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# Mr nice guy

Meet Sandy Chadha, a CEO who believes that honesty, integrity and personality are the key to selling absolutely anything.

IMAGES SUPREME IMPORTS

Supreme Imports entered the world of batteries almost by accident. Struggling with a failing retail business, Sandy attended a trade show to try to liquidate stock. What happened next changed the family business forever. “When I did that show, somebody—just by complete chance—gave us some Duracell batteries and said ‘I’ve got about £1,000 worth of these that I need to get rid of. Can I leave them on your stand and if you get any orders you can buy them from me?’,” says Sandy. “And I thought, there’s no harm in that, so I put them on display. There were just a few packets of Duracell batteries on the stand, but we got a lot of orders—like £30–40,000 worth—which, in those days, was a phenomenal amount of interest for us.”

Sandy thought that the interest in Duracell was a bit strange, until he discovered that although their batteries were available in large supermarkets, there was no distribution network in place to service the many thousands of independent wholesalers, cash and carries and retail stores across the UK. Demand was huge and Sandy approached Duracell to help fulfil his orders. Being the nice guy that he is, he didn’t want to let his new customers down.

“I went to Duracell and I said ‘I need to place some big orders, can you help me?’ They weren’t interested. They just said ‘We don’t have those channels, we’re not interested in supplying.’ So rather than just leaving it, because I did not want to let these customers down, I looked around, investigated the market and found that in Germany, Duracell batteries were sold cheaper—60 per cent cheaper than in the UK. So I went to Munich, which I thought would be a good place to start. I literally just went to the hotel and picked up the *Yellow Pages*, looked up battery wholesalers and made appointments to go and see them over the next three days.” >>



**Name** Sandy Chadha  
**Company** Supreme Imports  
**Position** CEO  
**HQ** Manchester, UK  
**Employees** 105





Sandy managed to raise the finance to fill his orders and bring stock back home. “And that shipment was the start of our battery market,” he says. After that, the business evolved rapidly. “As we grew, we attracted attention from Duracell itself,” Sandy says. “And also what I found during my travels in Europe, was that I could not only buy Duracell, but Panasonic, Eveready, and Energiser batteries. So I started to import a range of brands. It was then that we caught the attention of manufacturers in the UK, and by about 1996 we were sourcing batteries directly from manufacturers in the UK and became an official distributor. It’s one of those things where you look back and you think, ‘Did that really happen? That’s really how it all started?’”

Sandy was warned that he shouldn’t put all of his eggs in one basket, and couldn’t make a living from batteries alone. However, he saw things differently: “If you look at batteries and where they’re sold, they’re in every single market sector: convenience stores, petrol stations, hardware, chemists, toy stores, cash and carries, airports, literally any retail store, whether it be a supermarket, a chain like Marks and Spencer or a smaller independent gift store. It’s probably the most diversified product on the market

in terms of the different types of outlets that we sell to. So that’s the reason why we thought it would work and why, in fact, it has worked.”

The next phase of Supreme Import’s growth saw it move into licensing and manufacturing. Large brand names such as Polaroid, Philips, JCB, RAC and Eveready approached the business and requested its help in establishing a presence in the valuable battery market. Supreme Imports manufactured the batteries under licence in China, brought them back to the UK and then marketed and distributed them throughout Europe. It then looked to the private-label market, snaring among others a contract with ASDA, who are the second largest retailer of batteries in the UK. The business was going from strength to strength, when Sandy decided to diversify and expand the company’s offering to the 6,300 customers on their books to include lighting. Sandy says it’s been a phenomenal success for the company, although it’s not his greatest achievement.

“The biggest highlight in terms of success is that two years ago we launched a range of vaping products, which we manufacture in Europe,” says Sandy. “The success of that—from a zero standing start to 10 per

