

The story behind the making of Domino Clamps

In 2014, Justin Beardsell found himself standing on top of a shipping container in the blistering Spanish sun, smashing a short scaffold pole diagonally through the corner of the container with a lump hammer, asking himself: "There must be a better way of doing this?". Here's the entrepreneurial journey that answered his question.

Temps de lecture : minute

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I was trying to safely erect lighting for our post-apocalyptic themed area at a festival in Spain. We had been doing it for a number of years, and each year we bought a new shipping container in which to store our decor, and which were delivered to site each summer for us from their storage site nearby.

By the time we bought our 3rd shipping container for storing our camp in 2014, I was beginning to see a wasted opportunity in seeing these 2-tonne steel boxes lying around, while we slaved away building bigger and bigger structures that required more careful construction than ever before.

I began thinking of ways we could make use of the shipping containers to make the build easier.

I went home that year and began looking for whichever product was the right thing to attach to a shipping container so I could then join on decor, lighting, fencing and so on. Except as my search continued, it became more and more apparent that the thing I was looking for didn't exist. I

remember this moment clearly. I could feel my heart beating in my chest as the possibility dawned on me that a product which I could clearly see a use for, did not seem to be available.

In 2015, I came back with my first Container Clamp prototypes. I still have them. They were little more than 2 CNC machined pieces of steel the right shape with some grooves machined in for safety and they were fiddly as all hell to install. But they worked and by making 2 different types, we were able to attach wood, metal and Scaffold tube quickly and easily to our shipping containers.

Our little arena went up easier than ever before, and we began rethinking the way we worked and the way we built based on these new little devices.

I would leave 6m of scaffold tubes in the top of one of our containers, along with 4 sodium halide flood lamps. The first thing we would do on arrival is to attach the floodlights to the poles, the poles to the containers, and within half an hour, we had the site lit well enough to work throughout the night with 4 massive floodlights safely raised 6m in the air.

Crucially, none of our new structures needed us to dig any more. In terms of safety, build time and ease, they were revolutionary.

Then came a hiatus of about 3 years as I pursued my other business... Until I made the decision to try and make a go of starting a business with these Clamps, and I tried to enlist the help of my structural engineer friend, Rube.

Did you have the expertise and experience in

the field you chose?

I'm not a trained engineer, but I have been running my own business making custom made lighting and video installations for events for a few years, which involved little bits of engineering and rigging safety along the way. Having used shipping containers regularly in the world of events, and dealing with the problems of attaching things to them first hand, this was the main driving force which led me to create Domino Clamps and start the business.

Did you start on your own or with any associates?

I started the company with my structural engineer friend, who I both trusted and who could offer valuable technical engineering advice. We sat down in a cafe one Sunday morning and I proposed the terms of the agreement, he would work with me to get the product to market, and have a few obligations beyond that. The partnership worked really well.

Having someone to work with during this early phase was invaluable, and gave me the motivation to get going and keep going. As it was, going through that R&D phase and getting the product to market was nightmarish at times. Doing it alone would have been unbearable. I don't think I could have done it.

How did people around you react when you told them about your idea?

We had to keep it quiet for a while, but once we began telling people the idea, the feedback was fantastic. Almost universally, people were hugely supportive and we got a lot of the "oh wow I wish I'd thought of that", which of course is a great morale boost, and was often a source of

positivity and impetus when other areas of our development were less than encouraging.

How long did you spend on your business plan?

