

# wordsmith

No faffing about, that's the *Mix* style. We sat down with Paul Smith and cut straight to the chase. Tell us about the MBO from Samas, Paul.

'I saw the opportunity to buy Samas out. I pitched the idea. It appealed to me as a personal opportunity to steer, build and create a company.

'Samas UK is now independently owned which allows flexibility and cuts out bureaucracy. Working in a corporate you know that there are some things you can and cannot do. What I've got now is the freedom to go for that opportunity.





▶▶▶▶▶“To be honest I work well with the big international clients. Sometimes, those clients don’t want just the Samas product portfolio, so now I have the freedom to cherry pick other products entirely focused on the needs of the UK market.

‘I got fed up looking at Excel spreadsheets – I want to focus on what I’m good at – selling and adding value. For the last two years I’ve headed up the Samas international sales team, travelling to Frankfurt, Paris, China – you name it. After a while Sunday to Saturday living out of a suitcase wears a bit thin.

‘I first pitched the idea of an MBO to the Samas board six months ago. They laughed at me, reminding me of the money they had spent in the UK. But I didn’t give up and kept on at them until a change at the top meant I had a CEO who was more sympathetic to my proposition and we were off and running.

‘From a Samas Group point of view the UK market has been very difficult and has a chequered history from the acquisition of Roneo through to the multibrand strategy, so they saw an opportunity to work with me – driven by commercial common sense. My job has been to fill factories, but the old model of ‘one size fits all’ doesn’t work any more. There are huge cultural differences in the UK compared to the continent.

‘It’s fair to say that throughout the MBO process Samas have been fantastically supportive – commercially, financially, legally, everything. I like to think my loyalty going way back to the days when I had the▶▶▶▶▶

►►►► licence for Assenburg was also a factor. What my business partner Ken Robson and I now have is the best of both worlds – freedom, with the support and backing of a major.

‘I’ve worked with the guys at Samas a long time, and my relationship with Samas is very important; they know that we are more likely to be successful if we do it this way. It allows focus on the UK – a market where I reckon I’ve got some unfinished business ...and I’m going to have some fun! What I’m good at is selling, not corporate meetings. We are one continent but the cultures are different. About four years ago, English was made the language of Samas. I went to a corporate meeting after which a German colleague said that had enjoyed speaking English for two days, but the only person he couldn’t understand was the English guy!

We changed tack and talked about selling and leadership, starting with asking Paul about his strengths.

‘What am I good at? I’m honest with clients, sometimes telling them that they are wrong. I’m a good listener and I like to think I’m a good leader. It’s like that line about lions led by donkeys – I never ask anyone in my team to do something that I don’t do myself. I reckon that if you want people to follow you, to be motivated by you, then you’ve got to lead by example.

‘I was fortunate to have worked for John Bristow. At the age of 28 he promoted me from being a rep to general manager of Capital



