CORK COMPANY OF THE YEAR AWARDS 2020 | vodafone business | Irish Examiner Media Partner

In the third week of a four-part series looking at the finalists for the Cork Company of the Year Awards, Munster Business Hub editor Alan Healy casts an eye over the contenders in the Large company category.

Joe Keane, head of operations, said 'this has been an absolutely incredible year for Rowa Pharmaceuticals'.

Frank Madden, CEO of Crest Solutions, which has been offering engineering solutions to the medical device and pharmaceutical industry.

Trigon Hotels managing director Aaron Mansworth says the group is honoured to be shortlisted for this award and it 'acknowledges our vast investment in Cork'.

Rowa supplying medicines around the world for 60 years

Based in Bantry, Rowa Pharmaceuticals Ltd has expanded its reach over the past six decades to supply medicines across the globe.

Rowa provides high-quality prescription and non-prescription medicine at a competitive price.

Their mission statement is to provide products and services that consistently meet technical standards, regulatory requirements and customer expectations, delivered on time and at competitive costs.

The company has been a pillar of the community for over 60 years providing jobs to the people of Bantry and West Cork.

Their two key products; Rowachol and Rowatinex were developed in the late 1950s and provide relief from kidney stones and gallstones without surgical intervention.

Their unique selling points are the services they offer to the healthcare profession including a wide range of promotional material including window display material, posters, leaflets, booklets and counter display units.

They have expanded to have a presence in 80 countries worldwide. Some of the leading markets for their products are Russia, Egypt, Afghanistan, Libya, Hungary and Korea, all supplied from their Bantry base.

The company is owned by Brigitte Wagner-Halswick, who has been managing director since 1979 following the death of her husband Roland Wagner.

In 1979, Bantry had just experienced the largest maritime disaster in Irish history, Ireland was going an economic crisis and political turmoil, unemployment was high and Mrs Wagner was a young businesswoman in a male-dominated landscape.

This was a difficult time to maintain a business but she made the decision to remain in Bantry and make Rowa a success.

Travelling the world and promoting Rowa products establishing the company as a leading pharmaceutical supplier.

The business has also remained in Bantry despite multiple offers and opportunities to move the business, especially during the recession.

The company continues to grow, launching new products and registering these products in new markets such as Syria, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

This year, in conjunction with the IDA, Rowa introduced the LEAN programme in their laboratory with the overall goal of improving processes and becoming more efficient in their procedures.

Joe Keane, head of operations for Rowa Pharmaceuticals, said: "We're very honoured to be a finalist in the Cork Company of the Year Awards 2020. This has been an absolutely incredible year for Rowa."

"Most notably, in September, we celebrated 60 years in business in West Cork, a monumental milestone that few companies achieve."

"I'd also like to say a special word about Mrs Wagner-Halswick, who has been our managing director since 1979 and today, is still the driving force of the company."

Crest supporting the world's top pharma and med device firms

The important work of pharmaceutical and medical device multinationals in Ireland, Europe and the US is supported by Cork firm Crest Solutions, who have provided them with engineering services and solutions for more than 20 years.

The company was founded in 1998 and is now amongst Northern Europe's leading engineering services partners to life sciences companies.

Since their inception in Cork, they have worked with a variety of companies including Allergan, Gilead, Teva, J&J, Baxter Healthcare, MSD-Merck, and Abbott.

The company has experienced exponential growth with employment growing from 20 people in 2011 to over 175 today.

They are on track to hire an additional 120 engineers, project managers, software developers and technicians by the end of this year.

Crest invested in a joint venture with Vistalink NV in 2012 and has grown this operation to service the Benelux and Scandinavian regions, successfully internationalising the company's European operations and reach.

Through strategic partnerships in the US, the company now delivers and supports systems in multiple sites globally for life sciences clients.

Construction is ongoing at the company's headquarters in Little Island, doubling the building's footprint to accommodate the increased workforce.

Many of the company's engineers work on customer sites domestically and abroad managing, delivering and supporting projects.

This has led to projects being delivered in multiple countries and sites for global leaders.

CEO Frank Madden said their plan is to grow group revenue exponentially over a five-year period.

"As multinationals build global teams to assess and implement emerging Industry 4.0 technologies, they are contracting Crest Solutions to partner with them to build scalable solutions for their sites internationally.

"These include innovations in digital work instructions, virtualisation, virtual reality, augmented reality and cobot applications, all backed by the excellence of the project support we provide through our resourcing solutions and managed services teams."

"We are delighted and honoured to have been selected as a finalist by Cork Chamber for Large Company of the Year.

"We are immensely proud of our domestic and international growth from our base in Cork, increasing turnover almost ten-fold in the last five years.

"Cork continues to be an excellent place from which to grow an internationally-focused business.

"Our ability to hire so many talented people in Cork, in addition to having so many multi-national manufacturing customers with a presence here, have been key enablers in the success being recognised by Cork Chamber," Mr Madden said.