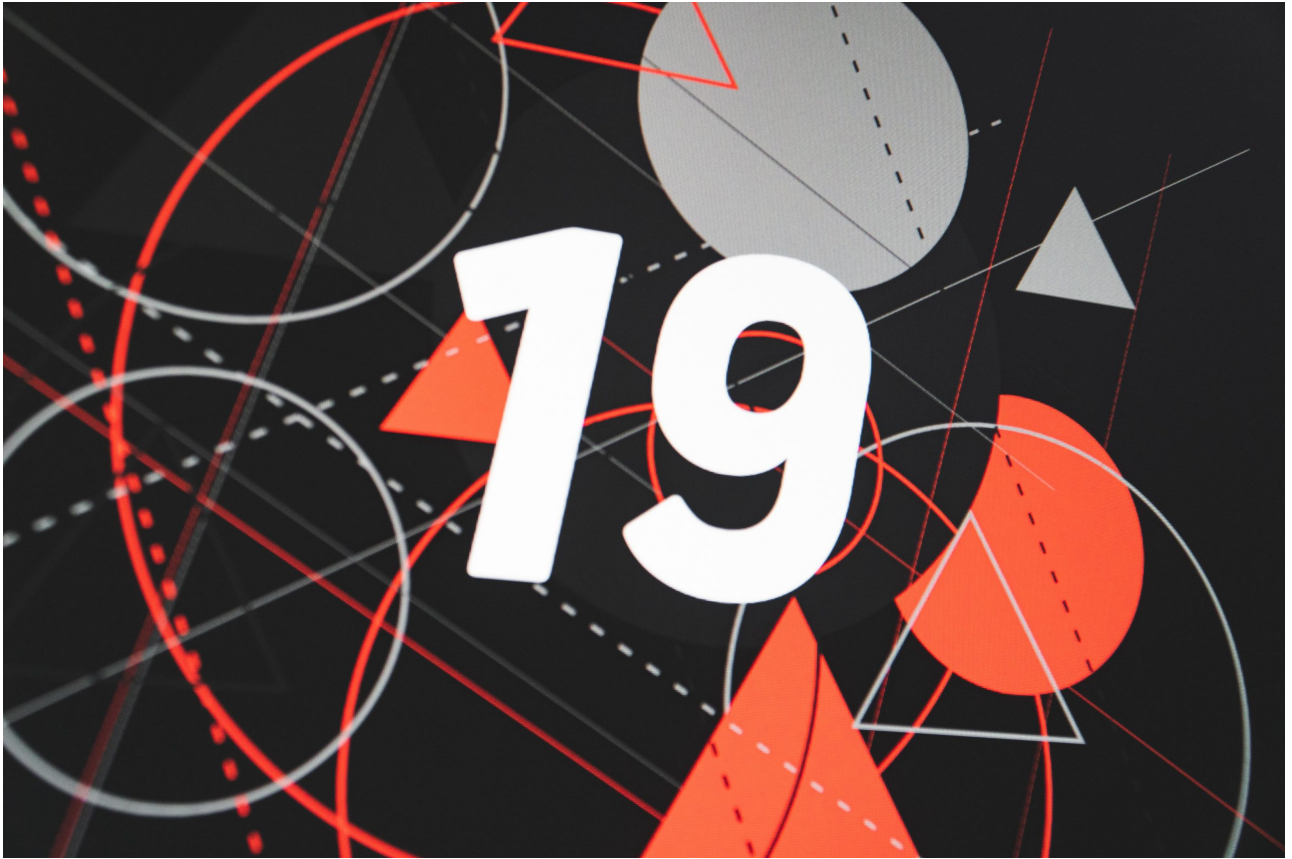
Our business plan was essentially a stripped back version of our innovate UK funding application. I didn't quite realise it until about halfway through answering the questions in the application, that what it was asking us to do in effect was to flesh out a business plan, along with a few other bits of info they wanted. We applied for a modest grant, but it was out the only source of money at that stage, so we spent a lot of time on it.

Days, maybe weeks. Unfortunately, we didn't get the funding, but we did end up with a very well thought out and researched business plan, which helped clarify in our own minds what the product was about, who were our customers, and what the path forward looked like.

How did you manage the financial part? Family/friends? Savings? Crowdfunding? Bank loans?

I took some money out of my old business which it owed me, and both borrowed & was gifted some from a couple of family members. We also got the full government-backed startup loan from Transmit startups, which meant we didn't need to go looking for investment.

