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# LESSONS FROM GIN

Business the  
Four Pillars Way



**Matt Jones**

Co-founder, Four Pillars Gin



‘Matt is a world-class strategist with a wonderful ability to explain how organisations can build and leverage the power of branding to thrive in competitive markets. He is a truly consummate storyteller, and in *Four Pillars*, he has a great story to tell. Regardless of whether you are new to branding or a seasoned marketer, you should read this book.’

**Don O’Sullivan PhD, Professor of Marketing, Melbourne Business School**

‘Matt gets brands, understands the challenges businesses face and seems to get a genuine kick out of seeing others succeed.’

**Ellie Vince, CMO, Brown Family Wine Group**

‘Meeting Matt is like marketing therapy. I walk out feeling more supercharged than ever.’

**Ashik Ahmed, co-founder, Deputy**

‘Matt gets ‘it’ before most people even know there is an ‘it’ to get.’

**Alexandra Burt, proprietor, Voyager Estate**

‘Outrageously articulate, splendidly creative and profoundly pragmatic.’

**Colin Pidd, founding partner, ByMany**

‘A masterful, authentic storyteller.’

**Victoria Angove, managing director, Angove Family Winemakers**

‘With his characteristic wit and incisive wisdom, Matt has distilled what it takes to create a brand that is truly remarkable. If you’re looking for clear advice and practical insight on how to scale a business or idea, look no further than *Lessons from Gin*.’

**Michael McQueen, international bestselling author and change strategist**



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**Matt Jones**

**Co-founder, Four Pillars Gin**

**WILEY**

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*For Rebecca, who made all this possible. And for Harper and Jack,  
who shared a large part of their childhoods with their parents'  
determination to build something that mattered.*

*For John, the mentor I'm lucky enough to call my father.  
And for Eileen, who taught me to value every word (even if I still  
use too many).*

*For Cam, Leah, Sally and Stu. The greatest quartet  
of partners Bec and I could have dreamt of.*

*For everyone who has ever worked a day or a decade at Four Pillars,  
and everyone who has ever sold or bought a bottle of the good stuff.  
Without you, none of these lessons would have been learned.*

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Matt Jones** has enjoyed an eclectic career woven together by the common themes of creative strategy, storytelling, design, experiences and human behaviour.

Matt describes himself as a serial failure and an accidental entrepreneur, having moved from being a government economist to a political strategist to a global brand experience leader before going on to be co-founder of Australia's most loved and successful gin business, Four Pillars Gin.

An economics graduate, Matt's early professional roles took him first to the Defence Intelligence Staff and then HM Treasury in London's Whitehall. After studying for a Master's in International Relations, Matt moved into politics, becoming the head of Economic Section in the legendary Conservative Research Department in 2002, aged just 26. Matt went on to become the Conservative Party's chief political adviser.

In 2006, Matt moved from London to Sydney and from politics to brand strategy, joining the world's largest brand experience firm, Jack Morton Worldwide. Starting out as head of strategy in Australia, Matt moved to take on strategy for Jack Morton New York in 2009 before becoming leader of the Jack Morton global strategy and creative community in 2010.

In 2012, Matt and his young family relocated back to Australia where he set up his own brand purpose consultancy, Better Happy. He handed one of his first business cards to Stuart Gregor at a lunch in

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Surry Hills, and within a year Matt, Stu and Stu's best mate Cam were making plans to make gin together.

Today, Matt is the proud co-founder and brand director of Four Pillars Gin, a gin business that has been named the world's best gin producer an extraordinary three times by the International Wine and Spirits Competition in London. Matt is also a passionate keynote speaker, mentor, adviser, board member and collaborator with creative agencies, start-up businesses, corporate brands and not-for-profit organisations. He's also half of Think Story Experience, a boutique advisory firm he runs with his partner Rebecca Bourne Jones.

Matt describes himself the same way he did on his first Jack Morton business card back in 2006, as a creative strategist. You can learn more about Matt's work, experience, passions and interests on his website [www.thinkstoryexperience.com](http://www.thinkstoryexperience.com).

# PROLOGUE

## **What this book is. And what it's not.**

**W**elcome, friends. Before we begin, let's make sure you're in the right place. Because this is not the definitive story of Four Pillars Gin. At best, only a third of that story is mine to tell. So here it is, my side of the gin-soaked story and the lessons I took from over a decade of helping to build a world-class gin business.

