

Thinking BIG

Tim Kiek travels to North Essex to meet the entrepreneur behind the Big Cars brand, Adam Stott

In most dealerships the closest you'll get to 'ice' is during an appraisal of a vehicle's in-car electrics. Big Cars, however, isn't 'most dealerships'. During the festive period it installed an ice rink in its showroom: tricky for demonstrating cars but an innovative means of generating publicity, increasing brand recognition and, ultimately, selling more vehicles. Less 'Dancing with the Stars', more 'Dancing with the Cars'.

The progenitor of the ice rink idea, and Big Cars itself, Adam Stott, has made a career of eschewing convention. For one thing, at only 33, he has achieved enough in business to offer better advice than some of the dragons in Dragons' Den.

Adam's career in retail began at Ford and continued at BMW. During this period he worked as a car salesman and had a high degree of success. For many a mid-twenty something a stable, profitable job at a world-renowned company would be enough to satisfy their professional ambitions. Not Adam.

"Whilst I was earning good money, I still felt limited in what I could earn, learn and how much I could progress," he said. "In theory, the logical progression in the dealership hierarchy could have actually seen my earnings decrease as my role would have been less commission-based."

Fuelled by this sense of professional incarceration Adam left BMW to start-up on his own. "I actually sold my house, moved in with my mum and used the funds from the house sale to begin my business. My office in those days was actually my mum's spare bedroom!"

I am sure Adam will be relieved to learn that I have never been in his mum's spare bedroom; for all I know it could be as capacious and opulent as that of Lord and Lady Downton. Assuming it isn't, though, such surrounds represent the most humble of origins for a business which now reaches over 330,000 people on Facebook.

"My strategy at the beginning was to build relationships with the people who would want to use me," Adam revealed. "I used contacts from my time at Ford and BMW, as well as constantly networking to get new ones."

"It was very much a case of taking one step at a time and a journey of constant, non-stop improvement. I can honestly say I have never worked harder than in those first few months."

COPING WITH GROWTH

The combination of such an assiduous approach to work, combined with Adam's natural tenacity and business acumen, proved a potent mix and one bound to keep the moss from the stone. Due to the volume of work he was receiving Adam started to take on employees and delegate some of this volume to them. Yet he quickly realised that such delegation came with an inherent problem. "My business was founded on offering people the sort of personal service they would struggle to find elsewhere and so if they were delegated to someone else they became disappointed they were no longer being looked after by me." □



TIM KIEK IS THE EDITOR OF IMI MAGAZINE

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Big Cars' big history

- 2008**
Adam leaves BMW to start the business
- 2009**
Company is incorporated and Big Cars is born
- 2010**
First office in Chelmsford is established
- 2011**
Big Cars moves to Romford
- 2012**
Big Cars' Chelmsford presence is re-established in larger premises
- 2014**
Romford site is relocated to a much bigger site in Witham, Essex
- 2015**
Company is voted into Top 1000 Businesses by the London Stock Exchange
- 2016**
New dealership in Addlestone, Surrey is opened

To counter the loss of his personal touch Adam's solution was, superficially, a touch counter-intuitive: using marketing he grew the business even more. "By bringing in new business, less reliant on me as a 'personal brand', my salespeople were able to start creating their own circles."

Arguably, this was the watershed moment for the business: the moment when Adam Stott became Big Cars. With the foundations laid it wasn't long before Adam invested in bricks and mortar. Big Cars swiftly outgrew its first office, a former estate agency in Chelmsford, and moved to Romford in 2011. A year later the business returned to Chelmsford, moving into a premises with showroom space for around 10-15 cars. It exists to this day and, in the month of interview, 95 cars were sold there. Now the company's head office, Chelmsford sits alongside showrooms in Witham, Essex and Addlestone, Surrey – the latter having opened earlier this year. A fourth site, in Sudbury, Suffolk, is due to open in the next few months.