In fact, getting the money was surprisingly easy. We wouldn't have needed to go looking for investment. People had a lot of faith in our idea, and we got quite a few offers of investment from friends and acquaintances. I still get asked from time to time if I need more.



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Do you know how many times you have pitched your business?

Informally? Countless times. Formally, like to someone that mattered from a business point of view, not a whole lot. As I say we never needed to go knocking at the door of hard-nosed investors.

Nevertheless, I had an enthusiastic quick pitch which I could deliver quite easily, and for a long while I carried around our latest prototype, just in case I found myself in front of the right person, and I wanted to explain it further and put the product in their hands. People always feel a lot differently about a product once they are holding it.

What would you say were the biggest difficulties that you experienced during your startup adventure?

There were a lot. Figuring out what was required of us from a legal perspective and for accreditation was a nightmare. It was very hard to get people to offer their opinions, and harder still to get anyone to commit and say for sure what was required. We had a very unique product, and deciphering EU regulations in regards to how they applied to our product was not something we could do without help.

Those that knew more about the regulations however often had a hard time understanding the product. This was an issue which I think surfaced often; people were intrigued and pulled in by this ingenious new invention at first, but then when they realised how hard it was to fit it into pre-existing boxes for categorisation and how complicated it potentially was, they lost interest and/or wouldn't be willing to put the time into finding to a solution.

This kind of story repeated itself during the IP research process: accreditation, testing, manufacturing and all the way through to finding product insurance.

The other thing was the time scale. I came from an events background, where everyone is used to having to deliver the moon on a stick, under budget, and yesterday. All of this process took place at a snail's pace by comparison. Added to that we were never very high up anyone's priority list, I imagine. Things happened really slowly.

Finally, the sheer amount of things that went wrong, and the mistake made by people supplying us with services or in other ways contracted to us. You wouldn't believe it. For us, the adage of 'anything that can go wrong, will go wrong' was no mere cliché; we soon took it to be a fact of life. I won't go into details on these, but suffice to say there were a number of calls between Rube and I that began.

"You're never going to believe what's happened now..."

Have you had to pivot at some point?

Our product is for attaching things to a specific part of a specific type of container, so there's not a whole lot of room to pivot. The Domino Clamps are very versatile in their application though, so when COVID caused the events sector to shut down (a sector I was familiar with and had planned to start by targeting) we had to begin focussing on applications where things needed to be fixed to shipping containers in less affected industries instead.

On a personal level, do you think you had all the support needed to help you in these or other tough times?

For a number of reasons, not as much as I would have liked. Financially there wasn't a penny to help us from the government, as we had not got business premises yet. The last few months have been incredibly nerve-racking and uncertain, as they have been for everyone. 5 months behind schedule, our first pallet of Domino Clamps arrives, only to be met less than 3 weeks later by UK lockdown.

I just count myself lucky that at least we did get the first batch before this, and that we weren't further down the line with too many employees that were dependent on the company to keep going. It's hard enough to get business help and advice at the best of times, right now, everyone's focus is on damage limitation, and it seems like a lot of the usual rules on growing or developing a new startup don't really apply.

Everyone is breaking new ground and just trying to navigate through as best as possible. What has got us through was being able to cut costs as much as possible, and focus on selling to customers in industries less hard hit by COVID, and particularly to smaller businesses who have been getting on with non-customer facing business work while they wait for things to open back up again.

Where are you at today?

Given the current crisis, we are managing surprisingly well, despite some of the sectors we would usually be sold to at this time being among those hardest hit by the pandemic. We have a number of resellers worldwide, and are making sales both here in the UK and abroad.

Meanwhile, we're continuing to demonstrate various ways in which our product can be used in preference to welding or drilling into shipping containers, and most importantly, having fun in the process of making the videos and accompanying material that goes with them.

What advice would you give to other founders or future founders?

"Don't do it alone. Get as many people around you that you can call on for support as possible."

There will be times when it will likely be far harder than you imagine it could possibly get, and you'll need people to turn to then. Other people; their work, advice, skills and support will always be your most valuable asset.

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Article by Justin Beardsell