

# MANAAKI

Putting your mahi where your mouth is

‘This business is called Manaaki because it’s actually about manaaki. Manaaki is more than “caring”; it is where you actually put the interests of others ahead of your own, and often to the detriment of yourself. That’s what everybody did — everyone who was part of this — they chose to give, never seeking anything in return,’ explains Pat MacFie.

Pat MacFie left online accounting giant Xero in July 2019 after four and a half years as global director of media to start Indigo. A month before New Zealand first locked down, former CEO of SME incubator The Icehouse (and Kiwi start-up sector superstar) Andy Hamilton joined the business. They were on track to do around \$2 million in the year ahead, providing growth strategy and execution support for mid-sized businesses. In the space of 72 hours, as the Covid crisis deepened, they lost three-quarters of a million dollars in cancelled bookings.

‘We woke up on Monday, 17 March, and we were essentially stuffed. We said, “What the f\*ck are we going to do here?!” recalls Pat.

‘What we knew is we had to do a couple of things really quick: eliminate as many fixed costs as possible, and try to understand the impact of the



problem. From my time at Xero, I really understood the extent to which small business underpins our communities, our families. We wanted, as much as possible, to make every effort so that nobody had to take a wage-cut and nobody would lose their job. That was the first thing that really galvanised our effort, alongside our desire to survive.’

The team worked quickly to understand what their capabilities were; what they could bring to bear to help. ‘Andy has a huge network. We have a team that knows how to execute really fast. I have my experience in brand. We realised that by putting all that together we could help small business, create a brand that unified the people we were helping, and speak to small business in a really authentic way.’

On the Wednesday of that week the team gave the green light to the project that has become Manaaki. They launched on the 25th, the first day of New Zealand’s Level 4 lockdown. The Manaaki platform was designed in-house, and built by a developer in Poland, and 75 advisers — experienced Kiwi businesspeople willing to give of themselves to help other businesses — stepped up.

The Manaaki team also had to get to as many as possible — so they enlisted high-profile sportspeople like Monty Betham, Ardie Savea, Roger Tuivasa-Sheck and Dillon Boucher, who can reach tens of millions through social media. ‘These guys helped us speak to real-life businesses through the other platforms, creating that initial momentum.’

Since its launch, 100,000 small

businesses have joined the Manaaki platform, and well over 300,000 individuals have engaged with social media content, including the Instagram Live interviews that the team produced throughout lockdown.

The Manaaki story isn’t just about advice, though: it provides practical support and powerful connections. The team have worked directly with social enterprises in dire straits during lockdown. For example, the Covid downturn meant Downlights — a social enterprise that provides living-wage jobs making candles to people with disabilities — were failing to raise on PledgeMe the \$150,000 they needed to buy a new piece of equipment. ‘They reached out for help, and we put the founder, Jen, on Instagram Live to talk about the initiative. We’d never had more than seven people on that Live. But this guy just so happened to tune in on this one occasion, and he donated \$25k. The next morning another business raised \$15k on our Live feed.’

One of the most memorable elements of Manaaki’s launch campaign was their *Love Letter to New Zealand Business*, a video of the Manaaki advisers reading the quotes that featured on their social media posts.

The appearance of Minister for Small Business Hon Stuart Nash and Prime Minister Rt Hon Jacinda Ardern on the video attracted some backlash, for perceived politicisation of the message. The team also ran into resistance from traditional media companies, who appeared opposed to Manaaki’s strong presence on Facebook.

Nevertheless, Pat and the Manaaki

team got the opportunity to speak with dozens of Kiwi businesses and business leaders, and in doing so got a sense of what made it possible for those that made it to succeed.

‘A big factor was just speed: they acted fast, they took decisive action. They were in a better position sooner, giving themselves the best opportunity to survive. Early on, their questions were around the wage subsidy, HR law, cost reduction. Once that was done, they asked “How do I connect with my customers?”’

Next, the team launched a second platform: Chooice. ‘We saw the gap in digital capability during lockdown. We ran a test called “1000 Websites”, and signed up 1,400 businesses to free online stores as a proof of concept.’

To do this, Manaaki partnered with the successful Facebook group ‘New Zealand Made Products’. Set up early on in lockdown, the group currently has 530,000 members, 500,000 of whom are New Zealanders. About 100,000 are small businesses, and around 50,000 are micro businesses. Rebranding as Chooice — ‘You know, like the New Zealand type of choice. Like “Choooooice!”’ — the team have created an e-commerce marketplace alongside the Facebook group, which includes a weekly live shopping broadcast. In the first week, 700 stores had been created. The first broadcast had an audience of some 30,000.

There is a longer-term goal, too. Pat explains: ‘We don’t own anything in the Shopify e-commerce space. All the payment gateways are international. New Zealand owns none of its digital

commerce infrastructure — Trade Me is Australian, Facebook is American. This is our first step in trying to take a bit of that back.’

Pat has heard the issues businesses are facing, and listened to the advice the Manaaki advisers share. So has he picked up any ideas on how we need to approach business today?

‘You need to be crystal-clear about what you can offer, and have a number of tests you can run as quickly as possible to validate that and give yourself confidence to go to the next step.’

‘The thing I’m most proud of is that in bringing this whole concept to the business realm, we were able to reframe the way that people perceive Māori in some small fashion. It’s not just that a world-class group of advisers and experts — our best and brightest businesspeople — gave of their time so freely under the moniker of a te ao Māori concept. And it’s not just that they have now colloquialised this term of manaaki; it’s that they have a bloody good understanding of it.’

‘You see these images of ex-pat Kiwis around the world doing the haka when New Zealand teams or organisations perform well on the global stage. They’re so invigorated and inspired — they can’t think of any other way to positively demonstrate their national pride than to do the haka. That’s what I think we gave our businesspeople through all this: the opportunity to do their haka for New Zealand on behalf of the business community, through this Māori lens. I’m immensely proud of that.’