

ACHIEVING YOUR AMBITION

**Interview with
ANDY FITZGERALD
MANAGING DIRECTOR
OCEANAIR MARINE**

'IF YOU STOP improving the product, the company dies', reads the headline of a framed press cutting on the wall behind Andy FitzGerald's desk. The quote is from his "hero," Cliff Hardcastle, an entrepreneur who both made and lost a fortune. "He said that if you sit back, competitors will catch you up," explains the founder and managing director of Oceanair Marine, which makes blinds and soft furnishings for super yachts and other luxury boats, prestige homes, as well as motor homes.

Product development to an extent, he says, has to be driven by customers. "You have to make the effort to listen, because that is the only way you can be sure of hearing what they want. For example, charter operators told us they wanted a toilet brush with a disposable head, so we developed one.

"The tooling cost us £30,000 but it's important to make the investment, otherwise we would be giving competitors the opportunity to step up to the plate."

As it happens, FitzGerald says he has always tried hard not to compete with anyone else. "When I started the business it was to develop a new market. And if there really is a new market to develop, there isn't going to be a competitor at that stage so you shouldn't fail."

FitzGerald initially started the business just to create a job for himself. He had been working as a product manager in a company when he wasn't given the position he wanted. "I couldn't believe the crassness of the decision-making and I thought I can do better than this. I wanted to be master of my own destiny," he explains. "I was working hard for this company but they kept chopping and changing and I thought I'm never going to move forward."

He was lucky in having two financial backers, including his brother-in-law, so he started owning a third of the company, and later bought the rest from his backers.

In those early days, FitzGerald used to deliberately keep a low profile. "I used to be absolutely paranoid that we would be alerting potential competitors to our products before we had established ourselves," he explains. We never really breathed a word in terms of marketing until we got big enough to know we would be OK."

He has now started "shouting" about the business to brush aside the competition that is "nibbling at the edges", and that will help with his goal of continued growth. The company turned over about £14million in 2016, and FitzGerald thinks Oceanair could be a twenty- million to thirty-million business.

In part, that will be achieved by using technology to develop more highly engineered products, such as blinds that don't rattle, which are child safe (no hanging cords) as well as being powered so they can be remotely controlled. "Our slogan is 'elegance engineered'," says FitzGerald. "That's our mantra with new product development."

His intention is for the business to be "strongly" cash generative so it can continue to invest in more plant and equipment. "Otherwise you get to a point where you hit a glass ceiling," he says.

The upside of the build up to the financial crisis of 2008, he says, was the availability of cheap money without personal guarantees, which enabled him to take out a loan to build his factory. "A million, at a ha'penny over base rate," he smiles. "This was critical to the company's success."

His biggest challenge now? "Making our way through the changing circumstances of Brexit," he says, "whether it's exchange rate volatility, potential tariffs and export complexity. But we're still the only company which does what we do on a one-stop shop basis."

He thinks the answer is that other companies don't have the size resource

or knowledge. "I used to think it was just about the product but you also need a methodology, FitzGerald explains. "In our case it's being able to produce an economic order quantity of one and having the flexibility and ability to handle a complex mix of custom products. Then it's down to customer service."

"Fear of failure is far more of a driver for the owner-manager than riches," he suggests. "It would be awful to have to go home and tell your friends you had gone bust. And it's very easy to fail. But I'm very competitive. I'm a winner, I'm tenacious and I had three kids who needed to go to school."

The main challenge internally is managing people, because owner-managed businesses tend to be too small to have the processes that make things easier for corporates. "We've had it all: death, infidelity, fraud, inappropriate behaviour," says FitzGerald.

He describes his management style as "dictatorial democracy", explaining: "I listen to what people say and then it's my responsibility make the decision. If everyone's views had to prevail, a business wouldn't be able to do anything."

One lesson he has learned is the importance of delegation. In his early

days he was reluctant to hire someone to run the factory because his ideal candidate wanted more than he was paying himself. "But my sister said we need to do this, we had to put in the right calibre of people if we were to grow the business properly," recalls FitzGerald.

FitzGerald has been considering succession as none of his three grown-up children want to follow him into the business, the reason for which, ironically, does give him a certain sense of pride. "One's an interior designer, one's a trainee doctor and one's a marine architect," he explains. "They all want to prove they have become successful without me."



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