy adviser then a speechwriter then a communication strategist, moving into the world of brand and brand agencies.

By the time I met Cam and Stu, I had spent 15 years advising people and businesses, from future prime ministers like Theresa May and David Cameron to global brands like Samsung and Google. Locally, I had advised future unicorns (i.e. billion-dollar companies) like Deputy, and all manner of great Australian businesses and brands from AMP and the NRMA to Voyager Estate and St. Agnes.

But giving advice is one thing; putting your own advice into practice is quite another. So, while I didn't lack confidence in my abilities, I hadn't yet had the opportunity to use my skills and experience to create something myself. And now I was going to do it in a category where I had near zero professional experience (albeit a fair bit of experience as a consumer).

What drew me to gin? In short, it seemed to me that gin provided that rarest of opportunities: to create a truly differentiated (and better) product that would still need creative thinking and brand-building to get it the credit it deserved. As someone who has never been a fan of traditional, advertising-led marketing and who believes the world is already full of enough stuff and doesn't need more commoditised

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clutter, the opportunity to help create better gin and to make sure Cam's and Stu's efforts would get the credit they deserved was too tempting to say 'no' to. I was in.

In moving from that first decision (to make gin, not tonic) to that next decision (to find a third partner) to the next decisions (the partner would be me and I would say 'yes' to the opportunity), we were learning our first important lessons about starting a business.

There's no one thing that defines a business and determines whether it will succeed, fail or (in many cases) tick along doing neither. A business is simply the sum total of the consequences of its decisions.

Stu, Cam and I have made literally thousands of decisions over a decade of building Four Pillars Gin. I guess we must have got enough of them right that I'm sitting here writing this book. And, in the next chapter, I'll explore some of the ways that we (sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, and sometimes with pure serendipity) approached making our first big decisions together.