Back in 2012, I crossed paths with two of the most extraordinary and talented humans I will ever meet: Cam and Stu. These two men would go on to change gin in Australia and change my life in the process: Cam with his drive, pragmatism and ability to become one of the world's great gin distillers; Stu with his entrepreneurial creative instincts, optimism and unparalleled ability to open doors and build relationships. Without them at the heart of everything, Four Pillars simply wouldn't have happened.

This book is the story of the things I did, or at least the things I contributed to—the value I (hopefully) added. The ways I helped shape how the Four Pillars story unfolded and how we successfully built an extraordinary business together and, in the process, led a craft spirits revolution in Australia that saw the number of distilleries in this country grow from under 30 to over 600 in a decade.

At the heart of my side of the Four Pillars story is how we ensured that the world-class gin product at the heart of our business always

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(or at least more often than not) got the credit it deserved and benefited from the positive bias that would help it grow. Bias is a concept I'm going to talk about a lot.

I will share some stories about how we made the world's best gin at Four Pillars and how we made sure the world knew about it. And, when all the talk of gin gets too much to take without reaching for a bottle of Four Pillars, there are also a few drinks breaks and recipes along the way too.

The book is divided into four key parts, reflecting what I see as the four key parts to building a business like Four Pillars Gin. They aren't perfectly chronological, although I do start at the beginning and end at the end (it's the middle where timelines get a little mixed up). Instead of being chronologically accurate, I've tried to bundle the stories and lessons in four big themes: *thinking* clearly about your business; *crafting* the core elements of your business; *sharing* the fruits of your craft with the world and getting the credit you deserve for it; and *growing* in the face of change, disruption, new opportunities but also new challenges.

I'd like to think these four phases are relevant whether you're a small start-up business or an established player. I'd also like to think you can apply this thinking to things that aren't businesses, such as a charity, an organisation, a movement or even the development of your own personal brand and career.

Each of the four sections of this book contains four 'useful bits', where I pull out the gin-soaked lessons from our experience and show how they can be applied to just about anything. They're definitely not rocket science, but they are (hopefully) a helpful guide to thinking in useful ways about the four key stages of starting and/or scaling any business:

1. How to think clearly about the business you're going to build. What decisions are you really making? Are you clear on the implications and reasoning behind those decisions?
2. How to identify and commit to the core craft at the heart of your business. What's your why? What's your how? And what business are you really in?



3. How to share the fruits of your craft and ensure you receive the credit you deserve for the value you create. And how to think about the role of emotion, design, storytelling and experiences in growing your business.
4. And, finally, how to navigate growth and change as your business succeeds, as it evolves and faces new challenges and opportunities. How to know when to stay the course and when to adjust to your new realities.

In other words, these sections are no replacement for a fully formed business, product, brand or marketing strategy—over time, you'll need all of those things—but they will help you think at a high level. And sometimes that high-level clarity is all you need to keep moving forward with confidence and conviction.

For anyone reading this book who loves gin, I hope it offers some fresh perspectives on what has made Four Pillars (I believe) the most exciting, innovative, uncompromising and simply delicious gin producer on the planet. And for anyone with their own idea for a business, a product, an organisation, a movement—whatever it may be—I hope this book gives you some frameworks to build your own layers of brand bias around your efforts, and ensure that you and whatever value you create get the credit you so richly deserve.

Lastly, please don't think I'm right—about anything really—whether it's how to build a great brand or how to stir the perfect martini. As the saying goes, 'all models are wrong, but some are useful'. I hope some of the models I talk about in this book are useful. And, perhaps by showing where these thought processes took the Four Pillars business, they can help you think about how to navigate wherever you want to go.

So don't read this book if you're looking for scientific marketing facts. There are no sure things when it comes to starting and growing a business. There are just decisions and choices to make. I hope this book prompts you to think about and make enough of the right decisions and choices. And I hope it inspires you to have fun and keep smiling while you do it.

Few of us can do what Cameron did (whether it's when he ran around a 400-metre track fast enough to get to the Olympics in 1996 or

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when he became the most awarded gin distiller on the planet), and I can say with confidence that I'll never meet another person with the room-filling charisma and personality of Stuart. But we've all got something we do well, something that gives us energy, and something we want to do with all that talent and passion. I hope this book inspires you to think about how to make the most of those possibilities.

