

COVID-19: Interview with James Leinhardt, founder & CEO of Levitex

Set to revolutionise the sleep market, Levitex has designed mattresses, pillows and more to tackle back and neck pain using a specific foam technology. Maddyness spoke to James Leinhardt, Founder & CEO to get to know more about the company's story, how they have coped during COVID-19 as a team and to look at their strategy for the future.

Temps de lecture : minute

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I have dedicated my working life to helping critically injured and acutely ill patients with their postural care, including chronic back and neck pain. When I saw the benefits of maintaining a good sleep posture first-hand and realised that no one was talking about it, I teamed up with Dr Ilan Lieberman, a Pain Medicine Consultant and Clinician. Together, we developed Levitex Foam, what would later become the best pillow for neck pain.

In the long term, we aim to use our company as a platform for making meaningful change in the understanding of posture. In complex healthcare (in my opinion) posture is often the overlooked, black sheep cousin to Pressure injuries (sores) and moving and handling needs.

However, if posture in bed-bound patients was better managed, they would be less susceptible to body shape deformity that leads to increased peak pressures, more complicated moving and handling procedures for care staff, but most importantly totally preventable and horrendous pain

for the patient.

Posture management is critically important for the care and wellbeing of patients groups that spend the majority of their lives in bed. Whilst we are absolutely a commercial entity looking to be hugely profitable, retiring to some nice beach in the Caribbean, we are fully committed to making serious noise in healthcare.

[Maddyness] What is the biggest professional challenge for you today?

[James] Surviving the time it takes to tell the world about our clinically evidenced, game-changing foam technology in one of the most congested consumer marketplaces. As an independent, we are etching out our authority in night time posture in order to educate the market about the benefits of choosing the correct sleep surface.

What is the biggest personal challenge today?

Being organised. There was no easing out of lockdown, we went from total stillness to full speed overnight. So we now need to streamline the business and automate where we can as soon as possible as my most valuable commodity - my time, is haemorrhaging. We have brought in task management processes and time management apps into the business to start becoming a more polished entity.

Is remote working a new thing for you?

Yes, prior to lockdown I would never have dreamed of working from home. It has been surprisingly successful in many ways particularly with regard to wasting time on the road and the preconception that you need an office with meeting rooms etc to be considered a legitimate entity. I think it has made us all a bit more human as well.

We have had Zoom demonstrations for example with teams of physios, where the dog runs in, we have used my kids as demo models etc. I suppose it just made the work environment a bit more forgiving. Most importantly I have worn shorts every day for 22 weeks.

How do you keep your employees happy and what do you do to successfully manage your mental resilience amid lockdown?

I guess we have just tried to be extremely flexible. As a business, we are fortunate that everyone involved whether employed or working freelance has totally bought into our vision and so long as we all do our bit and pull our weight there is simply no need for micromanagement. Some members of the team prefer to work in the middle of the night and of course, those with kids often have no choice but to work around them, homeschooling and all the extra work in keeping the home.

For sure there have been some mishaps that probably wouldn't have occurred in the pre lockdown office setting but frankly, one thing that we have learnt as a group during the pandemic is that actually very little is that important. For me, I am just grateful to have a business and not least a business that has a really exciting future.

We have never been so busy and even though it hasn't all been

transactional, there are so many startups that couldn't survive lockdown... we are still here, more resilient and with a strategy that looks different to pre COVID but a vision that remains unchanged

What changes have you made to keep your business running?

We have pivoted from a B2B model to B2C model whilst we wait for the retailers that we have agreed to supply to catch up at their end. We are hopeful to be on board with at least one in the next 4-6 weeks (fingers crossed).

The last eight weeks have seen us totally redesign the website and all our marketing and PR efforts have been redeployed to launching. We have brought on an exceptional Digital Marketer to help lead that show, rewrite copy, SEO work and so on as well as an athlete/pro club relationship manager.

