



LEAVE THE

B@\$\$T@*DS

BEHIND

An Insider's Guide to Working for Yourself

Richard Maun

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Richard Maun

 **Marshall Cavendish**
Business

For Lucy and Theodore

You are loved, you have talent and you can choose
your own path in life.

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PREFACE

This is a book to help people make the transition from fed-up wage slave to enthusiastic self-employed free-man, or freewoman, whether your dream is to be a florist, a plumber, a consultant or any other gig where you don't report to an odious lump of a manager and where you are free from the shackles of an annual appraisal. A world where personnel managers are just a distant memory. A world where you can decide what sort of phone to buy and where you don't have to use it to report to a lame duck bastard of a boss, because you don't have one of those any more.

These pages have not been lovingly crafted, printed and bound for people who want to borrow \$1 million and buy an established business, or who already have wads of cash and just want to play at it. No, this book is aimed squarely at people like me who started with little more than an idea and a sense of self-belief that would have made the Angel Gabriel cough with surprise.

A clue to the content and style is in the title. Cunningly the book is not called 1001 Ways to Get Started because you would fall asleep by the first chapter and probably consign the rest to the shredder. Instead it has the word 'bastard' in the title because when people make this kind of leap they are full of emotion and don't want to be force-fed lists of tip-top tips. What I wanted when I started was a book that would help me to understand some of the business basics, which make the difference between having fun and having a house. I wanted to read something that was informative and made me think, and that wasn't varnished by the dead hand of parental advice. Most of the business books on my shelf are half-read because completing them is like trying to drive through a snowdrift without a steel snow plough bolted to the front of your car. No matter how hard you try, you just get bogged down and then have to wind down a window to let off a flare and be rescued. *Leave The Bastard Behind* comes without any snow-related safety kit, because it is breezy, pithy, informative and useful so that you won't get stuck in the cold, wet, white stuff.

The world is full of bad language and it's fair to say that some of it has migrated into these pages waiting quietly to be read, laughed at and thought about. If you're not the sort of person who likes to read a few naughty words then you have a choice. You can put the book back on the shelf or you can hand it to the person looking over your shoulder who doesn't have such hang-ups. I don't mind because we all have choices to make in life and exercising your right to choose is what it's all about.

Choose to continue reading and you'll find some practical guidance to help you get going with your pet project. If you Google 'business books' you get a whopping 502,000,000 responses, but this is the only book to contain a handy height chart, some rude words about marketing types and a useful and unique personal planning kit. And if that wasn't enough, it even warns against the dangers of playing with fireworks.

Working for yourself is like sex. You can have fun, you can indulge your fantasies, but once you have fired the starting gun then there are going to be consequences, tears and a sticky patch. So this book is here to help. It's not intended to be a dull slog through the intricacies of discounted cash flow, the niceties of business law, or the pain of hiring help. Instead it covers the main issues people face when deciding to go it alone, and it invites them to think. I know, because I have worked for myself for over four years and so this book is part helpful companion and part reflections from the other side.

I have worked more hours than I ever worked when I was employed by someone else. I have had to learn fast to keep eating, and I have had days that have been so fantastically rewarding, I could have cried with the pleasure of just being me, doing what I wanted to do. On sunny days when I pull up to

client and park my car I still pinch myself that this is work. On the days when I'm stuck at home wading through accounts I also pinch myself that this is work, but the rough and the smooth is what makes life as a *selfer* so exhilarating and so stretching.

Read this book from cover to cover, and have fun working out for yourself *what* you will do and *how* you will start doing it for yourself. And if you are already in business, read it and think about all the decisions you can change now, and about all those little loose ends that you still haven't got grips with. Then when you've finished it and completed the personal planning kit, if you want to spend some of your precious seed money on more books you have 502,000,000 choices to investigate. Life is always about choice, and *Leave The Bastards Behind* is here to help give you choices and invite you to consider your options. Have fun!

