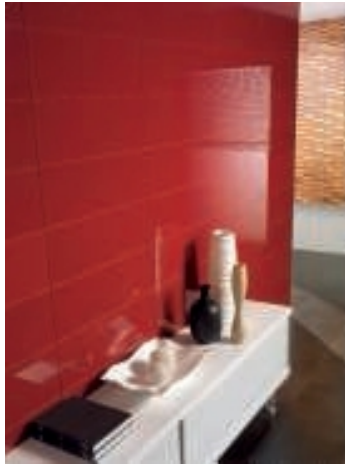




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What a Save!

'This year we'll do £60 million. Next year it'll be £75 million, and £100 million by 2016. We'll do it.' Makes a change to hear about growth, doesn't it? Nice to hear someone with confidence, isn't it? Even better, these are not the words of some cocky hired hand backed by some distant conglomerate. What's more, the word 'acquisition' was never mentioned in our 90 minute chat - this is real organic growth.

It's a plan based on investment, innovation, design, technology, patience and energy. In fact it's a growth plan based on the same elements that have served Johnson Tiles so well over the last decade. It hasn't all been plain sailing though. In Ian Crowther's words, '10 years ago the word was that we would shut down.'

We'll get back to the plan in a moment. It's good stuff - not rocket science, just crisp thinking and an intelligent straightforward strategy. And if it's not the basis for an MBA in Sales and Marketing Commonsense, it should be. Let's start from the beginning, because what Ian Crowther says about his background tells you a lot about what he's doing right now.

'I'm from Worsley in Lancashire. Dad was a truck driver, mum worked in a laundry. The way I am comes from my parents - they were very patient and caring.

'Perhaps that's why I'm good at listening. I was mentored by Les Pilling, who was my Sales Manager at Marley Floors. Les taught me to get to know the customer. Another mentor was Graham Ellis, my Sales Director at Forbo Nairn. Graham taught me to always look for

the opportunity, to drive business forward ... and never believe anybody! I owe a lot to those guys. Graham had me working all hours - weekends and evenings - at the time I thought he was impinging on my life. Graham told me to ring him every day - with good news. He said his job as Sales Director was to be like an eagle, watching carefully and swooping down every so often. I do the same now.

'I played a lot of sport. I even played as a semi-pro goalkeeper. I was shy as a lad; I really wanted to be an architect because I was good at technical drawing and interested in design and fashion. The trouble was my parents moved house and I moved schools from a decent one to a less structured facility. I ended up leaving with no qualifications.

'I think that maybe having no qualifications is a big part of what motivates me. There's a bit of a chip on my shoulder perhaps, a bit of 'I'll show those bastards!'

'I got into selling because I wanted a company car - I remember the first one was a bright yellow Cortina with bald tyres. Because of my interest in fashion I started by selling clothes, then had a couple ▶▶▶▶

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▶▶▶recycle a lot of material – we’ve been in The Sunday Times list of top green companies for the last three years.’

We asked Ian how Johnson Tiles are going to get that £100 million target. The answers came precisely and swiftly.

‘Three ways. First: product innovation. We’re developing new shapes and sizes such as rectangular and large format. You’re going to see some interesting new developments from us in surface texture. And there’s going to be a significant extension of our Absolute collection, which will give the A&D some really subtle stylised porcelain.

‘Second: we’re going to take market share from the competition. Specifically, we’re aiming to be the A&D market leader. We’ll do it by backing all those product innovations by servicing designers better in terms of availability and quality. And third: we’ll continue to develop our successful Material Lab concept – you’re going to see more products and resources backed by more events and usage training.

‘There’s a market shift to porcelain – away from wood and soft finishes. It’s to do with lifecycle, environment, durability, hygiene and aesthetic choice.

‘The plan, put simply, is to get us to £100 million and be number one in the A&D sector. We’re already number one in New Build

Housing – we weren’t 10 years ago. We’re number one in supplying multiples – we weren’t 10 years ago. We’re number one in the public sector – we weren’t 10 years ago. And I think we’re number one in National Accounts with lots of top customers such as Costa, Next and Morrisons. We weren’t number one in that sector 10 years ago either. We’ve done it by improving a lot of small things one at a time. In my opinion, companies that make sudden seismic changes of direction are almost bound to fail. What we’ve done is step by step. Patiently and with energy.

‘Money is not my motivator. Success is motivation for me. I used to teach kids football – it was all about giving them a sense of achievement. The big thing was to make them proud of themselves. I instil that in our salespeople. It’s quite simple really. Make one good call a day, and provide a good service. Then go and achieve whatever it is that the customer wants. It’s all about listening, observing and having patience. One of my proudest sales was winning the Barratt Homes account – after they had said no for nine years! Be patient and care.’

Be patient and care. Not a bad basis for a business strategy, don’t you think? Oh, and we nearly forgot to say, what with all the business stuff, that Ian is a top bloke too! ●