We have also spent a lot of time profiling our client. Drilling down on very specific avatars so that our marketing spend is much more linear and far less experimental. In short, we are targeting a very specific market now rather than engaging in every possible opportunity that has been presented over the last 18 months or so. We stripped all unnecessary costs in April, May and June and put as much on ice as possible. Once we strategised our next six months of pivot then we went straight back at it.

One thing we made a conscious decision about at the beginning was to not veer off course. We were not a hand sanitizer or PPE company beforehand and we were not prepared to jump on those opportunist bandwagons!

What have you implemented to stay competitive?

We had fortuitously come to the end of a few contracts including office space, warehousing and our only commercial sponsorship which has all been renegotiated to reflect the new world. We have also purchased bulk raw materials etc so as to better control our costs. The biggest cost variable currently out of our control is shipping, air freight etc which we just have to monitor in real-time.

How is your relationship with your investors?

Amazingly better than ever. We signed an LOE with them literally weeks before lockdown. Most importantly they haven't backed out of the agreement we signed or looked to change the goalposts. This is their second investment and already they have made some phenomenal introductions in terms of value add and equally I have been performing "meet the company" webinars for them to their investors and IFA's etc.

From what I have read in the news we really are the lucky ones. Many companies simply didn't get their rounds closed even after signing terms. I suppose for us it was a huge declaration of trust from them that in spite of the global pandemic they have backed a company at the start of our journey... so their belief in the project is so clear to see and extremely motivating.

What advice would you give startup founders to keep managing costs and cash flow efficiently during a crisis?

I think the first thing you need is the buy-in from everyone in the team. It ain't pretty, those that have been furloughed have found it really tough

not helping out but they recognised their roles were redundant and to guarantee the longevity of the business and our long term vision.

For those that have continued to work it has been all hands on deck, crazy and sprawling hours. Without the buy-in from the whole team including our marketing and PR partners we simply would have crumbled.

The destination remains the same, just a slight detour that's all!

What do you think of the support packages for startups offered by the government and what have you been able to use?

At the beginning of lockdown, the support of furlough and the BBL 100% kept us alive. We were still finalising our funding. We agreed to take several deployments over the next year rather than the full round in April as had been previously agreed so without the two support packages from the government we would have had a major cash flow issue in the month of April creeping into May.

Regardless of the packages themselves I was so impressed with Rishi Sunak the first time he led a daily meeting and I think that feeling of security he conveyed, that we were going to be looked after allowed me to remain focussed and not discombobulate with fear of failure and everything going.

Do you feel confident in your business post-

COVID and are there any changes in society that you think will help you?

Cautiously confident I think I would say. We certainly have a very clear picture of how the next 6-12 months look for us and we make pillows and mattresses (amongst other products), so pretty COVID proof I think!

Moreover with so many people now working from home hunched over a kitchen table with a laptop propped up on school books, sitting on a stool... posture has never been more important. Considering we probably spend as much time sleeping as we do working, why not fight posture, the continual fight against gravity, at night, in bed, asleep...

Let's be honest Zoom meetings are creating stiff necks all over the world and so perhaps this is the best time to look at improving your sleep quality and for no extra charge your posture too!

On a serious note, I think that, unfortunately, there is going to be a really terrible fall out for all those patients that were not "critically ill" during the lockdown. We have only started to see our complex Neuro patients in the last 2-3 weeks. I assessed a lady last week in a care home for the first time in 22 weeks. She survived a terrible stroke and is bed-bound.

In this time her body shape has changed, she is developing fixed contracture in her limbs, is increasingly susceptible to a pressure sore now and most importantly will be sleeping poorly and probably will be in horrendous pain. There will be literally thousands and thousands of people like her who simply can't access some or all of the care and adaptations that they need.

Speaking to the physios and Occupational therapists who are now back working in the community, they are petrified of what's coming. The most complex neuro clients (MS Cerebral Palsy, Catastrophic brain injury etc) often need their posture to be managed 24hrs a day 7 days a week and we see the effects of not doing so are fatal.

Whilst I know we are going to be busy and that's good for business whatever the fact is this really transcends all that and so we are just ready to do our thing!

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