

# SWEET 2016 FOR GALA

Since the start of 2016, Gala has opened a fleet of new stores. As retailers turn to the brand in growing numbers, IF&CR speaks to CEO Gary Desmond about the recent successes

**G**ala is one of Ireland's most exciting convenience retailers. A completely Irish-owned operation, it prides itself on reliable structures and powerful communication.

The brand surged in popularity toward the end of 2015, while the first quarter of 2016 saw the fascia fronting a swathe of new stores across the country.

Speaking to Ireland's Forecourt & Convenience Retailer, CEO Gary Desmond told us more about the new sites.

"Since the start of the year, we've opened seven new Gala stores, with another three stores on the cusp of opening," he said. "Five of the new stores are in forecourt sites, namely Adare, Ballymahon, Bunclody, Clarecastle and Glenties, and our forecourt stores now account for almost 50 per cent of our portfolio.

"Since the start of the year, we've been inundated with enquiries both from new retailers to Gala, and from our store owners who are looking to expand. Finally, it seems that the economy is bouncing back but the turnaround has certainly been at a varying pace, dependent on location."

Gary said the group company forecasting 20 new Gala stores in 2016 with quarter one's addition of seven stores representing "a great start".

So what is it that Gala are able to offer above its competitors?

"At Gala Retail, we have the structures and expertise in place to deliver first class advice and support in convenience retailing," Gary told us. "As an Irish brand that's owned by a number of prominent wholesalers, situated nationwide, we combine head office expertise with invaluable local knowledge, service and support.



“Our weekly engagement figures are incredible”

"This joint approach offers retailers the best of both worlds, and has been a key reason why our retailers are in partnership with Gala for the long haul.

"In addition, our focus on community retailing is a central pillar in everything that we do. Working within a Gala framework, every Gala store is tailored to meet the needs of its community.

"Gala retailers retain a level of independence within the Gala group, as they know their community best. From our store owners to our marketing efforts, which include Special Olympics Ireland and parkrun Ireland, our goal is

to ensure that community retailing in Ireland remains synonymous with Gala."

Gala's connection with the Special Olympics has gained a lot of traction for the brand, but it has also had a positive impact on those competing in the games.

Gary said: "Last year, Gala became one of the main sponsors of Team Ireland at the Special Olympics World Summer Games, when Ireland brought home an incredible 82 medals. It was a truly special sponsorship for Gala, with many #GalaSpecialMoments, and engagement from retailers, shoppers and our online audience was incredible!

"Following last year's partnership, we wanted to continue supporting this amazing organisation, and in March we announced one of Gala's largest-ever sponsorship deals – a four-year partnership with Special Olympics Ireland that follows the four-year Olympic cycle.

"All of our stores and their communities know either Special Olympics athletes, volunteers or someone within the Special Olympics family. Therefore, it's a partnership that resonates with the Gala Group, and one that we're extremely proud, and privileged, to be associated with.

"Our sponsorship has already commenced with Gala supporting 90 all-island Area Events and the Ireland Winter Games. In addition, we'll be involved with the World Winter Games (2017), the Special Olympics European Games (2018) and the 2019 World Summer Games."

Gala has developed a strong partnership with the forecourt sector, and according to Gary, it's an area into which the brand wants to continue to expand.

"This is a huge area of growth for Gala and I would see this continuing for the rest of the year and beyond," he said. "Many of our forecourt stores are amongst the best in the country, for



Ben McGinn, Paula Mee, Fiona Gratzler, John Ireland enjoy the Gala Good 4 Me Range

example, the Gala forecourt store on the Kylemore Road that opened last year is performing particularly well.

"In addition, we're incredibly proud to have a number of award-winning forecourt retailers in the Group including Mulrooneys Gala in Roscrea, Mullin's Gala in Sligo and Gala in Patrickwell, Co Limerick, to name but a few. We're focused on delivering more Gala stores within forecourts as it's a formula that's working incredibly well."

Gala's proactive marketing is one of its greatest strengths, with the brand amassing a successful social media audience with over 123,000 Facebook followers alone.

While most retail brands still struggle with the medium, we wanted to know how Gala had managed to get a return from this complex area.

"Our massive online audience has been a huge success for Gala over the past few years," Gary said. "We've focused resources and funds on building the audience, and our weekly engagement figures are incredible. Unique content, aspirational prizes and great offers all drive the conversation and in terms of delivering



Tony Cluskey (Gala) with Anna Foley, Matthew and Aoife Jackson, and Matt Shields at the first junior parkrun event

for the business, we're now seeing the fruits of our labour.

"The Gala Retail Facebook page enables us to have an immediately accessible online audience to communicate with when we're promoting new initiatives, introducing footfall, driving promotions, and such. Also, in terms of ensuring a constant presence for the Gala brand, it delivers day in, day out."

With the rest of 2016 set to be an exciting year for the group, we asked Gary what was in the pipeline for the brand.

"We have a major focus on marketing this year with many high-profile initiatives already in planning," he told IF&CR. "From our four-year partnership with Special Olympics, to being a major supporter of parkrun Ireland, 2016 has got off to a great start.

"The parkrun phenomenon has continued to grow, increasing the number of locations by 20 per cent since the start of the year, and Ireland's first junior parkruns have been introduced.

"With thousands of people now participating weekly in parkrun, this is a central activity in Gala's 'Your Choice with Gala' health and wellness strategy, which we launched last year.

"Also as part of 'Your Choice with Gala', we've teamed up Ireland's longest-established slimming and health organisation – Unislim - to create an exclusive healthy eating concept – Good 4 Me."

Devised to provide healthier, convenient choices for busy shoppers, Good 4 Me is a range of lunch options, including sandwiches, wraps and baps, designed by Gala that consumers feel good about - all coming in at fewer than 400 kcals.

"The first phase of the roll out is almost complete and we'll be expanding the number of Gala stores who offer Good 4 Me over the coming months," he added.

"Lastly, later in the year, Gala will once again be the title sponsor of the IFTA Gala Television Awards and we'll be working with Disney throughout the year to offer our shoppers thousands of opportunities to see the latest Disney movies before they open to general release." IF&CR