Whilst you're having fun, remember that no one is really a bastard. We might like to scapegoat our bosses for their bad behaviour, but as we own our own behaviour, we can choose to be powerful and do what we want to do. Think about the boss you hate. He (or she) may be overworked, undertrained and having to uphold a set of business objectives that he doesn't personally believe in, but being the boss he has to toe the party line or face the chop. Given the need to earn money to pay for life, it's inevitable that people's reaction to stress can be to treat their 'team' with harsh words and a short fuse. Don't pity them, simply think about how life must be for them, then focus on what you want to do for yourself and give them a cheery wave as you paddle off into the sunset.

There are no businesses that operate in a little bell jar, all on their own and isolated from the world around them, and it's the same with writing a book. Despite my sincere wish, this book did not arrive one morning in the post, completed, edited and ready to be read. So from my big jar of sweets I have some treats to hand out. First up is me, for actually managing to write the damn thing and for making sense of a pile of scribbles on odd bits of paper (loosely called planning). I'll have a rhubarb and custard sweet, I think.

Next up is my friend and chief supporter Harry Hemens, who has generously given me his experience when I needed it and who has listened patiently to my dribbling for many years. He gets the big round lollipop, as does Steve Tracey who lets me call him at odd times with crazy ideas, and who took the trouble of reading the drafts and giving me sincere and muchneeded feedback. Thank you chaps, and have a big lick on me. A chewy bar goes to Joe Holmes, who very kindly asked me a whole bunch of useful questions which got me thinking, and a big bag of jelly babies goes to the following supporters to share out and munch on: Julian Hammond, Alan Robertson, Frances Donnelly, Roy Godwin, David Jerram, Craig Walker, Mum and Bill, and the late and much missed John Morgan.

Finally a couple of bags of sherbet dip are reserved for Pom Somkabcharti and Martin Liu at Cya. Without them, this would still be on my laptop, instead of in your hands. Enjoy all the sweets everyone, and especially enjoy a tube of Daddy-Mints each, Lucy, Theodore and Rebecca, who have all helped me to become successful. If Newton stood majestically on the shoulders of giants, then I have perched on the wobbly shoulders of two small children and one hard-working wife. Thank you!

So if you fancy a dip into the world of 'after I had a proper job', complete with bad language and strong stories, then read on. Remember that you are responsible for all your choices, actions and inactions, because the responsibility to manage your own business sits squarely on your shoulders all times. The book does reflect my genuine experience and is full of my failures and thoughts, but I don't intend to be sued, so keep your eyes open and your ears alert at all times. In addition, the examples have all been disguised, so that only I know who is really who, to save red faces and the threat of litigation.

Finally, if you're wondering why I bother to use strong words, then it's because life is like that

and don't pretend you didn't know them already!

Richard Ma

THE EMPTY DESK

Leaving the bastards behind

1

I am fed up, frazzled and fucked off.

Not for the first time I find that my job has disappeared before my eyes. Evaporated in front of me like a will o' the wisp with a fast ticket out of here. This is not the first time this has happened, and I can feel a growing bubble inside me that says that this will be the last time. The last time I will have to sit opposite someone telling me he doesn't need me. The last time I will have to sit on my hands and avoid reaching out and squeezing his throat. The last time I will have to nod and smile and 'understand' that he just can't afford me any more.

Boss

It's nothing personal, you know, old chap. The chairman needs a new car and we wondered how the business was going to pay for it. And we thought ha! We could lose a Maun and bingo, we now have the money. So terribly sorry and all that, but you know, business is business. Would you like to see the brochure? It really is a very nice car, with leather seats and a special hook for curry bags. Car people are so clever these days. And the cup holders are the same ones that NASA uses on the shuttle.

Me

Don't they have a habit of blowing up?

