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February 02 2009

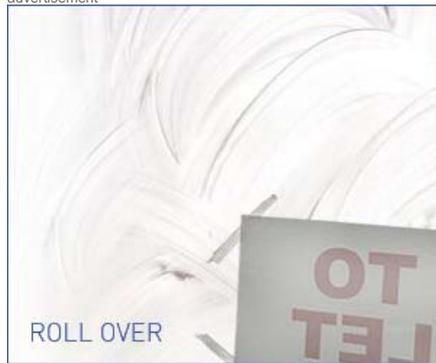
With growing numbers of firms finding the going is getting tough north of the border, leading corporate recovery experts have been enjoying a bonanza in recent months.

All those who are using their services will be fervently hoping that policymakers at the Bank of England try to provide a helping hand by cutting interest rates when they meet this week.

Still, it is worth remembering that Scotland's company base still includes quite a few relics of the Victorian heyday of manufacturing in the country, which have seen a few recessions come and go.

This week, we hear from the head of one such survivor who may be about to benefit from consumers' increasing desire to save money by doing work for themselves.

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UNVARNISHED
OPINION: Ian McAslan
warns companies to never
take customers for
granted.
Pic: Colin Mearns

Name: Ian McAslan.

Age: I'm 34.

What is the business called?
Smith & Rodger Ltd (S&R).

Where is it based?
Finnieston, Glasgow.

What services does it offer?
We manufacture wood finishes, for sale across the UK and beyond. We also run courses on French polishing and furniture repair.

To whom does it sell?
We sell to flooring contractors, shopfitters, furniture

manufacturers, French polishers, decorators as well as the do-it-yourself sector.

What is its turnover?
£600,000.

How many employees?
There are eight.

When was it formed?
April 2, 1877.

Why did you take the plunge?
S&R is a family business, and I am the fourth generation to manage the company.

I was very lucky never to have any pressure placed upon me by my father. In fact, before I joined in 1993, I thought S&R was only involved in paint - they had been up until 1978.

Our company secretary was retiring, and I was asked if I would be interested in joining the firm so that I could take on the role two years later. I gave the offer much thought and decided to go for it.

What were you doing before you took the plunge?
After finishing school, it was my aim to get into Moray House College of Education in Edinburgh so that I could eventually become a physical education teacher.

Unfortunately, I failed to be offered a place so instead went to Dundee College, which at the time ran a course that was seen as a feeder to Moray House.

After spending a thoroughly enjoyable year in Dundee, I came to the conclusion that I did not have the passion required to become a good teacher. This has been highlighted in later years by my two sisters, who are both teachers. The passion and drive they have for teaching is incredible and I can see how vital that is in motivating the children and colleagues around them.

Fortunately, I managed to find my passion at S&R, and I would like to think that this motivates the people around me.

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How did you raise the start-up funding?

Unfortunately, our meeting minutes only go back to 1920 when the firm was incorporated as a limited liability company. We are unable to determine categorically how the start-up funds were raised by the founders John Smith and Daniel Rodger.

However, word has been spread through the generations that John Smith used his private funds but that within five years my great-grandfather Daniel Rodger used his share of the profits to buy him out.

While searching through our records we found correspondence dating back to 1877 which showed that our first order was on April 11, 1877 from a R Ferguson & Sons of St George's Road, Glasgow, who purchased 4000 sheets of deep gold leaf.

What was your biggest break?

Apart from being lucky enough to be offered a position in the com-pany, it would have to be securing the business of a new account that was looking for a range of wood finishes to sell in its own bottles. Servicing this account showed us that not only could we supply the end user directly but we could also increase our market presence via re-sellers.

What was your worst moment?

In 1998 we lost one of our largest customers, Watson Grange in Linwood. We had supplied them with paper coating lacquers for more than 10 years and their business accounted for approximately 20% of our turnover.

As a result, we were forced to reduce our workforce by four. It was a very difficult place to work at that time, especially as some of those released had become good friends to everyone in the company. We have always been fortunate to have hard-working, loyal staff and once again they did not let us down. Although everyone was asked to do more work for no additional financial reward they did so without complaining (at least not to my face). This work enabled us to steady the ship and return to profitability.

What do you enjoy most about running a business?

Receiving letters and e-mails from customers who have taken the time to thank us for our service and quality of products.

What do you least enjoy?

Without doubt it is asking valued members of staff to leave our employment.

What are your ambitions for the firm?

To increase our customer base by promoting the skill of French polishing as a hobby. There is nothing to stop anyone digging an old piece of furniture out and bringing it back to life through French polish.

Overall, I wish to ensure the future success of S&R and add value for our shareholders by expanding awareness of our company throughout the UK.

I have always felt that whenever we gain a new account, or supply a new retail customer, we manage to hold onto them. Many of our customers have been buying from us for over 40 years and in some cases far longer.

What are your top priorities?

To motivate our staff: a satisfied workforce provides massive benefits to our customers, starting when the phone is picked up right through to packaging and delivery; to expand our online presence and to develop more environmentally friendly products to meet new legislation - for example, we are increasing production of "greener" water-based finishes, and are already compliant with the new volatile organic compounds legislation that comes into effect in 2010. To get out of the office more frequently - I enjoy meeting our customers and must free up more time for that.

What single thing would most help?

My continued good health, without it everything else is meaningless.

What could the Westminster and/or Scottish governments do that would most help?

Reduce corporation tax - it discourages companies from making profits and securing their financial futures.

What is the most valuable lesson learned?

Never to take a customer's business for granted. Every order should be treated as if it was their first one.

How do you relax?

My real passion is rugby but I also play golf, ski and have recently taken up mountain biking.

I enjoy good food, wine and company through Edinburgh Beefsteak and Burgundy Club, of which I am president.

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