



YOUNG AT HEART

Yummy United makes healthy food products and the company's philosophy is simple: kids are its customers, so kids create its products. Co-founder Oleg Beriev explains why doing business with children is much more fun than working with adults.

OLEG BERIEV
Co-founder @ Yummy United

Yummy United is a food production company for kids, run by kids. Two Kids Board of Directors, one in Italy and the other in Russia, call the shots when it comes to big business decisions, design, and marketing. Co-founders Oleg Beriev and Roman Glebov wouldn't have it any other way. Children are their target market so it makes perfect sense to let them decide how Yummy United's glazed quark bars (fresh curd covered in chocolate) and other products taste and look.

"In the USSR, children really loved glazed bars and they remain popular in Russia, where they're known affectionately as syrok, but they're still relatively unknown further west," Oleg says. "Over the last few years, a few new dairy products have been launched in Europe, such as kefir (a fermented milk drink). Ten years ago, no one knew what it was, now it's in every store. We're sure that quark will be the next star in the dairy category, especially with kids."

Oleg, who runs Moscow-based consulting agency Mildberry, and Roman, who has an industrial R&D background, chose Italy as the launchpad for Yummy United and set up shop in the spring of 2019. The duo figured the kids of the 300,000 or so Russian speakers who call the country home, including Oleg and his

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wife, would be a good market to launch their product.

"We didn't want to start in Russia because it's too big," Oleg explains. "We wanted to establish the company in Europe before moving to Russia. In general, Italy isn't good for business but 80% of the Russian speakers who live there are women who have married Italians and now have children – we know that if we sell to these families and make an impact, Yummy United will be successful. We're the only people selling glazed bars in the country so we're unique."

Power to kids

One of Yummy United's first priorities in Italy was setting up its inaugural Kids Board of Directors. Italian kids aged 8 to 12 were asked to send videos of themselves explaining why

they wanted to be part of Yummy United. Dozens were then selected to attend a one-day event to take part in creative workshops, design packaging, direct adverts, and create new products. The group was whittled down to 20, who were invited onto the board, which is refreshed every four months with new kids chosen through the same process.

"When we branched out into Russia in the autumn of 2019, we also asked children to apply to the board and for the first stage 85 kids from 37 cities across the country flew to Moscow for a one-day event," Oleg says. "It wasn't easy reducing the number into something manageable because all of the children were great, but we eventually chose 40 from 18 cities. The Russian Kids Board of Directors is also changed every four months and at the moment we hold weekly online meetings, each lasting up to three hours. Before the pandemic we also held offline meetings in Moscow for local board members and we hope to do this again in the near future."

Every meeting is dedicated to a pressing topic that needs to be navigated for Yummy United to move forward, like setting an initiative in motion or releasing a new snack. To kick things off, Oleg always brings the board up to date by giving a presentation about Yummy United's weekly progress before an invited expert speaks to the kids about a particular aspect of business. The board is then split into teams, each headed by an adult moderator and tasked with solving a problem, working out a business or marketing strategy, or brainstorming new concepts. Each team then presents their ideas at the end of the meeting.

"On the whole they are pretty well behaved and take it seriously," says Oleg. "When I give my weekly presentation, I talk about money and business, they probably don't understand everything but sometimes they ask me hard questions I can't answer! They put me on the spot. We try to make it as real as possible, but of course we have fun."

Healthy outlook

In June, Yummy United's snacks were stocked in over 11,000 Magnit supermarkets in Russia as far east as the Ural Mountains and the company is in talks with the X5 Retail Group, a major player in the country. Oleg explains that his company doesn't spend a



Oleg Beriev interviews a child during a Yummy United workshop



A Yummy United Kids Board of Directors meeting in Russia

penny on direct advertising, instead it invests in children and activities and has several initiatives with its partners. There are plans to set up a kids' radio station and a startup project in Skolkovo, a modern technology complex just outside Moscow for scientific research and development. Oleg says Yummy United only considers partners who are interested in creating interactive projects with children: "The youth are our future leaders, directors, and innovators and they experience massive change from 8 to 12 years of age, they start to form their own opinions and they're really fun to work with. They also come up with some brilliant ideas and think differently to adults, which keeps the 20 or so grownup employees on their toes at Yummy United."

It's glazed bars are made in Latvia's capital Riga by a company called Food Union and

the quark is supplied by Baltic dairy farmers, famed for their fine milk. The chocolate used to coat the bars is sourced from Belgium and the jam filling from various European suppliers. Yummy United works with dairy company MILKOM to create its flavoured milks and

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Express Kuban for its juices. Both companies are Russian.

The coronavirus hasn't put the brakes on Yummy United's operations in Russia but in Italy things are on hold. "We've cancelled a promo and new selection in Europe but we are confident we will get going again soon," Oleg adds. "In Russia, the numbers are looking pretty healthy with \$1,900,000 in sales predicted for 2020, \$10 million for 2021, and in five years – \$100 million."

As the company grows, Oleg is hoping that at least one or two of the children who have been on the Kids Board of Directors might one day go on to work for the company as adults. There's every chance this will be the case if Yummy United continues to invest in the future by placing trust in the next generation. ↗