

The Range thrives as 'poor man's John Lewis'

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Picture By Jim Wileman 17/10/2014 Chris Dawson, founder of The Range, pictured at the HQ in Plymouth, Devon. @Jim Wileman

Chris Dawson never learnt to read at school, and even today does not use email or a personal computer.

But the 62-year old former street trader has not been held back by his lack of formal education. The skills he honed selling watches and jewellery off the back of a lorry, he now deploys to run a retail business with 8,000 staff and 90 outlets across the UK.

The Range, the Plymouth-based home and garden discounter he owns with his wife Sarah, made a profit of £35m on sales of £382m, in the year to January 2013 – more than double 2008's revenues of £155m.

"We're not the bottom. We're not Poundstretcher. We're not Wilkinson, not B&M," he says referring to three of his fiercest rivals. "We're a poor man's John Lewis."

His story of rags to riches is a dramatic illustration of the truism that entrepreneurs are sometimes born not made.

The company, a retailer for the times, has thrived in recession in those parts of Britain worst hit by the economic slowdown. Its growth has been accelerated with the acquisition of assets and stock from the collapse of Focus DIY, MFI, Empire and TJ Hughes.

Meeting Mr Dawson bounding up the office stairs, sunglasses on head – he is suffering a hangover after a party the previous night to celebrate 25 years in business – it is hard not to be sucked into his slipstream.

He talks at breakneck pace, a cross between a second-hand car salesman and an evangelical preacher.

It is easy to see how tabloid newspapers have dubbed him Plymouth's very own Del Boy, his West Country chutzpah reminiscent of the wheeler dealing cockney character of the BBC comedy series *Only Fools and Horses*.

You might even say he cultivates the moniker: Del Boy is the personalised number plate of his new Rolls-Royce. But the big difference is Mr Dawson's deals have invariably come off.

Proof of his moneymaking prowess was evident early on. When still at school, he would collect the copper after metalwork class taking the offcuts on his bike to the nearby scrapyard.

As a street trader he operated across three counties, in market towns and resorts, flogging bric-a-brac and household items, while wooing housewives and holidaymakers with his sales patter.

The retail career started in earnest when he ploughed those earnings into two cash-and-carry stores in Exeter and Newton Abbot in the early 1980s, selling the sites during the property boom at the end of that decade.

The Range, which he initially branded as CDS International, launched with one store in Plymouth in 1988.

"We called it international, but we weren't even in Wales," Mr Dawson quips.

It was typical of his strategy, always pushing the boundaries to see what he could get away with. This unorthodox approach has sometimes attracted the charge that he is foolhardy.

"I'm not reckless. I'm so calculating, it's only because you don't see me writing it down in reports and having board meetings," he insists

His caution was evident during the final days of the Scottish referendum campaign when in the run-up to the vote he secretly shifted takings from his stores in Scotland over the border each night, rather than risk lodging the money in a Scottish bank.

He is not to be underestimated. When one of the big banks sent its treasury team to advise on how to handle the company's foreign suppliers, they returned convinced the former street trader instinctively knew far more about currency hedging than the bank's experts.

But he eschews business jargon. Instead he likes to compare the challenge of his job to a motocross rider navigating a difficult racetrack – alluding to his sporting passion.

"I read business as a track. It's rough here. Bit of an adverse camber there, I need to jump that," he says. "It's a permanent race for me."

And he likes to win as David Cameron discovered at a Downing Street reception, where instead of the customary single shot Mr Dawson managed to engineer three photo opportunities with the prime minister.

Maximising publicity for the company is “what I get paid for”, he says, showing off the framed photographs which now hang in reception at his company’s corporate headquarters on an industrial estate near Plymouth airport.

He expects his workforce to show similar determination and loyalty. Over the next two weeks he is busy visiting each of the sites, something he tries to do four or five times a year, to build teamwork. “I like to meet the people who make the money,” he says. The effect of his presence in the aisles increases productivity, he claims. “It’s got to be worth 2 per cent to 5 per cent in turnover to us, some of those managers are that motivated,” he says.

He insists he has even created a culture of entrepreneurialism among his managers, encouraging them to start ventures outside work. “Some have got taxis, we have a couple with bedsits. I’ve helped so many people in this company with – what did they use to call it – pin money. The Cardiff manager now keeps pigeons. He didn’t even like pigeons but I told him how much money there is in them.”

He is currently on the lookout for new sites, an exercise he likes to conduct from the vantage point of a seat in his hired helicopter.

“When I’m in the air, I can see where all my competitors are. I can see where all the traffic is, where the residential is. I can look out the window and weigh it up in three minutes,” he says.

Price is the key criterion. But he says the sites he likes are those “that won’t normally work, where you don’t know whether to go industrial, do residential or just flatten it”.

The company expects to have another 25 new stores open before April. The recent expansion has been made possible by the cash generated by some of these one-off transactions. In 2009, for example, he paid £3m for £68m worth of MFI stock, after the furniture retailer was put into administration.

“That was outstanding good value. We were doing a full kitchen, with all the new accessories, for a grand. I was selling them, 10 at a time, to builders around London,” he says.

But as the economy starts to recover there are likely to be fewer opportunities to pick up distressed assets, and some people question whether without such a cash injection The Range can maintain its impressive growth record. Might this not be a good time to consider selling the business?

“I get asked a couple or three times a year. I wouldn’t rule it out,” he says. But opening his arms in a theatrical gesture, he adds: “Unless you can show me how to replace this, then I’m stuck with it. I don’t know what else to do.”

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