Boss

Do they really? How fascinating. Anyway, Maun, there's an envelope for you. Only a small cheque. We're rather cashstrapped you see, just bought a new car. Oh, and there's the door. Do use it, please. *(I tug a forelock and exit, stage left.)*

Boss

(calls out) Bye, Maun. Do have a nice life.

Me

(I call back) Thank you! *(Thinks: Fuck you!)*

Of course I haven't been told to my face that I'm being turned into a corporate love machine with built-in walnut door handles and a cappuccino dispenser in the glove box, but the truth of it is that I might well have been. Several years ago I found myself sitting in the meeting room at work, all alone and staring out into space, with tears in my eyes and that sinking feeling that life had just got a little bit more shit. And I pondered. And I felt the bubble, once dormant, now grow and surge and spring into life.

A smile spread across my face and I took a deep breath, wiped my eyes and decided that I was going to win this game. I was going to have a chair of my own which no one but me would sit in. A chair without surprises. A chair which would be loyal to me and which I would not find occupied by a fat, smiling executive, one cold morning without warning.

I was going into business. My business. It was time to build my boat, pack some provisions and sail into the world of the self-employed. There was one question though, picking at the sleeve of my suit, like a small child in search of a sweet. Relentless and whining. The question was this:

Just what would my wife say when I told her of this bold decision?

Before we get to my wife and indeed many other helpful, loving and generally supportive people

let's stop and think about what this book is about. It's a book of personal stuff with useful bits, a about working for yourself. A personal story of what happened next, after I had made my decision. And unlike some of the less useful books on this subject, it will not stuff your head with a zillion ways to make a million, and it will not sit smugly in its corporate helicopter and tell you how to assemble a multi-level corporate strategy to take over the world. That kind of stuff may be useful, but I'm fed up with smug and patronising. This is the book I wish I'd had when I started. In the spirit of usefulness it will contain some thinking to encourage your thinking. It will contain some rude words, some interesting stories and some examples of how I fucked it up at times. See, a rude word already and we've only just begun.

I am successful, now.

I have survived. And I have enjoyed myself more in this gig than at any other time in my career so far, so we shall celebrate the good bits along the way. At the end of the book there is a very useful item for you to complete: your own personal planning kit. It's based in part on the business plan that I drew up for myself and used to guide me in the early days.

In my experience lots of small business types turn white when you ask them if they have a business plan. They all know that it makes sense to write things down, but there is a feeling that unless you have been to Harvard and can produce 40 pages of graphs and charts, then you are just playing at business. They are surprised when I show them my two-page plan, which I wrote in about half an hour. Often they say, 'Is that *it*?'

'What did you expect?' I reply. 'I haven't been to Harvard, don't have time to write 40 pages of business drivel, and am too lazy to plot any graphs. And I have carried this with me for 12 months and have ticked off all the elements.'

If you are already in business for yourself, use the personal planning kit to help you reflect on where you are now and where you want to walk to next week.

Life is full of shit sometimes, so we may as well have some fun on the way. Hence the bad language and the down-to-earth stories. Business can be like a small war, which is fought on the streets and in the hills. People get dirty and take bullet wounds. Sometimes they are fatal, sometimes they are not. People have to pull the trigger and get out there and mix it with the bad guys. Therefore I am happy to share my mistakes, and if this helps one person to avoid taking a bullet in the heart, then the book will have done its job.

So having parked my wife we need to return to the action to find out what she said when I arrived home in a slightly mixed-up state. On the one hand I was relieved to be free from a company which had been sapping my energy and causing us all heartache. On the other hand I was now free of a salary, and I had a new house with a large mortgage, two small children and no obvious skills to sell.

However, I was also excited and had a gleam in my eye that I had not felt since the first term at university when everything was possible and life seemed so full of opportunities to have fun, get drunk and roll about with as many lady undergraduates as possible. After all nobody goes to Uni to learn. It's one of the great myths of our time. Like the fact that pensions will work out in the end (they won't) or the fact that plastic surgery can make you look like Britney (it won't).

