

Mags McLoughlin

Pennies from Heaven



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Euro Changeover 2001 and the big hairy ambition was to raise €100m for charity from the loose change lying around in coin jars, old pockets and down the back of the sofa. And to do it in all 11 European countries during the transition. The concept sat on a one-pager birthed from an idea I got on a beach in Goa. And no, it wasn't place-inspired.

Meanwhile Banks were already sweating with the implications of even a fragment of the population clogging their queues with shrapnel. I headed to the Central Bank. They confirmed the amount in unaccounted-for coinage already in circulation stood at IR£26.7m. That night, as if needing tangible proof, I ransacked our house, emptied handbags, lifted cushions and amassed coins from five countries totally nearly thirty-eight quid.

Next I knocked on the door of the Euro Changeover Board where a genial civil servant on secondment told me that there wouldn't be a single security van available to transport any coinage me and my-non-existent team might collect. In fact, he made me some strong tea and patted me on the head.

That was the start of the sleeplessness, that fizzing in the bloodstream that tells you this is *something*.



The one-pager was honed until it sat like a slab of marble. It strived for a network of collection points - banks, super-markets, post offices, credit unions, department stores, video chains. It called for a high-profile board of changemakers and policymakers to kick the idea up the chain. It dropped on one knee to woo the celebrity support which would trip that switch in the public's imagination, in the shortest period. The rest was logistics. We hadn't a clue. And there was one stark reality. I was working full time as an account director in Irish International BBDO. So, I had to start there.

Ian Young, the agency's Managing Director, chewed on it for four minutes. 'We'll do it here. But forget about the rest of Europe, for now.' He pledged the full weight of the agency and Jonathon Cullen began doodling the sweetest logo.

Then came the ignition point. Denis O'Brien agreed to see me, and it happened to be on the day he was trying to buy Eircom. I sat in his reception alongside a star chamber of lawyers. I had ten minutes. Denis introduced himself, said he liked it and asked me what I wanted. Still standing I said I needed him to fast-track introductions at CEO level for all the networks, which he agreed to. I asked him to sit on the Board, which he couldn't agree to. Then as I turned to leave him with the wolves, he said 'I'll also seed fund it.'

Speechless for the first time, I eventually asked what he would need from me to justify that. His reply, *'Mags, either you do it or you don't.'*

Then I was in real trouble. We had 14 weeks. I started with the charities. The concept was always to raise funds for children's charities because, simplistic as it sounds, they were the future Europeans. I tracked down an old mate, that doyenne of the charity world, Caroline Downey of ISPCC. Now we had real momentum.



Deals were struck with AIB, Tesco, An Post, the League of Credit Unions, Abrakebabra, Texaco, XtraVision and more. We had 3,000 collection points, a ragged pantheon of celebrities including Liam Neeson, Charlize Theron, Gabriel Byrne, Jack Charlton, a million household collection bags and an ace project manager, Joanne Duffy. €300k worth of advertising from TV3, JC Decaux, Communicorp, Independent News & Media and P&D was donated. Richard Boyle skinned us a webpage with a live counter, a feat of the day. Through a board member, we got the use of an old army barracks and set up our equivalent of a wartime production line. A transport company was hired and our army of volunteers from the participating charities were organised into shifts. With a six-week window to changeover day, we were all set, and all going great guns, on a diet of instant coffee and plastic food, until we met ourselves.

Another group with exactly the same concept, *Changing Ireland*, headed by Niamh Sheeran from the Mater Foundation, squared up against us. It could've gone either way. But this was not a time to compete. We joined forces. We got to keep my name, they got to keep their adroit PR lady, Caroline Kennedy. We were now 11 charities - homelessness, children's charities, heart foundation, poverty, clean water, cancer research – with hundreds of thousands of potential benefactors in our sights.

At our launch in Government Buildings we thanked Bertie Ahern who had previously been Minister for all our pennies. As someone said on the day, you could close the doors and run the country from that room.

We were live, word was out and AIB bins began filling fast with Tesco right behind them, Abrakebabra a close third and others a steady trickle. But our workforce, well-meaning but as reliable these days as snowdrops in spring, fell apart.



As the no-shows mounted, we realised the charities would have to fund paid workers, something they hadn't budgeted for, and governance couldn't accommodate that fast. Another call from a board member, this time to Mountjoy. That brilliant man John Lonergan, Governor of Mountjoy Prison, sent in, every day, a hardy batch of prisoners to supplement our crew. In the freezing cavern, in the dead of winter, they worked and laughed and raised the music and the production bar as if early parole depended on it. Lyons gave us a truckload load of tea bags, Supersers and buckets of soup arrived from neighbours and the race against time continued.

Pretty soon notes were making their way into the collection bins as well as eternity rings, chicken bones, finger nails, love letters and someone's stash. We never imagined a syringe. Or a HIV claim. Blood tests at that time took six weeks. We didn't know if a sizeable chunk of whatever we collected would be going to this person or the charities. But the test was expedited, another favour, the result was negative, and the right amount of compensation paid out.

Then one day a man wearing two hats wandered in. Martin, the numismatist, became our resident coin expert and soon he was unearthing coins from mediaeval towns and historic battles. Until he had to do something that caused him a lot of pain. We were being robbed by an insider. He had proof and we had to stage a dawn ambush. They had IR£10,000 at home. No one wanted to press charges. But it shook us. And then we had to dig deep. The final sprint pushed our production and civilities to the limit. But the airplay galvanised us, everywhere any of us went overflowing bags of coins were shoved at us, our cars filled up, our houses were sandbagged. Reports from our bank started to come in, we were half a million up, one and half million up, just shy of three. And then came the heist. Armed robbery, security staff tied up, €100,000 gone.



We were a week away from our final count and press conference. We made 'Breaking News' before there was such a thing, the red tops were screaming, and celebrities came out of hiding, driving even more money our way. Forty-eight hours before the finale, the police got a breakthrough.

The money was recovered in full and at the appointed hour, we paraded 7 kids out on stage, each holding up a number, 7 3 3 1 2 6 7.

We'd raised over €7 million.

By springtime houses for the homeless were bought, shelters built, and Breakfast Clubs set up in primary schools where needed. We funded cancer research, purchased emergency aid in Somalia and community services for the elderly in the midlands. We staged an exhibition of coins from every century back to the 10th century. But someone also did time for robbery, four years, which was much, much longer than any halo effect.

In terms of the triumph of experience, if you get that fizzing in your bloodstream – I got it one more time in my life when I adopted my boy from Guatemala – you follow it blindly because it operates beyond reason. But it's not enough. The imaginative warriors to raise it up and carry it through the fog are just as essential. As is the kind of humanity that comes from the campaign trenches. Also, there's no such thing as an original idea, just alchemy to drop it in the right time and place.

I'm working on a third experience but I'm banking on this one being quieter. And contactless.



Mags McLoughlin

Over three decades working in communications roles in Ireland and overseas in advertising agencies and within major brands as head of marketing.

Recent project management roles have included Darkness into Light for Pieta House and Young Social Innovators.

Founder of TheSpark.ie, a creative platform for new Irish artists.

MA in creative writing and working on third novel.

I live in Dublin and always up for an idea-generating, free-wheeling conversation.

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Chops was conceived by Eoghan Nolan.

Designed and typeset by Gerry McCloskey

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