

David A. Wernick
John Branch
Johanna Clancy

case 8-084-583
October 18, 2024

The Belfast Distillery Company: Reviving an Iconic Spirits Brand and Taking It Global

“What’s happening is—and you see this in many different markets—the younger generation are rejecting the current brands or categories and looking to be decision makers, opinion formers, and do something different. And that’s where brands like ours and categories like Irish whiskey become relevant.”

—John Kelly, CEO, Belfast Distillery Company¹

It was a crisp April morning in 2023 and John Kelly was deep into his morning commute. He was also deep in thought. As his car swung past the political murals along the Falls Road in West Belfast, Kelly thought about the surprising turn his career had taken. In the span of a few short years, he had gone from heading up drinks giant Diageo’s business in the Middle East and North Africa to becoming the CEO of a company that was resurrecting an iconic Irish whiskey brand and helping to revive spirit-making in a city that once produced more whiskey than any other on the planet.²

What’s more, Kelly was overseeing the construction of a \$28-million project that would include a distillery and visitor center inside a decommissioned Victorian-era prison whose occupants had included some of the country’s most infamous political figures and paramilitary fighters. The J&J McConnell’s Distillery and Visitor Experience, slated to open in early 2024, was expected to become a major tourist attraction and symbol of the industrial city’s renaissance. The complex would create 50 jobs staffed by individuals from various sides of the Irish sectarian divide, thereby helping to promote peace and prosperity in an area that recently had known little of either.

Yet Kelly’s mind this morning was fixed on more immediate matters: implementing his company’s strategic plan for taking McConnell’s Irish Whisky from a small-time player in the fast-growing Irish spirits industry to a leading global brand with expressions in the premium and super-premium categories. That plan involved growing the nearly 250-year-old brand’s market share in its home territory as well as in key overseas markets. Kelly had a wealth of creative marketing ideas, a talented team of industry professionals,

Published by WDI Publishing, an initiative of the William Davidson Institute (WDI) at the University of Michigan.

©2024 David A. Wernick, John Branch, and Johanna Clancy. This case was written by David A. Wernick, Teaching Professor, Florida International University, John Branch, Clinical Associate Professor of Business Administration at the University of Michigan’s Ross School of Business, and Johanna Clancy, Assistant Professor, University of Galway. The case was prepared as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a situation and was written based on both primary and secondary data. The case should not be considered criticism or endorsement and should not be used as a source of primary data. A representative of Belfast Distillery Company reviewed and approved the case before publication.