RECRUIT TO SUCCESS

Concomitant with growing a business is the recruitment of staff and Adam is refreshingly candid about his initial forays into this world. "I was really bad at

it," he said. "The rate the business expanded meant I was plugging holes everywhere, leading to rushed appointments. There was a point where we literally would take anyone – clearly the wrong approach.

"You have to plan your recruitment fastidiously. Recruit the right people and then provide them with ongoing training. If I had recruited better at the beginning, which a business coach could have helped me with, then I am convinced that I would have achieved all this three years earlier.

Our recruitment approach is centred round our expectations of the employee; we lay these out at the initial interview so if you come into the business you know exactly what you will be doing. It does mean we lose some people at this stage but we would only lose them six months down the line anyway. We now also have in place one person through whom all recruitment goes."

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KNOWING YOUR MARKETING

Recruitment is clearly a vital ingredient in the recipe for any successful business. Marketing is another and it is the area in which Adam's passion truly lies. He may not have said it explicitly but, given Adam's eyes shone with a zealous vigour when marketing was mentioned, it doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to deduce this. The myriad marketing advice videos he has produced and posted online are also a rather large clue. Elementary, my dear reader!

So what is the Adam Stott approach? "Well one size certainly doesn't fit all," he said. "If you are a small business owner your approach needs to be very different to that of a large business owner.

"You need to invest in yourself and marketing is part of that. It is a process. Small businesses should start by building relationships and then invest in marketing when they grow a bit. You must also have a clear understanding of who your audience is and what platform you need to use to communicate with it. We use Facebook as we want to attract a young audience; yet this wouldn't work for an Aston Martin dealer. There is also no point in dabbling; master it or do nothing at all. I truly believe that every business owner should be an expert marketer."





TOP TIPS...

ADAM'S
TOP FIVE TIPS
FOR BUSINESS
SUCCESS



Develop yourself in whatever way you possibly can.



Get a **business coach** – someone to hold you accountable.



Bring the **right people** with you – recruitment is vital.



Customer service – know exactly your percentage of referrals and retention



Love what you do and relish the challenges in front of you

The proof of Adam's approach is very much in the pudding. As mentioned earlier, Big Cars has a Facebook following of over 330,000 people. It has also sold over £50mn of stock on social media. To achieve this Adam put in place a full marketing team – including a videographer – that works on Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram etc.

INDEPENDENT IMPROVEMENT NEEDED

The point of marketing is, of course, to sell cars. Big Cars sells almost exclusively used cars and Adam loves the independent dealer sector. This affection doesn't stop him from being critical, however. "The reality is the sector needs to professionalise; franchises do it better. I really think there is too much moaning among independent dealers and not enough graft to narrow the gap. I don't believe in excuses.

"There is also no one holding the sector accountable which is a big problem. I hold my business accountable for everything it does but not all owners will have my exacting standards. The independent dealer that doesn't offer a fantastic service is going to find things really tough"

A desire to increase professionalism in the industry is something Adam shares in common with the IMI and it is thus unsurprising he is currently in the process of applying for membership. "I want to become part of a network of like-minded professionals and I think the coaching side of my work fits into the IMI's ethos very well."

It most certainly does and Adam strikes all the right notes when singing from a hymn sheet that could almost have been written by the IMI. Adam is a proponent of licensing as he believes greater regulation will increase accountability. He also does all he can

to create a female-friendly environment for both his staff and customers. With regard to the latter, initiatives include a kids' play area and regular events like the annual winter wonderland at Witham.

A BIG FUTURE

Having achieved so much already it will come as no surprise that Adam has bold plans for the future. Currently the repair and servicing side of his business is limited to car preparation, but this is set to change. "In the next few months Big Cars will be launching a full retail servicing business and I can guarantee it will be like nothing the industry has seen before," he said with typical confidence.

Usually I would dismiss such claims as bombast but Adam's career and achievements with Big Cars to-date mean I would be erroneous to do so. Goodness only knows what he has in mind? One thing for certain, though, is that it will be 'Big' news.

The business may have started in a small room but through Adam's big ambitions, big dreams and big work ethic – Big Cars was born. And a bigger success story you couldn't hope to hear.