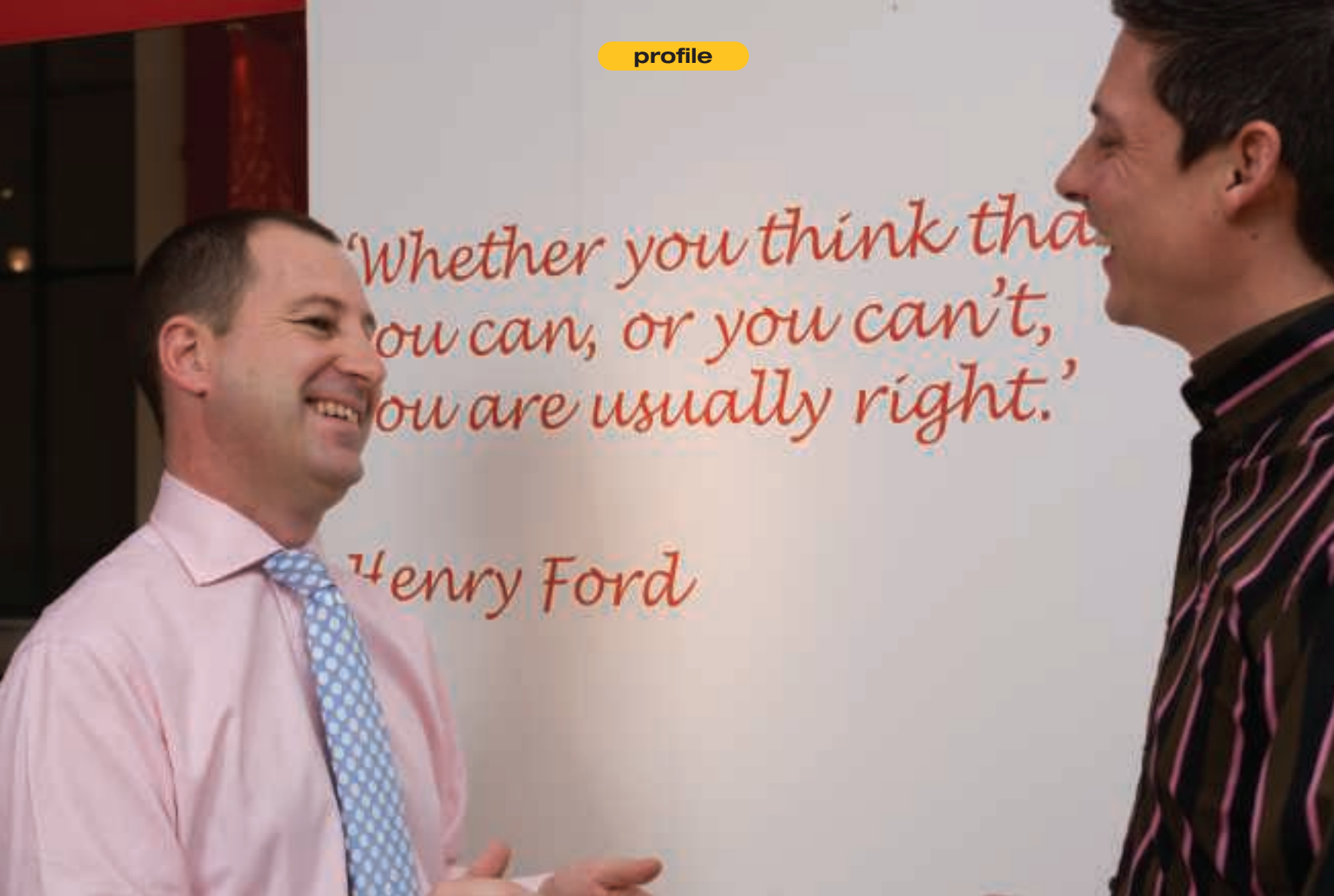
Contracts, a company he had acquired. To be honest, I’m not sure to this day why John gave me that responsibility, but I do know that he mentored me. He called me in, told me I had potential, and that I needed to learn how to manage people. I remember John saying: ‘I’m going to initiate your commercial apprenticeship’.

‘John shadowed me for six months. After the first week he asked me to take off my shoe and unlace it. John told me that people are like laces – don’t push them, pull them because they will follow you in a straight line. He taught me the importance of looking after people.

‘Of course he could be incredibly annoying on occasion! But John Bristow was a great person to work for, and I owe him.

Paul Smith’s a driven, focused kind of guy. By his own admission he doesn’t really enjoy the showroom party circuit, not because he’s unsociable, but because ‘I’ve always been able to separate work from my home life. Most weekends I sail 40ft yachts (I qualified as an RYA skipper in a year) off the east coast out of Bradwell, Burnham and Ipswich. That’s how I relax. As a skipper it’s about getting the best out of people. The best feeling is being on a boat on a sunny day – it’s an absolute release!

‘As for music, I’m a big fan of ’70’s prog rock – I’ve seen everyone from Hawkwind to Led Zeppelin. Favourite album? It’s a toss up between the Floyd’s ‘Wish You Were Here’ and Led Zep’s ‘Physical’ ►►►►►



►►► **Griffiti**. And, no I didn't get to the 02 Arena gig, although I must have applied 200 times! I've got loads of stuff like a Led Zep '75 tour poster in mint condition which I saw in the paper was worth £600, and early Floyd albums on vinyl like 'Saucerful of Secrets'. I once had to make a pitch to a company in Kings Cross called 10 Temps – when I got there, there were pictures of Pink Floyd everywhere. It turned out the company was owned by Nick Mason, and I got to meet the great man himself. My jaw dropped and I became catatonic...!'

Time was pressing, so we finished by asking a long serving furniture man his opinion about exhibitions and furniture systems. 'If Samas decide to exhibit at Orgatec this year, which is by no means certain, then I will be part of that team. I'm starting to question the value of shows like that, and I'm not sure how relevant they are any more. At the very least the return on investment is questionable. Having said that, big shows like Orgatec and NeoCon have a profile which small national shows don't have. It's hard to justify the value and ROI of a local show.'

'As for furniture products today, they are more simple and that's a good thing. There's less bullshit, less complacency and I think that our industry's trying harder because we have to deliver value.'

'One thing I do know is that the days of selling a 'one size fits all' global systems product are over. I don't think that conceptual selling happens anymore.'

'What do I mean by selling value? It means going the extra mile, giving what the customer wants, covering his back – that is value. It's an old cliché, but it's true: create a win/win. It's simple really – do what you say you are going to do!'