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The business that began with a daring £20,000 bluff

By Dina Medland October 6 , 2011

To fund his studies, Tristan Rogers worked for his university running a recording studio. “I suddenly had a room full of equipment. I would sit there composing music and every now and again a student would come asking for help and I would tell them to go away,” he says.

But while sitting there, an idea for a commercial venture around the sale of electronic media emerged.

Securing university backing for his plan proved too complicated and so Mr Rogers approached a FTSE-100 company directly, using what he calls “artistic licence” to describe his business and how many people he had working for him.

But he won a contract to build an end-of-year financial report as a website – and quit his course. “They wanted me to do it in two weeks but they thought I had 15-20 staff members. I got some friends together and we did it for a fee of £20,000,” he says.

That was how he founded Concrete, a private company providing software and advice to retailers on international expansion, of which Mr Rogers is chief executive.

He appears to live by Oscar Wilde’s dictum that “consistency is the last refuge of the unimaginative”, having displayed a scatter-gun approach to school life and early career. He says it is either because he is “possibly guilty of attention deficit disorder – or just had a wide range of interests”.

“Growing up, I thought I was going to be a musician, a car designer or a racing driver. I clearly failed in all those and I never had a grand plan,” he says.

The importance of education was drummed into him: “Both my parents were the first of their respective families to go to university so it was seen as mandatory that I would go – I quite liked English literature, and a girl I knew was going to De Montfort University in Leicester, so I signed up two weeks before the course. But first I took a year off,” he says.

Music had always been a passion: at school he played in a steel band that won accolades, toured and performed at high profile events. Interested in orchestral percussion, he joined an orchestra to play timpani or kettledrums, and composed his own music, resulting in a performance at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London.

But a record deal eluded him and during his year off he turned to another passion.

“I needed to make money and I was damned if I was getting a job,” he says. He started buying spare parts for Citroën cars. There was money to be made and it helped fund his undergraduate course.

After university, he worked with Citroëns for another year, discovering “an aptitude for servicing cars”. By the time he arrived to study for an MA in electronic media at Oxford Brookes university, he had gone into business with a garage there.

He found the electronic media course in 1994 amounted to studying basic CD-Rom publishing and he realised the tutors knew no more about CD-Rom publishing and the internet than the students.

This helped give him the confidence to pitch for the contract that led to the formation of Concrete in 1996. “I called it Concrete because I’ve always been interested in experimental music, composition and art. I was fascinated by Dada and surrealism and their creation of sound montage with tape recorders which later became known as ‘musique concrète’,” he says.

While building Concrete, Mr Rogers’ adventures with cars continued to “bubble along in the background” from premises in Buckinghamshire. The experience of sharing investment in a garage, uncovering fraud in the past business and having to go into administration was an instructive one. “After that I decided running a business is easy as long as you set it up from scratch yourself,” he says.

“It definitely tarnished my view of being in the garage trade. Running a business is all about making more money than you spend,” he adds.

He gave Concrete increasing attention between 1996 and 2000, growing with the evolving internet. “The difference was you didn’t build websites any more – you built an application offering software as a service,” says Mr Rogers.

“This is the first time I have had a career as a specialism and I enjoy it. The market changes very quickly. The business has been built from the ground up to be cash positive and though we don’t disclose turnover, it has doubled year on year,” he says.

Based in Clerkenwell in London, Concrete employs 15 people and its clients include household names such as Marks and Spencer, Walmart, Gap, Jaeger and New Look.

The idea of managing large numbers of staff horrifies Mr Rogers. “It’s all about intellectual property – we have built something we can leverage. It goes back to engineering, like a car,” he says.

But he adds: “Three children under the age of five is a very good incentive to focus on what you want to achieve. Before that I just pursued whims that might be fun or possibly profitable.”

Secret CV

What was your first big break?

Pitching to a FTSE-100 company and winning the job while I was in Oxford. The market in using the internet for communication was so young that someone like me could just pitch up and do it.

What else might you have done?

A musician – I have always enjoyed playing and composition.

What do you do outside work?

I enjoy racing cars on a track. I once had 400 cars when Concrete first set up in the rented top floor of a manor house in Buckinghamshire with lots of land. These days I live in London and have three cars – an old Citroën, an old Porsche, and a Renault Espace.

Best career advice to others

The danger is that you give it in hindsight. But I would say always be aware of the need to make money – but don't dilute your passion.