

It's a tough economic climate out there, but that hasn't stopped a number of brave Irish entrepreneurs, writes **Niamh Hennessy**

EVERY day last year 36 businesses were formed in the midst of one of the worst recessions to ever hit the country. This was despite a lack of bank credit, plunging consumer spending and a hike in unemployment rates.

Mirroring this entrepreneurial activity, however, is the number of businesses that collapsed. In 2009, 12,000, or almost 33 a day, closed their doors.

Niall McHenry is one of the many entrepreneurs who took the plunge during the recession and decided to set up his own business.

"All of a sudden, everyone was cutting back on their spending and looking for ways to save money. I felt that there was no website offering value-conscious consumers the right mix of research, editorial and deals," he says.

McHenry launched his website, saveafewbob.ie, last July, offering users tips on how to save money.

"Setting up a new business presents several challenges. It can be difficult but I try and stay positive," McHenry says.

"There is definitely financial pressure. I miss not having a monthly salary and have had to cut back drastically on my own lifestyle. To date, I have funded the business myself through my redundancy payment, cashing in small investments and selling my car."

Despite the challenges, McHenry says he is proud of what he has achieved and plans to develop the site this year and is also hoping to attract an investor.

Funding also proved an issue for Aoife Horgan and Cathy Cowan who set up their own PR firm last year. Both had worked in the industry for a few years and decided to go it alone.

"There were not many funding options available to us as we were not setting up a company that is seen as providing an exclusive new service or unique product," says Cowan. "As we are not employing any personnel or investing in premises just yet we were not eligible for any grants. We had to use our own savings and a small bank loan to get things started."

The most difficult part of setting up the business was the lack of security that comes with having an employer.

"There is no regular wage in the early stages and if there are any diffi-



We felt the fear but did it anyway



← Oonagh Levis and Mary Leahy from Giftguru.ie (right) and Aodan Enright (above) of Smarter Egg.



>> Aoife Horgan and Cathy Cowan of The PR Boutique; and, (above, left), part-owner Michael Dronney and chef Colin Shannon of the Sextant bar in Cork city.

Top left picture: Denis Scannell

culties you really have to rely heavily on each other and try to work through it," says Horgan. "In saying that, we find it extremely satisfying to know that all the hours we put in are for our own benefit and we will reap the rewards."

They also have no regrets about their decision.

"We have seen how many businesses failed in the height of the boom so there can easily be many successful ventures in a recession. Hopefully The PR Boutique will be one of those," says Cowan.

Another internet firm set up towards the end of last year is Giftguru.ie, which is an extension to an existing business, Town & Country Hampers.

Oonagh Levis and Mary Leahy said it took a lot of "blood, sweat and tears" getting the website started.

"The busy Christmas season gave us a great start and a great idea of what people like to buy," says Levis.

Over the next five years Levis

and Leahy want to expand the business and they have a strong belief that they will survive the downturn. The advice they would give anybody starting out now is to go with your gut instinct.

"If you believe in it, and are willing to work hard, you can't fail," says Levis.

Head of small business with Bank of Ireland, Damian Young says there is still a vibrant entrepreneurial spirit evident in Ireland. "2010 should be viewed with some optimism," says Young. "The faster pace of recovery in Europe, the US and other countries offers growth opportunities for export orientated start-ups."

"Indeed, the stabilisation of Ireland's finances should help to instil more consumer confidence and business activity in 2010. In addition, the Government's extension to its corporation tax exemption for start-ups makes 2010 an attractive year to start a business."

He said that there are some signs of optimism. "The outlook for 2010 is that overall start-up

activity will remain at between 13,000 and 15,000 new companies being formed this year."

One sector that has been badly hit over the last two years is bars and restaurants. This didn't stop a group of Cork businessmen who decided to renovate The Sextant in Cork and develop it into a bar, serving lunches.

Part-owner Michael Dronney says the business is doing well but survival is all about innovation.

"We set up in the middle of the recession so first off we said we wanted to stand out. We are more than happy with how things are going, especially in the middle of a downturn," says Dronney.

Among the innovations at the Sextant is a 'pig on a spit' night on the first Friday of every month.

The passion to be successful encouraged Aodan Enright of Smarter Egg to set up his firm, which runs courses for other businesses.

"I stepped away from a well-paid corporate career to start

my own business, knowing that it would be a tough learning experience. But I suppose I was ready for the adventure," says Enright.

"For me, the most challenging aspect of starting up was convincing myself that I could be successful with it."

"Funnily enough, when the recession kicked in and I began hearing stories of how people were struggling, I began to realise that success was really on my own terms and not a matter of making as much money as the next guy."

Enright says he had many moments of indecision, worry, fear and confusion around the business but that now he has definitely no regrets.

There's no doubt that running a business is tough going, but for anybody thinking of setting up on their own, Mary O'Riordan, who established online show room Perfect Curtains last year, has this advice.

"Failure is more frequently from want of energy than from want of capital," says O'Riordan

Five tips for staying in business

- 1. Cut costs**
Cut out every unnecessary expense, no matter how painful.
- 2. Hire the right people**
People can make a business, so hire right and invest in staff.
- 3. Take it seriously**
Give it everything. Your business shouldn't be viewed as a hobby. If you want to succeed put the work in. Be prepared to spend money to make some money.
- 4. Competing on price**
It's all about low prices now as consumers tighten their purse strings. Value is everything.
- 5. Promote yourself**
Get promoting. People will rarely come looking for you. Marketing and PR are more important now than ever.

