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Flight Club co-founder: Innovation is written into our business objectives



Steve Moore is co-founder of Flight Club CREDIT: FLIGHT CLUB

By **Matthew Caines**

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After circumnavigating the globe in a fire engine, Steve Moore was inspired to set up Flight Club, a chain of bars on a mission to refresh darts.

Before Steve Moore became an entrepreneur, he led record-breaking expeditions.

The co-founder of [Flight Club](http://flightclubdarts.com/) – a chain of venues where punters play rounds of “social darts” – can trace his start-up journey to 2010, when he embarked on a nine month-long circumnavigation of the globe, executing the epic trip in a mode of transport more suited to a dozen miles than 25,000: a fire engine.

“The whole project was ridiculously ambitious,” remembers Moore, who lost his firefighter father to lung cancer the year before and wanted to raise money for charity. “We planned for 28 countries and five continents – plus a Guinness World Record for the longest journey in a fire engine.”

It was a mammoth operation that required an intense year of preparation and research. There was a crew of 25 co-drivers, who would swap in and out along the way, plus fixers in most of the countries.

“There were about 200 people involved,” says Moore, who knew nothing about logistics and project management at the time. “I took some truck maintenance and Russian classes, and went on an SAS survival course.”

Returning to London in 2011 and having raised £120,000, Moore reflects that he was inspired, if a little sore from his off-road adventure. “The biggest takeaway was realising the potential of what you could achieve with just people – getting them to work together and calling in favours.”

People-power is precisely what Moore would use when he swapped fire engines for dart flights a year later. In 2012, he and Paul Barham, an old friend and Flight Club’s other co-founder, were catching up in a Croydon pub. “There were some young people having a blast playing [knockout game] Killer on a dart board. We saw an opportunity.”

The duo wanted to bring that same energy and fun back to darts, which they felt had become dated and dull. The plan was to launch with a London venue: a fully-functional bar that served food and hosted competitive darts party games in booths.

Moore drew on his experience of putting together a team for the fire truck trip, surrounding himself with people who knew what he didn’t.

“I had never owned a bar, but a friend from school ran nine in the capital, so we got hold of him. A friend from university also owns an accounting company, so we asked for some help.” Calling in favours is crucial when starting a company, he adds.

“We went nuts on focus groups, doing three or four a week for about 18 months”

Steve Moore, Flight Club

Answers were less forthcoming for the darts experience itself. Moore’s Flight Club vision was to have camera-based, auto-scoring technology at every oche, to show where on the board the darts hit.

The scores would be recorded live, flashing up on a screen next to the players, who wouldn’t have to spend time chalking-up points and doing mental sums to work out the scores.

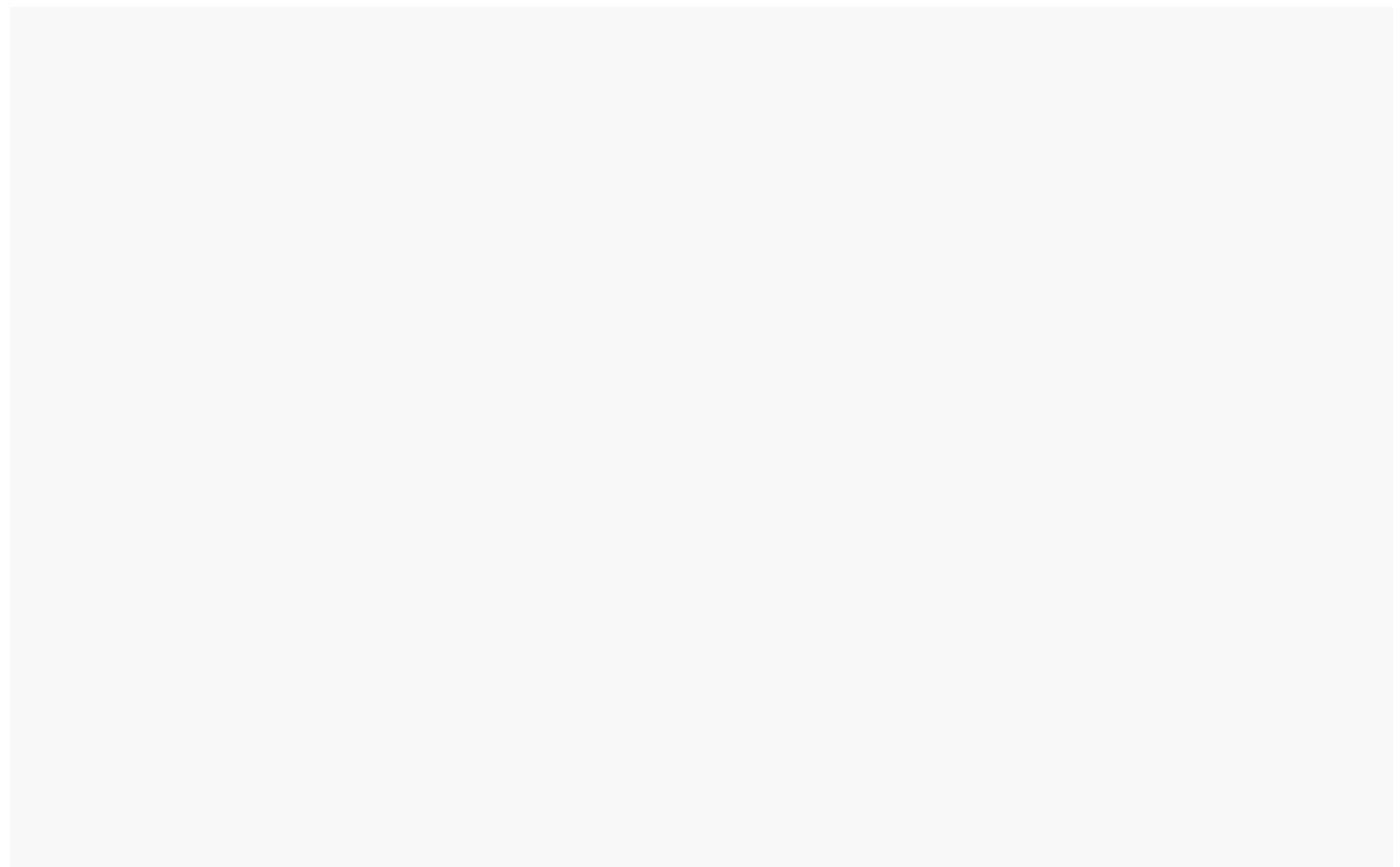
The problem was that it hadn’t been built yet.