My wife said nothing when I told her of my plan, decided upon just after lunch and padded out on the short drive home. She looked like she either wanted to cry with fear or hug me with hope. In fact she simply said:

'Oh.'

And then she said, 'What will we do for money?' And then we both burst into tears and hugged.

Big hairy life-changing events are chock-full of emotion, so we may as well face up to the fact that

behind the, thought that you will have your own business is a feeling. We do feelings in this book. And ~~thinkings and doings. These are the three magic ingredients of life: think, feel and do. They work the same way as a three-legged milking stool, and if you only ever balance on two legs you will, some point when you least expect it, tip backwards into a pile of steaming cow plop and squirt milk up your nose.~~

Some people are not so good at feeling their feelings. They lock them away and present a granite exterior to the world. This can be very useful at times, particularly when you are selling to someone. Crying on the shoulder of a potential customer and dribbling tears down her jumper is a novel way of securing a deal, but it's not generally recommended. Developing a tough waterproof shell is a handy asset for being in business, but you need to take it off sometimes, let your soft inner underbelly flow out and own up to having some feelings.

It really is OK to let people know you are terrified and excited at the same time. That you are worried you do not have all the answers, or indeed all the questions. That you are embarrassed just by saying the words out loud: 'I want to work for myself, because I think I have some talent that people will buy into.' Some people are too modest for their own good. It's no fun having 'He died a modest man' engraved on your tombstone. That's too late to be of use. Instead it would be better to have, 'He died a happy man, who had a rich life and had a go at doing the things he really wanted to do.'

So *fuck* the modesty and think about what you really want to do. What is in your heart? What ambition lurks there that dare not speak its name? Like forbidden love and the need to get a thrill from the shopping channel.

Do remember that thinking is work. Your brain is a like a bulging bicep that goes flabby with under-use. Ask yourself this:

Is my brain the equivalent of a beer-swilling crisp-munching slob, or does it have the gleaming physique of a champion oarsman?

If your answer is nearer the slob end of things, then it's time to get into shape and have fun with mental squat thrusts. Give your frontal lobes a couple of laps round a cognitive cinder track, and a six pack will soon be yours.

You can think. You might not do it very often, preferring constant action, like some sort of demented business paratrooper, who just can't help leaping out of the plane to sort things out. Relax and take off your jumpsuit and boots, because now is the time to read on, then go for a walk, make a fresh pot of tea and think about things.

It never ceases to amaze me that our culture is obsessed with doing. Doing stuff. Rushing to the shops to buy useless new gadgets and then rushing home again to watch sourfaced old biddies act out our favourite soap operas. We rush off to work and we rush off for a 'snatched' weekend break. If you're not doing something you must be dead or stupid. If we could all practise doing some quality thinking we might avoid some of the worst problems we encounter on a daily basis.

The same goes for business, where the general idea is often to check in your brain at the door and hang it on a peg next to your coat. You won't be needing it for the next eight hours, so best to leave it in a safe place. Most of the guilt for this attitude is shouldered by the senior management, who despite having a clutch of degrees, MBAs, and having been through leadership training that would make an eight-year-old yawn, decide en masse to deploy a new corporate policy which has all the merits and profit potential of a dead llama. The cult of the consensus board, or the decisions rubber-stamped by

tame management committee, who are too weak or cowardly to stand up to the wretched tyrant at the top, is a disgrace.

Think of the famous corporate names who have sold sure-fire winning businesses in order to invest in technology, or who have paid five times the market price for a licence to peddle as yet unknown items. Think of the sports teams that are financed by big shots with more in their trousers than the brains, who spend vast fortunes to build the killer pub quiz team, only to find out that a 20,000 seater capacity pub is a tricky thing to fill.

If only some of these people had some of the time stopped to think, then perhaps some of the world and most of the pension funds wouldn't be headed for meltdown.