And now, with all that said, and with those caveats in place, it's time to begin. Let's start a gin business.







**PART ONE**

# **Thinking**



# ONE

## **In the beginning, there was a decision**

**S**ometimes, very rarely, you come across a genuinely big idea. An idea that stops you in your tracks. An idea to make or do something wildly groundbreaking and completely novel. Perhaps even an idea that can change the world. This is not a book about big ideas like that.

In truth, there are few big, transformative ideas to be found. Most ideas (even the ones that do go on to change the world) are variations on previously explored themes – take Uber, which started out as an idea for a limo service that showed where your car was on a map (which, itself, was inspired by a device Daniel Craig’s James Bond used in the film *Casino Royale*). Or take the ‘idea’ to make gin. It’s hardly new. To make gin is simply to follow in the footsteps of Dutch genever makers from the 1600s and British gin barons from the 1700s (more on the history of gin in Chapter 3).

So, this is not a book about big ideas; instead, it’s about small ideas. The small ideas that, together, can help grow a business (and a brand...we’ll touch on that distinction later too). The small ideas that result from countless daily acts and decisions. So, really, this is a book about decisions.

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As you get older, you realise there are so many truths no one tells you when you're younger—like how much of parenting is actually logistics. Or, in this case, how much of the founding and leading of a business is just the seemingly endless task of making decisions (and living with the decisions you make). No wonder I felt so exhausted after the three COVID-affected years of 2020, 2021 and 2022. We had made so many rapid decisions on the fly and against a background of such uncertainty and constant change. It wasn't the school at home that exhausted me...it was the decision making at work.

Starting a business is merely a decision, one decision that leads to many others. Each of those decisions amounts to a small idea. Even the decision to not do something is, itself, a small idea with consequences and impact. Get enough of these small ideas right, execute enough of them brilliantly and you might be onto something. This is the truth of most businesses. There are no shortcuts. No magic bullets. No game-changing big ideas. Just decisions, choices, priorities, compromises, mistakes, hustle and execution. But I'm already jumping ahead because we haven't got to the first decision yet.

The decision to make gin wasn't mine. It was Stu's and Cam's.

Cam is an Olympian. Both literally and figuratively. Literally, because he dragged his body around a running track fast enough to make Australia's 400-metre relay team at Atlanta in 1996 (he made the semis, if you're wondering, and in some very questionable running shorts). Figuratively, because he has a capacity for determination, execution and excellence that puts him in the top-three people I would take into any battle with me. He also happens to be wildly creative, have an extraordinary palate and is one of the funniest, most engaging people I've ever spent time with. Yep, in short, if you were designing the perfect co-founder and distiller for a craft gin business, you'd end up with Cameron Mackenzie.

And then there's Stuart. If generosity was an Olympic discipline, Stu would doubtless be an Olympian too. Like Cam, he's genuinely hilarious. Like Cam, he has an extraordinary palate. And, like Cam, he had spent decades in the Australian booze industry. Unlike Cam, Stu had gone on to build one of Australia's great communications agencies, specialising in the food and drink space. So Stu knew people, he knew business and he knew stuff. Between the two of them, we had the raw material to do something special in gin.



In the past, Stu and Cam had decided to make wine together (twice), buy stakes in racehorses together (too often) and not work in the same office together (again). And now here they were making a new decision. To make gin together. But this decision was different. It came with a caveat. This time, they would get a third partner involved: me.

Cam and Stu had both worked in and around the wine industry for years, both with a deep knowledge and passion for wine and spirits of all types. Cameron had spent time getting his hands dirty in production, operations and distribution roles, while Stu had built an extraordinary PR and communications business, Liquid Ideas, and had become arguably one of Australia's most sought-after strategic partners for wine brands (and all kinds of food, drink and hospitality businesses). These two, in other words, were made to make gin together.

If Cam and Stu were both made to go into the gin business, I was the less obvious contributor to the success of Four Pillars. My background is an eclectic one, starting off as a UK Government economist, moving first into politics as a policy adviser then a speechwriter then a communication strategist, moving into the world of brand and brand agencies.

By the time I met Cam and Stu, I had spent 15 years advising people and businesses, from future prime ministers like Theresa May and David Cameron to global brands like Samsung and Google. Locally, I had advised future unicorns (i.e. billion-dollar companies) like Deputy, and all manner of great Australian businesses and brands from AMP and the NRMA to Voyager Estate and St. Agnes.

