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NIGEL BOTTERILL

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THE SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

BRETT MATHEWS meets entrepreneur and marketing expert Nigel Botterill, the man behind the record-breaking thebestof franchise and a range of other million pound plus businesses

In Sebastian Faulks' brilliant novel, *A Week in December*, there's a great line from Faulks' fictional hedge fund manager. He says: "If you were in work between 1986 and 2006 and you failed to bank fifty million then your children are going to wonder whether you bothered to get out of bed. There's never been a time like it and there never will be again."

Successful UK entrepreneur and marketing expert Nigel Botterill might not thank me for it but I couldn't help thinking of this when he was talking to me about the recent woes of the UK economy. "I set up in 2002 and, to be fair, for the first few years you didn't have to be that good to be successful," he says. "As things have got harder, people who lack ability and common sense have been flushed out."

If history does, indeed, judge the period prior to 2006 to be the era of the gravy train, we are now deep into what might best be described as the survival of the fittest - and Botterill is loving every minute of it.

He talks candidly about the impact of the recession. "Yes, of course, it has affected us but in many positive ways," he says: "It has forced us to think differently about how we go about things and we have actually been more successful by being ahead of the curve."

More generally, Botterill feels that those businesses which are doing well right now are those that are, "Open minded, inquisitive and creative," while also taking responsibility for themselves. He adds: "So many business owners are prepared to blame the government for this or that which I don't agree with. As a business owner, when I took the decision to set up on my own, implicit in that was that whatever happened in my business was my

responsibility. I can't ask for any help...the reality is that many businesses that have died in the past two years would have died anyway because the world is changing."

Botterill is an interesting character. Already, he's established five million pound-plus businesses, including one of the UK's leading franchise companies, thebestof. Moreover, he has been responsible for setting up over 2,000 people in business since 2004. His first business success was *My Mag*, a community magazine inspired by his wife, and there are now over 1,000 *My Mag* programmes in operation.

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In 2005 he launched thebestof, the first independent online business directory, which became the fastest UK franchise ever to get to 200 franchisees and was placed third in *The Sunday Times/Microsoft Tech Track 100* in 2008 as well as winning the Innovative Company of the Year award. His other ventures at the moment include *My Little Wrapper* and *Explosive Marketing*. And he's also launched *The Entrepreneur's Circle*, which is aimed at mentoring business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs to help them on their road to success.

Thebestof is probably what he's best known for. The network now has more than 400

franchises across the UK and has expanded into three other countries. "It's going from strength to strength," he says. "We have been in Ireland for a while now and are also moving into New Zealand and Australia."

Thebestof is, in many ways, about helping the small guy tap into the huge marketing power of the internet and has become a major internet success story over the past few years. Thebestof brand has evolved substantially over the past three years and now offers a wealth of marketing solutions to local businesses. The theme of small business is something that is clearly close to Botterill's heart. When I ask him about social media, his ears instantly prick up. "Social media is really important to us and we have been actively engaged across Twitter and Facebook over the past 18 months," he says. Now, I've heard plenty of this kind of talk from chief executives in recent months and sometimes get the sense that they feel it's something they should be saying.

Botterill quickly adds, however: "In 2010, we attributed £160,000 of revenue directly to social media and we have driven more than a quarter of a million people to our website through Twitter."

Botterill clearly knows his stuff and, as a marketer himself, clearly understands the importance of online analytics. Perhaps more importantly, he isn't just engaging social media because people are telling him to; he understands the indirect way in which it can drive revenues to his business - an issue which executives across boardrooms in Britain have been tearing their hair out over for many months now.

So, does he Tweet himself? "Of course, all the Twitter activity you see is from me," he says.

Next he tells me something quite revealing: "As a business person, I make a massive commitment to learning. I spend tens of thousands each year training and developing. I learn a lot from other people and I would attribute a lot of our success to learning from people who are doing well."

Such humility might be viewed as a weakness by some entrepreneurs but for Botterill, it has clearly proved a strength.

The theme of the small guy is evident in Botterill's *Explosive Marketing* business. *Explosive Marketing* is an interesting venture which was established to help independent

restaurants with their marketing activities. A few years ago, a prominent UK restaurateur told me that more than 90 per cent of all independent restaurants fail within five years. Such a figure seemed quite startling; hence I was interested to find out where Botterill thinks they are going wrong.

“Mainly, it’s doing the simple things but doing them well, and turning two or three visits to a restaurant each year into five or six,” he says. Essentially, Explosive Marketing helps restaurants to better get to grips with existing

customers, collecting data on them and encouraging repeat business by offering VIP membership. “So many mid-market restaurants just lie empty and never achieve the success they should,” he says. “We see ourselves as the saviours of the independents.”

Another of Botterill’s businesses, the Entrepreneur’s Circle sees him coaching and mentoring other would-be entrepreneurs at events up and down the country.

“We had over 250 people at an event in Knebworth recently,” he says. “We focus on common sense and helping people to get their heads in the right place to be successful. There are lots of ways of working with people - often, just a ten minute chat can make a difference.”

My interview with Botterill came not that long after the UK government had announced some of the deepest spending cuts in living memory. For many businesses, such cuts have provoked fear and concern. Botterill is philosophical, however. He says: “I’m actually glad that some of the rigours all business owners have had to operate under for many years are now finding their way into public sector.

“Anybody who has been around in business for a while knows there is huge scope to save money in the public sector.”

His message here comes back to his general attitude - that of taking responsibility for yourself and generally getting on with it. “The reality is that no matter who you are and what you do, you only need to focus on the things you can change and influence,” he says.

There is a lot of talk amongst economists and the like that the UK is currently at a turning point. With parts of the world such as China and the Far East increasingly making headway - working harder and longer and generally becoming more competitive - countries such as the UK risk being left behind. Few believe there will ever be a return to the days of easy money that our fictional hedge fund manager spoke about.

One can’t help but feel, however, that to stand any chance, this country needs a few more Botterills. Bright, keen to keep learning, hugely marketing savvy - and with a healthy dose of good old British Bulldog spirit.

“I’m 44 now and have been in business for 25 years,” he says. “I’m looking forward so much to the next 12 months, I really think it’s going to be a fantastic time. The world is changing at such a rapid rate and it’s a really exciting place to be for anybody prepared to embrace the many opportunities that I know are out there.”

ON VIDEO

To hear Nigel Botterill’s analysis on what top tennis players can teach businesses about top customers, visit www.ukbusiness-today.co.uk/nigelbotterill