

Brew masters



An espresso-loving couple in Milton, Ontario saw a void in the market and decided to fill it by launching a website supported by a physical store that caters specifically to “the coffee enthusiast”

By Laurie O'Halloran

Slawek Janicki is a lifelong lover of good coffee. But 10 years ago, when his children were young, and he and his wife Anna needed a good, strong cup of espresso more than ever, he had trouble finding a retailer who specialized in premium espresso-making equipment. So when he got the chance to launch a brand new business, he knew exactly what he wanted to do, and in 2009 idrinkcoffee.com officially made its debut.

Born in Poland, Slawek moved to Canada with his family when he was just three years old. He grew up in Mississauga, Ontario where he met his future wife, Anna, in elementary school. After studying English Literature and Economics at York University, he and

Anna were married in 2004.

He worked at various sales and marketing positions, and was a partner in a business distributing satellite and cable across North America, when his first child was born in 2005. By the time his second arrived in 2007, Slawek was ready for a career change. When a third party offered to buy his half of the company, he happily accepted and used the buyout money to finance his new coffee equipment business.

“As a coffee enthusiast, I had noticed an absence of good suppliers in Canada,” he says. “I wanted to offer consumers the high-end espresso makers that I had trouble finding.”

With plenty of internet sales experience, he knew he wanted to be an om-

nichannel retailer and started to build the company’s website in 2008. He had leased two buildings for his previous company, one in Mississauga and one in Milton, a growing suburban community about an hour east of Toronto. He kept the Milton location for his new physical store and rented out the other one. In early 2009, both the website and the 2,200-square-foot retail store launched, with coffee as the one and only focus.

“Our goal was simply to bring great tasting coffee to people who truly appreciate it – without any pretension or snobbery,” he explains.

The name ‘idrinkcoffee.com’ perfectly reflected the spirit and nature of his business, but it was already taken so Slawek had to buy the URL from its pre-



Owners Slawek and Anna Janicki have been married for 12 years and have worked together for four years.



Retail Profile: idrinkcoffee.com

vious owner. And knowing the importance of advertising from his past job, he started promoting idrinkcoffee.com on Google AdWorks from day one.

Located in an industrial complex off one of Milton's main streets, the store got off to a frustratingly slow start. Slawek now admits that buying products was a real learning curve and he made a lot of mistakes at the beginning.

"Initially our stock was all wrong," he says. "We overbought on machines that didn't sell and underbought on the ones that did. I thought we would sell a lot of super automatic machines because they are convenient, fast and clean. But today they represent a small portion of our business because for our customers, the coffee quality is not as good as with a traditional espresso machine."

Over the years, Slawek learned to trust the numbers instead of his gut feelings. He learned what his customers would buy, and what they wouldn't. "The difference between what I thought then and what I know now is huge," he says with a laugh.

With inventory under control, sales started to grow steadily. They added a 4,500-square-foot warehouse and in 2013 Anna joined as office manager.

By July of 2015, idrinkcoffee.com was ready to move down the street to a larger, 13,300-square foot office and warehouse location. The company now employs eight people plus outside contractors and carries over 1,000 skus, from a \$29 Bodum French Press to a \$6000 Electra automatic espresso machine. They also offer grinders, beans and coffee accessories plus a commercial category which now accounts for 20% of the company's total sales.

"We continue to add to our line-up and carry a much larger selection than most of our competitors but it's a paradox," says Slawek. "Too much choice is generally not good because it can paralyze the customer's decision making."

Slawek sources his products from around the world and works mainly with European suppliers, though Breville is one of his top selling brands. He attends the HOST show in Italy every



Initially the store focused primarily on automatic machines but Slawek found that coffee-drinking purists preferred traditional espresso making techniques. Today, commercial machines account for 20% of total sales.





year as well as the Canadian Coffee and Tea Show and Restaurants Canada.

In addition to dealing with about 50 suppliers, Slawek devotes much of his time to working on the company's website, which is impressive. In addition to the huge product assortment, it features coffee brewing techniques and grinding tips as well as an overview of how coffee beans are grown and harvested.

After eight years in business, Slawek says what they have accomplished is "just a drop in the bucket" compared to the potential in the Canadian coffee-drinking market. Although there have been a few new competitors on the scene in recent years, he says he has "an abundance" mentality and believes there is room for more growth.

"We're in a position where we can expand because we are very strong in fulfilling orders and providing exceptional after-sale service," he says. "We are exploring some new online initiatives to increase sales and we're also considering opening satellite stores in Toronto and possibly western Canada."

Having a physical store to complement the online sales is very important to Slawek. Though he says his generation (he and Anna are both 35) is more comfortable shopping online, some customers still like to have the tactile experience of seeing the product first hand.

"Canadians are not yet very savvy about online buying compared to other countries," says Slawek. "In Britain,

about one quarter of all shopping is done online. In Canada, we're still in the single digits so there is plenty of room for e-commerce expansion.

The main difficulty of selling online in Canada, according to Slawek, is the sheer size of our country. They use FedEx, Canada Post and UPS but it takes longer to ship something to Winnipeg than it does to ship to anywhere in the continental U.S., where it only takes two days. "The distances are too great and we simply can't ship any faster than we do," he says. But the couriers are continually upgrading their services and Slawek is confident the delivery times will be reduced.

Of course, another problem with selling online is that it's a 24/7 job. It never stops, and the Janickis have worked to find balance in their lives. They are both early risers and like to get home early enough to spend evenings with their kids, especially if it involves watching soccer, their favourite sport.

Slawek still loves the entire coffee-making process just as much today. He often spends Saturdays in the store sharing his passion with customers. But he also knows it's time to slowly step back from the business he has built from the ground up. "A company has to be able to run without its owner for it to be worth anything", he says.

With a winning concept and an enterprising attitude, growth is definitely in the future for idrinkcoffee.com. ☕



The 13,300-square-foot head office, store and warehouse in Milton, Ontario carries about 1,000 skus, with most brands sourced directly from Europe.