But giving advice is one thing; putting your own advice into practice is quite another. So, while I didn't lack confidence in my abilities, I hadn't yet had the opportunity to use my skills and experience to create something myself. And now I was going to do it in a category where I had near zero professional experience (albeit a fair bit of experience as a consumer).

What drew me to gin? In short, it seemed to me that gin provided that rarest of opportunities: to create a truly differentiated (and better) product that would still need creative thinking and brand-building to get it the credit it deserved. As someone who has never been a fan of traditional, advertising-led marketing and who believes the world is already full of enough stuff and doesn't need more commoditised

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clutter, the opportunity to help create better gin and to make sure Cam's and Stu's efforts would get the credit they deserved was too tempting to say 'no' to. I was in.

In moving from that first decision (to make gin, not tonic) to that next decision (to find a third partner) to the next decisions (the partner would be me and I would say 'yes' to the opportunity), we were learning our first important lessons about starting a business.

There's no one thing that defines a business and determines whether it will succeed, fail or (in many cases) tick along doing neither. A business is simply the sum total of the consequences of its decisions.

Stu, Cam and I have made literally thousands of decisions over a decade of building Four Pillars Gin. I guess we must have got enough of them right that I'm sitting here writing this book. And, in the next chapter, I'll explore some of the ways that we (sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously, and sometimes with pure serendipity) approached making our first big decisions together.

## TWO

# Okay, so we're doing this. But doing what, exactly?

**I**'ve told the Four Pillars story ~~hundreds~~ thousands of times over the past decade, and someone will always ask, 'Where did the idea of making gin come from?' And I've always been keen to own the fact that making gin was not an idea, it was a decision.

I'm not trying to be contrary here or split linguistic hairs for the sake of it. I'm trying to help clarify what I suspect is, for most of us, the experience of creating a business, which is to say that we make a decision to take action and do something.

Writing this now can risk being a reinvention of history, a making sense of what happened in a way that feels far more structured and strategic than it really was. So, now, here's the truth of how we moved through these steps.

It was 2012, and I'd been working with Stu and his Liquid Ideas team for a few months. It was clear we shared a perspective on how brands got built and what worked in this new socially wired landscape. While our working and communications styles are quite different, our ways of thinking are remarkably aligned, and from day one I felt this

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was someone I could work with and learn from. In addition, we both loved food and wine (about which he knew infinitely more than me) and shared a passion for Manchester United. The building blocks of friendship and partnership were in place.

Stu wanted me to meet his mate Cameron. He and Cam had played around with making wine together for years, first under the Donny Goodmac brand, then as part of Dirty Three Wines (where Marcus and Lisa are still making sensational wine to this day down in Gippsland, Victoria). Now, they were talking about making gin, but hadn't got serious about it.

Our first dinner in Surry Hills was a chance for Cam to meet me. I don't know what Stu had told him in advance, but Cam was a natural sceptic when it came to bullshit-peddling, self-styled, brand-marketing gurus, so it was probably an opportunity for him to judge whether he could work with me or not. The smart money was on not.

Somehow I passed the test, and the second dinner happened at Cam's place in Healesville in the Yarra Valley. We talked about gin, and gin drinks, and Stu even invented a signature serve for the gin we hadn't yet made. He called it the Keating (gin, tonic, Campari, lime—sophisticated, perhaps even a bit pretentious, slightly bitter, just like our former PM). The next day, pretty worse for wear, we talked more over breakfast and I walked away with the job of writing up our first (very basic) business and brand plan.

Two dinners, one hungover breakfast and one PowerPoint presentation, and suddenly this thing felt real, and we were agreeing to put some money in the bank to send Stu and Cam to the USA to learn more. Perhaps, ironically for a business that has been shaped so much by the fact that all three co-founders were bald/forty-something/experienced, we had the humility to begin by identifying what we didn't know. In short, we didn't know anything about making gin.

At this stage, some context would be helpful. In 2012, there were fewer than 30 distilleries operating in Australia, and Tasmanian whisky was arguably the only Australian spirit making waves (with the exception of Bundy, of course). As I write this in 2024, there are over 600 distilleries operating in Australia. And between them they make around 300 different gins. It's hard to imagine how little precedent there was in Australia for what we were about to do.