“We knew that [sports tech company] Hawk-Eye had tried it, but failed,” says Moore, who even put the challenge to PhD students as part of a country-wide university competition. No one could figure it out. Again, Moore leaned on other people, leveraging his network of contacts to solve the fundamental issue and secure a key hire.

“We knew a camera systems contact who supplied Hawk-Eye with its kit,” says Moore. “He knew a specialist who worked with Nasa [on autonomous in-flight refuelling systems] and who might have the answer.” That person was Dr Jason Dale – and he did. He’s now the company’s technical director.

With Dale’s tech, the co-founders could finally build a working system, having brainstormed dozens of darts games with chalkboards and Excel spreadsheets on a test board in Moore’s living room.

“We went nuts on focus groups, doing three or four a week for about 18 months,” he adds.



Punters enjoy a game of 'social darts' at a Flight Club venue CREDIT: FLIGHT CLUB

The team was still very nervous when a dozen oches were installed at their launch venue in Shoreditch.

“When we opened the doors [in 2014], we thought that a few people would come in and play, but we were full,” says Moore.

“I remember thinking: this system was just in my lounge and now we’ve got hundreds of people using 12 of them.

“That first day was so unenjoyable,” says the co-founder, who admits that the team took a huge risk on the tech side, having tested it in such a limited environment before rolling it out for commercial launch.

The business employed a neat trick to deal with any blips, by selling the first few weeks as a hackathon, making the experience of finding a glitch a fun game, rather than a disappointment. “If people found bugs, we would offer them a free drink, which they loved,” jokes Moore.

“We put every single penny back into the product”

Today the company employs 20 people in its tech team. There's more rigorous testing and constant innovation, which prevents Flight Club from becoming a one-trick pony, where a customer might play all the games, experience the lot and never come back, thinks the business owner.

"Refreshes and new releases are written into our business objectives – we launch four new things a year," explains Moore. Instant video instant replays, for example, will be available to players by the end of September.

Business owners must beware of resting on their laurels, warns the co-founder. "Even though we're booked out five months in advance, we're constantly refreshing the games, even the interior design, to keep people coming back. There are companies in our sector that are now coming off their peak, because they're not reinvesting, but we put every single penny back into the product."

Moore also invests in staff. "For a small company, we put a lot into our training academy, because you're only as good as your general manager," he says. "We're in a sector with traditionally high staff turnover, but retention for us is great, because we're growing at a rate that can fulfil a lot of people's career ambitions."

Poetically, Flight Club employs 180 people across its two sites (the second is in Bloomsbury). Last year it registered turnover of £8m and its website claims that more than 19.5 million darts have been thrown so far.

On the horizon are new venues, with a Chicago Flight Club opening in February 2018. Moore says that he's also looking at Melbourne, Oslo and Hong Kong, as well as new locations in the UK, such as Bristol and Manchester.

"We've had zero issues," he explains. "There's never any trouble, because people are so engaged in the activity.

"The biggest credit to us and what we do is mobile use; no one is on their phone at a Flight Club venue – anywhere else, people have their heads down, texting and browsing Facebook."

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