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Paint it Black

Here's a couple of quiz questions for you. The first one's maths - sorry. How do you express growth from £3million to £25million in the last six years as a percentage?

Incidentally, you'll be pleased to hear that Question Two is nothing to do with the length of time it takes to run a bath if the water is coming out of one tap twice as fast as the other one. Or something.

Question Two is this. How do you express as a formula: attention to detail, working your socks off, networking like crazy people and generally making sure your client's happy as Larry?

Answer to Question One. No idea, but it's a lot.

Answer to Question Two. See below.

We're chatting with Simon Black, co-founder of fast growing fit-out firm Cameron Black. Apart from some nonsense about Chelsea, which we'll pretend wasn't said, we like Simon a lot. He was slightly knackered from a late one with some architect mates, had several jobs on the go, but still found time to park up the bike and chat to us. Modest, unassuming and downright likeable, Simon's happy to talk about pubs in Highgate, skiing and blinking Chelsea. But we've actually steered this piece away from most of that, for the not insignificant reason that he's done well in business by doing the simple things right. Stuff like treating everybody the same, from client

to labourer on site. Building a business from scratch by working hard. Oh, and here's a good one, doing a good job so you get repeat business and referrals. That's the answer to Question Two, by the way. That's the formula.

So, in time honoured fashion, we asked Simon to give us some background.

'I'm originally from Norwich. Dad's still an architect; semi-retired now, he'd been the owner of a successful practice. Dad worked for the MOD in Singapore for about three years. They came home because my Mum was pregnant with my sister. It's always rather rankled with her that she was born in Ossett rather than Singapore.

'I went to Norwich Cathedral School, where I did ok. I intended to be an interior designer, so I went to Yarmouth Art College. Like all students, I needed money, so I got a job as a labourer for six months. I worked on site for Willmott Dixon, gunning out old piles in the pouring rain. Willmott Dixon had a good trainee scheme and sponsored me to go to the Polytechnic of Central London (which became the University of Westminster) where I studied construction management. However, three years later Willmott Dixon shut down



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▶▶▶▶ their Norfolk office due to the recession. So, for a while, I worked for a car dealer (I'm a bit of a petrolhead) selling Morgan and VW performance cars.

'After a while the construction industry perked up again. Through my sister, who knew Kim Ridge, I got a job at City Axis. I remember the interview went something like this:

'Can you drink?' Yes.

'Can you ride a motorbike?' Yes.

'Can you sail?' No.

'Never mind, we'll teach you to sail!'

'I ended up staying at City Axis for eight years. I was a site manager, a contracts manager, but at a small D&B company like that I learned everything; dealing with clients, with architects, with subbies – from the client all the way down to the labourer on site. I love being on site still. At Cameron Black I often run jobs for long term existing clients, there's a buzz for me to be working with the client. We sell Cameron Black a lot on personal relationships – because we're relatively small, one of our four directors will always be personally involved in the project. The bigger companies lose that.

'Rupert Shaw was at university with me, and we kept in touch on our annual boys holidays. It was on one of these holidays, a skiing holiday in 1998, that we decided to set up on our own. Rup had done well at Overbury, Mansell, Parkeray etc. but knew his career



there had peaked. I was happy enough at City Axis, but also knew I was never going to be a director. So, knowing we had some good contacts between us, decided to start our own fit-out company. It was March 1999, I was 30 years old.

'Our first office was in Kilburn – 100 sq ft, £90 per week. There were bars on the windows, burnt out cars outside. One morning I went to get a sandwich; there was a guy in the street with a gun. A police car screeched up – realised that they didn't have guns themselves – and screeched off again in reverse.

'We never took clients to our office in Kilburn.

'Our first client was Harvey Nash, a large recruitment company. We did a decent job, and got some money to expand. Rup and I did everything, seven days a week. We'd take any work we could. We were small, cheap, and had low overheads – and we gave every client our personal attention. Our hard work started to pay off, and after three years we moved to Charlotte Street – subletting an office from a structural engineer. We now had four or five employees and took on a business development manager. By now we were working on proper jobs, through tender processes, with client led professional teams.

'Our success was, and is, based on a lot of repeat work – word of mouth recommendations too. It's looking after clients personally that gets the repeat business and the referrals.

'By 2005, we'd got ourselves to £3 million turnover working that way, but recognised we'd almost stagnated. We were doing a decent amount of steady work with regular clients, with the occasional larger job. Rup and I recognised that we'd reached a point where we had to make a decision: carry on as we were – or make the move to expand and become players.

'We brought in Stuart Johnson as third director – his specific role was to expand the brand and our client base. Stuart had a senior role at Overbury, so it was an important move and opportunity. We were now out in the market much more, seeing architects and the QS community. We got our name around, used our contacts, got on ▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶▶



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And we have a fantastic client in Google. For the last couple of years we've also become a major force in private medical – one of those sectors which is hard to get into, but once you're in there's a lot of good work. Projects like St Georges Hospital in Tooting, and a Harley Street Clinic that's based on a six star hotel.

'And there's other good stuff too! Marsh & Parsons (with Annie McDonald – her enthusiasm is infectious) and Foxtons too: we even do the odd nightclub, like Circus in Covent Garden.'

Time to go, time to get the tab. As Simon rummaged around for his bike paraphernalia we were reminded he'd said something earlier about being a petrolhead?

'Well, my everyday transport is a Honda Fireblade until I can afford the Aston Martin Vantage that I want. I have to make do with a scale replica for now! I play squash and I try to play golf. And I love football – I'm a Chelsea

season ticket holder; I even took my son to Stamford Bridge before he was two and he's now a season ticket holder at the ripe old age of 4! Oh, and skiing of course! I love it, go every year. We've been known to take the whole company...'

So finally, Question Three. Why is the company called Cameron Black? You're the Black, who's Cameron?

'Well, when Rupert Shaw and I started the company, we thought Black Shaw sounded crap. And so did Shaw Black. Me and Rup were quite keen on Cameron Diaz...'

▶▶▶ more tender lists. Our USP is almost entirely to do with relationships.

We get on lists, we win projects – and then, crucially, we're used again. And then referred to other architects, and so on...

'We're good at what we do because of attention to detail. We have good project managers on site, good contract managers. We're not contractual, we're not adversarial – we're all about working together. It's the only way to get on.

'In the last six years we've grown from £3 million to £25 million.

'In tender situations you can't charge any more than the other guys, prices are generally very close. So decisions are often based on personal relationships, and proven success, of course. Our main competitors are almost always Overbury, ISG, BW and Parkeray. For me, that's very flattering because we're a lot smaller than all of those companies.'

We ask Simon how he sees things panning out in the next few years.

'We've appointed a fourth director, Bob Thompson, who's been our construction director for the last few years. Bob's got a strong M&E background – and he knows everybody in the industry. I've just written the business plan to 2014. The truth is nobody knows what's happening next. The general consensus is that for the next two years the industry will be similar to today – there's lots of work out there – but with some improvement in margins. There's a ray of light for 2014/15 though – there is a huge amount of 15- and 25-year leases expiring in the City and West End. We're expecting that a lot of companies will refurb or move. As for us, I can see us concentrating on the quality of work we do. It's not about chasing work; it's about getting decent margins – unlike one competitor who went in at minus 15% on a project last year!

'Our current portfolio of clients is really strong. We're very busy with Deutsche Bank, and also have a framework with Land Securities – who we've worked with for years.