Hotel group promotes city nationally and internationally

Operating three top locations in Cork, Trigon Hotels have strong ambitions for the future.

Their 4-star group of hotels include the Cork International Hotel, Cork Airport Hotel and the Metropole Hotel.

Across the group, they operate 334 bedrooms, four restaurants, three bars, 33 conference and meeting rooms and multiple leisure facilities

Founded in May 2017, Trigon Hotels are dedicated to the promotion of Cork as a premium business and leisure destination nationally and internationally to ensure Cork, its people and its businesses benefit.

All their three hotels are ranked in the top 10 on TripAdvisor, securing spots three, five, and 10 out of 33 properties.

They provide 270 jobs in Cork and this is set to grow in the next three years. This figure does not include the additional teams, part-time employment and seasonal staff they hire for large events, conferences and busy periods such as the jazz festival.

Their ambitious sales growth projections are 5% year-on-year for the next three. The Metropole has seen year-on-year growth of 18% on 2018 and for the past five years, Cork International Hotel and Cork Airport Hotel have had double-digit growth.

Trigon's festivals and events also continue to grow in scale, having recently received Fáilte Ireland funding.

Awards/accreditations this year have included, Irish Hospitality Institute Food & Beverage Manager of the Year, Chambers Ireland CSR Award Nomination for their charity initiative from working with BUMBLEance, Gold Medal Awards shortlisted finalist for Best Business and Conference Hotel and Best Breakfast for the Cork International Hotel.

The Metropole Hotel Cork won Cork Hotel of the Year for 2018 at the Cork Business Association annual business awards. The Met Bar was shortlisted for Hotel Bar of the year at the national Bar of the Year awards.

They have just won a Cork Chamber Digital Marketing Award for Best use of Twitter. The Metropole Hotel also won 3-star hotel of the year at the national Irish Hotel Awards prior to becoming a 4-star hotel last March.

Managing director Aaron Mansworth said they are honoured to be shortlisted for this prestigious award. "This nomination recognises the hard work and dedication of our team to the hospitality, tourism and business community in Cork and indeed Ireland.

"It acknowledges our vast investment in Cork and our plans to grow and scale sustainably over the coming years, providing even more jobs to Cork people and driving impact on the local economy."

"We are committed to redefining the customer experience not only within our hotels and events, but also within Cork.

"We look forward to continuing relationships with Cork Chamber, its growing membership base and we will continue to innovate to further positively impact the industry and our city."

Housing cure needs careful consideration of all options, not a knee-jerk reaction

Kyran Fitzgerald

We are in the middle of a housing crisis. That much is clear.

Various solutions have been proposed in the election manifestos unveiled by political parties in recent days.

How many of these will pass muster?

The Green Party, for example, has unveiled plans for a "deep retrofitting scheme" to make 75,000 houses a year energy efficient.

This would appear ambitious, though, if implemented, the investment would surely pay for itself, in what is likely to be a carbon-constrained world.

The largest parties are all focusing on new-builds, with Sinn Féin promising hundreds of thousands of social houses.

The Fianna Fáil proposals are more nuanced.

They are promising to build 50,000 social housing units by 2025, while pushing total housing output up to 40,000 a year. It was 21,500 in 2019.

A few obvious questions should be asked.

Do we need to dramatically increase housing provision, given the number of vacant properties — residential and non-residential — across the country?

Even if we wanted to, could we increase this production without inflating construction costs, across the board, given the shortage of people who have the necessary building skills?

Moreover, it is worth asking if the debate on future home provision is not dominated — to an excessive degree — by a generation of builders who have not been particularly open to innovation, quality, or cost control?

Many builders have high standards and their buildings stand as testament to their skills.

But, as a society, and as homeowners, we will be paying for many years for the shoddy workmanship that was a feature of so many developments from the 1960s onwards.

According to the CSO, there were 230,000 vacant homes in 2011, and 183,000 by the time of the 2016 census.

However, the CSO reckons that just 65,000 of the homes vacant in 2016 were already vacant in 2011.

As for the rest? They were properties on sale, in probate, or unoccupied because the owner was away (probably in hospital or in long-term care).

However, these figures, arguably, do not capture the large number of properties — many in town and city centres — that are under-used, with the floors above ground level effectively unoccupied.

We should be squeezing a lot more people into the more central areas of our towns and cities.

The task of ramping up production is complicated by the dearth of building skills and also by a lack of capacity in quality inspection.

But the building trade may itself be on the cusp of change, with a move away from traditional, on-site activity to the production of much — if not all — of the building off-site.

The off-site option has many attractions.

It could greatly reduce the demand for traditional building crafts, freeing up labour to work on renovations and on very high-quality new-builds. The new generation of off-site plants can be located well away from major population centres, providing jobs where they are needed.

