

The Comeback Kid:  
The Emily O'Brien Story  
By Justin Shaw

Consumers care about businesses with a story.

Not to be confused with a gimmick - a *story*. A story born out of authenticity that has the fearlessness to be vulnerable. While a cool logo or a tight catchphrase can make businesses stand out in the marketplace, consumer loyalty is linked to the business' values and goals. When these characteristics are drawn from a story that speaks to the consumer on an emotional level, businesses earn more than a financial investment: they earn trust.

### **Hamilton's own Emily O'Brien has one hell of a story.**

It looked like O'Brien had it all. She was a 20-something social media entrepreneur filled with drive and hustle, and just began a relationship with her new boyfriend. While on a trip to St. Lucia with said boyfriend, she found herself painted into a corner: she attempted to smuggle drugs back to Canada. Caught with two kilos of cocaine on her person, Emily landed herself in federal prison. With a criminal record for such a serious offense, it looked like O'Brien future was up in smoke.

It wasn't just the criminal record that could rob O'Brien of her future - it was her grief. Using her incarceration period to reflect upon her choices, Emily processed her grief by owning her actions and committing herself to being a better person.

As she worked on personal self-improvement, the gears of her entrepreneurial mind began to turn.

An accessible and affordable food O'Brien could acquire while in prison was popcorn.

"A lot of people love popcorn, and it is cheap to buy and goes a long way." says O'Brien. "It's also so much healthier than baked goods and most of the junk food that was available in the canteen. It is one of those snacks you can eat a lot of when you feel restless and bored and not feel super guilty about it. It's also a social snack. You usually make a giant bowl of it for you and your friends to share over some conversation, games or watching something on TV."

Basing herself in Hamilton, Ontario, O'Brien decided to start a popcorn company that used fresh ingredients and offered unique flavours. The business model was taking

shape, but even from the early conception, O'Brien knew she wasn't selling popcorn: she was selling a story.

## **The business was to employ individuals with a criminal history to offer them a second chance.**

"The company can give offenders the opportunity and confidence to gain and maintain pro-social employment, keeping the community safer by helping ex-cons refrain from returning to their old ways," says O'Brien.

These actions speak volumes. The business took what could have been perceived as failure but instead uses it as a catalyst for profound reinvention. O'Brien's business offers both her team and her consumers a story of acceptance, responsibility, and hope.

Before O'Brien could build a business that sells delicious popcorn and provides an inspiration to countless individuals from all walks of life, she first had to gain something that only she could give herself: forgiveness. In order to accept forgiveness for her own actions, O'Brien had to take an undeniable look at her values and goals, and find a truer sense of self-alignment.

When a business makes its story an integral part of their identity, especially a story that aims to serve the greater good, consumers understand that identity loud and clear. This kind of story isn't drafted after reviewing charts and graphs: it is a story that only reveals itself after deep contemplation and answering the question "*what is it we're trying to say?*"

O'Brien's business is thriving in Hamilton and beyond, and her story has reached a wide audience. Ultimately, the story of Emily O'Brien and Comeback Snacks is a story of courage. The courage to chase a goal, the courage to take bold risks in the marketplace, and most importantly, the courage to forgive.

**Want to support this amazing Hamilton business? Visit [The Comeback Snacks Website](#)**

**Want to hear more about Emily's Story? - [Youtube Video](#)**