



manifest destiny

John Sulzmann used to look good in Spandex. But he decided to put all that behind him and develop his own signmaking business (what else did you think we meant?). George Bailey meets the convivial boss of Artworks Solutions.

John Sulzmann is sitting opposite me, drinking a cold Chang beer and eating a bowl of pad thai which has just been served to him by a pretty, overly deferential Thai woman. We're alone in the restaurant, by the terrace, overlooking a wide flat river which is giving off a dense waft of musty riveriness, a smell concentrated by the still warm air. It's a bright day with sunshine streaming through the open glass doors. We could be in downtown Chiang Mai except the king prawns are too small, the SS Great Britain is a short distance away and on the way in we'd walked past a gaggle of smokers, crowding a pavement outside a pub, drinking cider. We couldn't be anywhere but Bristol.

Bristol is the home of John's company, Artworks Solutions – a supplier of what used to be called signage and graphics but which is now more often referred to as manifestation and corporate branding. 'I suppose you'd normally think that was marketing bullshit,' says John. 'Changing the names of things like that. But in this case it's a sign of the sophistication of what we can do now, based on some amazing materials and technology. If you can couple the materials and the technology with good ideas and execution, you get something very special.'





▶▶▶▶▶ John is something of an adopted Bristolian, moving to the city later in his life, with a cosmopolitan family background and several moves to new countries giving him a taste for travel and a confidence in new cultures. His grandmother was an English au pair who met his grandfather in a town called Donau-Eschingen in Germany. The couple had John's father and then moved to Dublin at the outbreak of the Second World War. His mother is Canadian and, as a youngster, John lived in Lagos for a short while before his father was posted to Bristol.

Following a degree course at the University of Western England, John's entrepreneurial streak was awakened when he met and worked with the son of the man who invented Spandex. It was here that John had his first experience of signmaking. 'It was like most first jobs,' he says. 'Not very exciting. I was making swatches of material in the Spandex factory. But looking back you can see that you get your first taste of things and you make the contacts and gain the experience that begins to shape your career.'

From there John got a 'proper job', working for Rhone-Poulenc in the export department before moving to San Antonio to work for a small firm, then returning to the UK to work once again for Spandex where he spent three years as a sign system consultant.

'It had always been part of the way I saw things, but it was while I was at Spandex the second time around that I began to see the potential to develop my own business,' he says. 'Like most people it all started small, in my case in my mum's bedroom. I had a computer and a car and an idea. Like most people, that idea turned out to be the platform for something rather than the finished thing, so I soon found I had to adjust the business model I'd developed. In my case, that meant a drift into having direct relationships with the interiors businesses and developing a much closer partnership with them.'

'What I also discovered was that the level of competition in the market was fierce. Now you can either meet that head on or you can develop specialisms and I thought the best way to go was the latter. It turned out to be the right decision because the new technology that was emerging was allowing designers to create increasingly astonishing results and do far more for clients. A mixture of luck, timing and good judgement, whatever you'd like to call it, meant we were able to ride that initial wave of innovation to develop the business.'

According to John, the real tipping point came with a job for Ernst and Young which involved a fairly sophisticated sandblasting and stencilling project. 'That was the springboard really,' he says. 'It allowed us to buy equipment, enjoy some economies of scale in terms of delivery and also established us in the minds of clients as a firm that could deliver something new and interesting, beautifully executed. You can buy equipment and whatever but you can't buy a reputation. That only comes with doing a good job for people.'

What it also meant was a new relationship with clients. 'Well you know the term 'partnership' is a very trite and hackneyed way of describing anything nowadays,' he says. 'But our business model is based on working with designers to create something special. We have the technology and materials to do that but they'd all be useless if we couldn't develop a brief, understand that and the way people think, know how to interpret their ideas and make them aware of the possibilities and limitations of what we can do together. In our case that is often a complex process, involving us, the designer and the end user client. That degree of complexity can only work in the context of a partnership and with everybody understanding their roles in the process.'

John believes that process is getting more sophisticated all the time. 'We're actually, like most firms, rooted in technology. We have ▶▶▶▶▶



▶▶▶▶to keep moving. We're helped in that by the fact that there is a large creative element in what we do, the technology is merely the conduit for ideas. We can go to the market and tell them we've got this new piece of kit or software that does this and that, but that is just the means to interpret an idea. So you have both elements of that – the stuff and the ideas – feeding off each other to always create something new, which makes it a tremendously exciting business.'

John does not see that symbiotic relationship changing anytime soon. 'You always get this with new technology,' he says. 'You look at the current pace of change and extrapolate it into the future and really you cannot see an end to it, an end to new possibilities – you're hampered only by your own imagination.'

'What is great about what we do is the unexpected part of the creative process. We're always surprised with what people dream up and what they ask us for.'

'What is particularly wonderful about all of this is that it is not always just us or the designers pushing at the envelope. More and more frequently it's the end user clients who are asking for something new, something that has never been tried before. Sometimes those ideas are undoable. Sometimes not. But before we say no to anything, it's always worth checking that an idea, however overambitious or even daft it may sound when we first hear it, is not actually something that can be achieved. Because who knows until you ask?' ●