Arts/MONDAY

Stephen's day: Sondheim hits high 'note' of 80

STEPHEN Sondheim, the father of the 20th century American musical, is 80 today. The composer/lyricist of shows including Sweeney Todd, Into the Woods, and A Little Night Music was a pioneer in musical theatre and his name is synonymous with the art form.

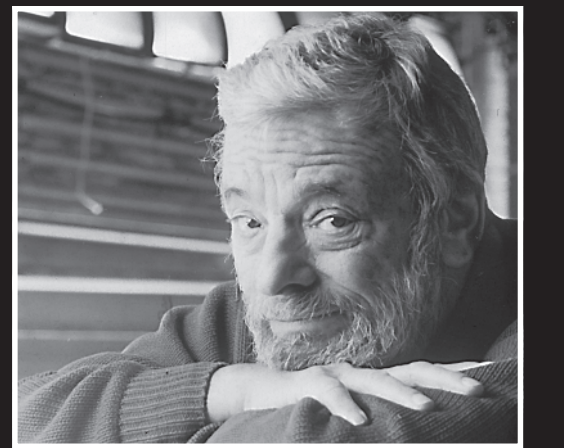
With 50 years of prolific output, Sondheim's career has been integral to the evolution of the musical. Emerging in the late 1950s, when musicals were lightly operatic, Sondheim defined the modern musical. He is the most garlanded composer in musical theatre, winning eight Tony awards, the most ever won by a composer. Three of these he won in consecutive years, a feat never since replicated. He has won an Oscar and a Pulitzer prize.

Though an established figure on Broadway by the mid-1970s, Sondheim was largely unknown to a wider public. Judy Collins' Grammy award-winning recording of his song, Send in the Clowns, was a huge hit. Likewise, the compilation show, Side By Side By Sondheim, emphasised the humour in his work.

Barbra Streisand's The Broadway Album, in 1985, a multi-million selling phenomenon, brought Sondheim's music to a huge, new, mainstream audience. Tim Burton's 2007 film version of Sweeney Todd, starring Johnny Depp, introduced Sondheim to a younger generation.

One of musical theatre's most innovative composers celebrates a milestone today, says **Patrick Talbot**

Stephen Sondheim is the most garlanded composer in the history of musical theatre, winning eight Tony Awards, the most ever won by a composer. Three of these he won in consecutive years, a feat never since replicated. He has also won an Oscar and a Pulitzer Prize.



right time had much to do with Sondheim's beginnings in musical theatre. His new neighbours were Oscar Hammerstein and family. Hammerstein was the legendary composer of such classics as South Pacific and The King and I.

Stephen had been taking piano lessons from a young age. By 15, he had written his first show, By George. Hammerstein was then preoccupied with composing Oklahoma, but his ambitious young neighbour insisted that he give him a professional analysis of By George. Hammerstein did. He thought the work was rubbish, and explained why. Thus began

one of the most fruitful teacher/student relationships in the history of show business.

Having graduated as a major in music, Sondheim tried to establish himself in musical theatre in New York. At a party, Sondheim approached the famous playwright, Arthur Laurents, and asked him what he was working on. Laurents replied that he was writing the script for a musical version of Romeo and Juliet, with composer Leonard Bernstein. "Who's doing the lyrics?" Sondheim cheekily asked. Nobody was. Laurents suggested he play some songs for Bernstein. The rest is history.

When West Side Story opened in 1957, it not only launched Sondheim's Broadway career, it heralded a new era in American musical theatre. A musical depicting ethnic gang wars on the streets of New York was unprecedented. The lesson was that musicals could address contemporary themes. Sondheim followed this success with the lyrics for Gypsy, and then the score and lyrics for A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum, and Anyone Can Whistle. But it was two musicals in the early 1970s that defined Sondheim as an innovator.

Company is a concept musical

about a single man's relationship with five married couples. It challenges pre-conceptions about marriage and emotional attachments.

Follies centres on a reunion of retired showgirls in a dilapidated theatre. It is a hymn to theatre itself, but with a nasty edge as the marriages of the two central couples crumble like the theatre in which the show is set. Ambiguity about human relationships became a defining theme. As the character, Robert, sings in Company: "Keep a tender distance. So we'll both be free./That's the way it ought to be. I'm ready!" This was Sondheim developing not just as a songwriter, but as a dramatist.

Sondheim continued to experiment. Pacific Overtures was presented in the Japanese Kabuki style. Sunday in the Park with George was based on the painting by Georges Seurat. Assassins was a daring study of the lives of the assassins of American presidents. Never very interested in film, he was persuaded by Warren Beatty to compose for Reds, and Dick Tracy. The song Sooner Or Later, from the latter, sung by Madonna, won an Oscar.

While revivals of his shows are constant, to mark his 80th birthday a summary of his career, Sondheim on Sondheim, will open in New York in May.

■ West Side Story is now at the Cork Opera House. Side By Side By Sondheim will be at the Everyman Palace from April 22.