

Elite, Insurgent, Family

An Interview with Damian McKinney, Global Chief Executive Officer, Stoli Group

EDITORS' NOTE *Damian McKinney brings an eclectic mix of skills and experiences to his role as the Global CEO of the Stoli Group. An officer in the Royal Marine Commandos, he operated in a variety of the world's hot spots, including the Persian Gulf during the Gulf War, and received numerous awards for courage and distinguished service. In 1999, he founded and built a global consultancy, McKinney Rogers, which was acquired by GP Strategies. McKinney has a formidable reputation as a business leader, transforming companies and brands to become the best in the world. He has worked across many industries and continents, achieving significant recognition, with particular focus on the beverage alcohol industry.*



Damian McKinney

COMPANY BRIEF *Stoli Group (stoli-group.com) was established in 2013 and is responsible for the production, management, and distribution of a global spirits and wines portfolio. Mainly known for the Stoli® Vodka brand, Stoli Group has expanded to appeal to luxury on-premises and more sophisticated global consumers. Signature brands are: Stoli® Vodka, elit™ Vodka, Bayou® Rum, Kentucky Owl™, Villa One™, Gator Bite™ Rum Liqueurs, Cenote™ Tequila, Tulchan Gin™, Se Busca™ Mezcal, and Stoli Group's wine division, Tenute del Mondo. With a presence across a network of more than 176 markets, Stoli Group works with a passionate team of 200 distributors around the world. Headquartered in Luxembourg, Stoli Group has production facilities in Spain, Italy, Argentina, and the United States, some of which are steeped in history dating back to the early part of the last century.*

How do you define your role and focus your efforts as Global CEO of Stoli Group?

As the leader of a global organization, I focus on strategy, branding, finance, and talent. At the same time, as the external face of the organization, it is critical that I am highly visible to partners, distributors, and clients. We have built a strong leadership team and work together to create the future of Stoli Group.

How critical is culture to the strength and leadership of Stoli Group?

I come from a background as an officer in the Royal Marine Commandos, which

epitomized a culture of always standing together and looking after each other. This was very powerful. It was about not failing the team or letting the team down. I am trying to build a similar culture at Stoli Group. It is about taking people from all walks of life with diverse experiences and perspectives and bringing them together for a common purpose. When I interview people, I talk about who we are at Stoli and what we stand for, and then I listen to who the person is and what he or she stands for, and hopefully it is a match.

At the heart of the Stoli culture is the word caring. We have three words that define the Stoli DNA – Elite, Insurgent, and Family. When we refer to Family, we are highlighting the ability to be open and transparent with each other, and this involves when things are done well, and when you may have let the family down. I learned a long time ago that if something is right, it is right – and if something is



wrong, it is wrong. We stand for doing what is right.

Will you discuss the transformation that you have led at Stoli Group?

I joined Stoli in October 2020 and the first thing I did was to tell our people where we were going and what part they would play in this journey. People want to know the plan, their roles, and then be allowed to go and do their jobs. I had a global town hall with our workforce a few days after I started and told them that this was a great company, but there were also a number of things not working well and that we needed to have the confidence in ourselves to fix them. I planted a stake in the ground and said that by 2025 we would be the most powerful and sustainable ultra-premium wine and spirits portfolio in the industry. It was important for me to give us a mission and a timeframe, and then to outline the steps on how we would get there. This was about having powerful brands in the portfolio, strong partnerships, and a commitment to sustainability and making this a better world.

The steps were very clear: in 2021, it was about waking up the sleeping giant, the Stoli brand; this year, in 2022, it has been about building out the entire Stoli Group portfolio of



Bayou Rum (above)
and Stoli Vodka in Support of Ukraine Limited Edition (top)

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brands. I constantly reinforce to our team what we are doing and where we are going, and we take time to look at the successes since it is important to take moments to look back and realize how far we have come and what we have accomplished.

What have been the keys to the growth for Stoli Group?

It comes back to the conversation about culture. I have to be honest about when I think back to the Russian invasion of Ukraine and seeing pictures of someone pouring Stoli down the drain. A few days after the invasion, I remember a member of our team in the U.S. saying to me that he was really scared about the business. My response was that this was going to test us, and I told him that the wonderful thing about life is that truth always wins – it may not happen immediately, but eventually truth always wins. What was

being represented at that moment was not the truth, and our job was to tell the truth and then to let truth speak for us.

Our success is about being very successful as a business, while also focusing on how we operate. We are building a reputation around trust and belief, and this has been important for our growth.

What advice do you offer to young people beginning their careers during this uncertain time?

When I speak at graduations, I actually speak more to the parents who are in attendance. My theme is to encourage young people to take chances and to break rules – don’t hurt anybody and don’t break the law – but I encourage them to break the rules. It is common to hear parents tell kids “no” and to not to do something since they may get hurt. I have young kids as well as older kids. I remember when my five-year-old was out on our roof and my mother thought it was too dangerous. I told her it was fine, and I was not worried about it because I had gone on the roof with him and showed him how to do it safely. The reality is that he is going to go out there with or without me, so I would rather show him how to do it safely and then be confident in him doing it.

It is all about building confidence and it is critical today for young people to have confidence and resilience as they begin their career journeys.

What interested you in writing books and what are the key messages you wanted to convey in the books?

I have written two books: *Commando Way* and *Commando Entrepreneur*, which describe the “commando” approach to delivering extraordinary results. When you’re trained as a commando, one of the major lessons you learn is to expect the unexpected, and this is something that business leaders face every day. I felt that my experience could be of value to today’s corporate leaders by drawing on the lessons I learned from my time in the military and in the corporate world.

How did your time in the military shape your leadership style?

It had a massive impact and there is probably not a day that goes by that I don’t think

about it. When it comes to leadership and culture, I go back to my time with the Royal Marine Commandos and my special forces background. During that time, we did not have bonuses or incentives to offer people – it was about leadership, teamwork, and culture. In business, we offer rewards for performance, but the best reward is the feeling that you get from working with others to achieve a common goal.

As Stoli Group goes through its transformation, how important is it to take moments to reflect and celebrate the wins?

It is really important, and it needs to be authentic. I find that with a high performing team that is going places, one of the dangers is that they will always look at doing things better, so it is critical to acknowledge what has been achieved. The energy that comes out of these moments is extraordinary. ●



Tulchan Gin



Kentucky Owl