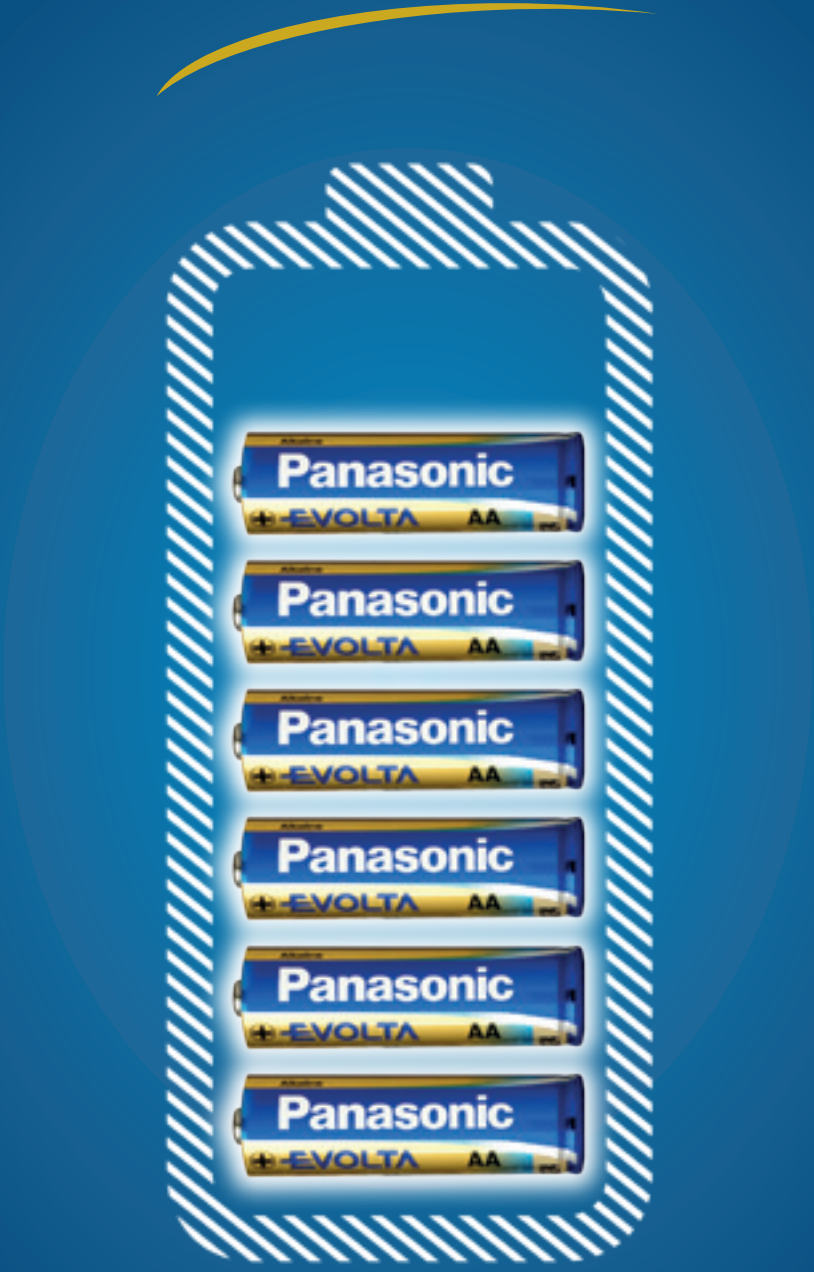
**“It’s one of those things where you look back and you think, ‘Did that really happen like that? That’s how it started?’” - Sandy Chadha**

cent of market share, and revenues of over £25 million this year—has been amazing.”

This phenomenal growth has been brought about by a completely self-motivated and loyal team. Sandy’s style is not just about being open and honest, it’s also quite hands off. “Most of my staff have been with us for 10, 15, 20 years,” he says. “They’ve all stayed loyal and I think one of the reasons is due to our ‘share profit scheme’, where people take home a percentage of any work they bring in to the business. It’s open ended, too, so I tell my staff that any one of them can become a millionaire working for us, and there are people reaching that level now. So if you work hard, are reliable, and look after your customers, you will be able to take home more and more money. It works well and it means I don’t really need to manage them. In fact, we have no middle management at all; no one managing the sales team, no one managing the buying team. They self-manage, driven by their motivation from the incentive schemes that we have in place.”

It’s an approach that has made the company very successful, as has Sandy’s approach to hiring. “I think the thing with a great team,” he explains, “is that you don’t need the smartest or most intelligent people, you just need people who are loyal, hard-working, and who are actually nice people. Customers want to deal with nice people. If you’re nice and have the right charm about you, you’ll win business. Your personality is sometimes more important than what you sell and how you sell it.” ■

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