Many parties are promising to build thousands more houses, but with little account of the current stock of empty or unused units, and the shortage of skilled labour.

Incumbents who do not invest in this area could find themselves losing much of their business and being downgraded.

One concern is that if we end reliance on factories for our homes, our new housing estates might appear more monotonous than ever.

This may suit the new generation of off-site building empires, which see profit in sameness. The planners and architects must step in to ensure that this does not happen.

Our municipalities would be well-advised to build up teams committed to quality planning and construction.

We are clearly in a rush to address the deficits in home provision that have fostered misery and insecurity, but this is no time to expose ourselves to those who will seek to profiteer from panic.

There are developers who are keen to promote skyscraper solutions at the expense of well-designed, lower-rise, but high-density alternatives.

The disaster at Grenfell Tower, in London, in 2017, should remind us of the dangers of going down that route. We have to be open to all new ideas, but we must not allow ourselves to be herded in one direction by those with profit in mind.

By all means, step up the supply of apprentices, while maintaining high standards of training. The high levels of local charges and Vat on construction activity simply do not make sense. They have been choking off activity.

These charges should be reduced. They are illogical, given the huge expenditure on rental subsidies, never mind the long-term costs associated with parking children in confined hotel and B&B spaces or damp flats.

Homeowners cannot, however, have it both ways.

They cannot expect local authorities to fund ambitious social housing programmes, while declining to provide local government with adequate income.

Our local institutions, in turn, need to develop a value-for-money mindset, along with the necessary skills in cost control.

Nor should we imagine that the problems associated with homelessness can be swept away through an upsurge in house provision.

Such a ramping-up in supply would, however, represent a huge step in the right direction.

It is not beyond us. We made up huge ground in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1970s.

We can do so again.

Elderly care tech firm eyes lucrative €450bn US market

Trish Dromey

Dún Laoghaire start-up PacSana is preparing for initial trials of a wearable device for the elderly which triggers an alert, not only when the wearer pushes a button, but also when it detects sudden changes in the wearer's movement patterns.

Using sensors and machine learning to identify the wearer's normal behaviour patterns, the technology is designed to alert carers and/or family when there are unexpected behavioural changes.

"This can happen, for instance, when the wearer does not rise in the morning or doesn't go to the kitchen for meals," said company founder Feargal Duignan, adding that the first trial, which is expected to start within two weeks, is with one of the North's largest care trusts.

Observing a growing need for home care solutions for the aging populations in all developed countries, Mr Duignan set up PacSana in 2018, having identified an opportunity to use wearable technology and data analytics/machine learning to develop an innovative new product.

Two years on, the company has raised €200,000, carried out private trials and is now preparing to start pilot testing with two health care providers in the North, including a private company as well as a public sector one.

"We are also in discussions with one of the world's largest healthcare providers regarding a UK pilot and we are in advanced discussions with a major healthcare provider with over 5,000 users in Boston," said Mr Duignan.

The key focus for PacSana is the US market which now has a population of 55m people who are over 65 and is set to have 72m by 2030.

Feargal Duignan says that by the end of 2020, PacSana is targetting over 1,000 users globally.

"We see an addressable market of 43m people in the US in a country where upwards of $500bn (€450bn) dollars a year is spent on reactive technology solutions," he said.

Mr Duignan previously worked as sales director with Dell-EMC in Ireland before signing up with Enterprise Ireland's New Frontiers programme in 2018 and starting to research the market for home-care solutions.

The idea for the company had come to him when a friend was unable to contact an elderly relative who had an alarm pendant.

In order to come up with a solution which would work better than the existing products on the market, he began by organising focus groups and talking to care providers.

Starting with €50,000 in funding, including some private investment, Mr Duignan contracted out the development of the solution which involves four components; a lightweight bracelet, which was designed and produced by a company in Ireland; a sensor developed and manufactured in Slovenia; machine learning software developed in Serbia and a gateway communications device which is also produced in Ireland.

In 2019, PacSana hired its first employee, a developer to work on the device and the company now employs two full-time and two part-time staff.

In August last year, PacSana enrolled in NDRC's accelerator programme at Arclabs in Waterford. "This helped with product/market fit, problem solution fit, extending our network, business planning and preparing to pitch to investors," said Mr Duignan, who has now embarked on a fundraising round with seed investors and venture capitalists in Ireland and the US.

"Our next phase is to scale the company, develop business in the US and also build out the team," said Mr Duignan, who expects to take on five staff once the company receives the funding it requires. "These will include sales staff as well as staff with experience in domiciliary care," he said.

On the back of upcoming pilots in the US, PacSana is aiming for a breakthrough in the US market this year.

"By the end of 2020, we are targetting over 1,000 users globally," said Mr Duignan.

Planning to operate by changing a monthly subscription fee per user, Mr Duignan believes it is possibly for PacSana to generate annual recurring revenues of over €5m by the end of year.