There are exceptions to this: those talented few who don't talk through their backsides. Who ponder and stop and smell the daisies and carefully work out their next move. These organizations are the modern equivalents of the Great Pyramids. Their organizations are massive, stable, profitable and designed to be around for at least a thousand years. Perhaps even one day there will be a token two or three mega global businesses that have sucked up all the others in the way that gravity from a black hole sucks up light.

So when I made that tiny little decision to do something different, I was thinking for *myself*. I was thinking about what I would really, *really* like to do.

Because people have a nasty habit of forgetting things in the heat of the moment, the personal planning kit at the back of the book can be cut out and tucked under your wing for when that crucial moment arrives. And you will know when that is, because a tiny little thought will sidle up to the first domino in the long, long line of dominoes stretching round your brain and give it a sharp kick in the ribs. Clack-clack-clack, down they fall and whoopee – off we go, heading towards the land of the *selfer*.

However, let's remember that my story is mine. Yours will be yours. Therefore you are cheerfully invited to say bollocks to any part you disagree with, and to choose a way for yourself that works. My way worked for me; you are you and need to be responsible for your way. Because you are responsible to yourself and that is the way life is.

Stop at this point and think about what it is you would like to do:

- Set up as a hairdresser?
- Move to becoming a contract electrician?
- Chuck in the corporate towel and become a consultant?
- Go freelance?
- Buy a franchise?
- Set up as a therapist?
- Make money as a masseuse?
- Open a shop?
- Retrain as a ... (you decide)?
- Or a thousand other opportunities to stop working for other people and discover the satisfaction of doing it for yourself.

It's OK to dream and to be talented at something. It's OK just to want to have a go at avoiding spending the rest of your life as a barfly who moans that he could have been the man, if only he had listened to his heart. I met a pensioner once at a rugby club bar in Wales. He had sat quietly in

corner while I moaned to a friend that I couldn't do what I wanted. The old gent then leaned over and said, 'Look, sonny, I'm 78 and you don't want to be sitting here like me, wishing you had done things. Think about it.' His eyes sparkled and he held his gaze steady, which although was slightly unnerving also made me concentrate. After thanking him politely, I found on the walk home that I really was chewing on his comments, and that he had scored a direct hit on the bit of me that wants to lead a life and not just be a follower.

There is a small part of our hearts which is like a tiny happy flea sitting on a deckchair, quietly reading a newspaper under the warming sun. This little flea is our life force, that bit of us that gets up sometimes and says, 'Hang on, I want to do this for me.' Or 'I have a dream' or 'Will you stop doing that?' or 'I will lead my life for me.' Most of the time the flea is just happy to sit and read and perhaps doodle a bit on the crossword puzzle.

Sometimes however, a breeze makes him look up and stirs him into life. He throws down his paper and springs and twists around in the air, doing what he wants to do, just for himself. And so it was that the old man's comments were like a breeze which stirred up my own flea. Then many years later when I was older and wiser (or more stupid, depending on your viewpoint) and my job had been taken away from me, the shock and shame and hurt of it also stirred up the flea, who rolled up his newspaper and jumped and jumped and jumped and made big divots in the sand, which read, 'Follow your heart.'

So I did.

With only a biro and my ex-company car for company, I struck out on my own as a business coach. Quickly building on my existing industrial experience, I added new skills at my own expense and in the early days, when I was still greener than a slice of tropical rain forest, cut the odd corner to stay one step ahead of the clients. Working for myself really rammed home the sentiment, borrowed from the lawless gun-toting Wild West, that:

In business there are the quick and there are the dead.

I determined to be quick.

Sitting in the smoky depths of a franchised pub and 'restaurant', I almost never made it past my first day on the job. Nervous, unsure of myself, but ballsy enough to be there anyway, my first client sat in front of me, his eyes unblinking with suspicion and his bulging arms folded stoutly. He looked at me as if I was a bug sitting on the rim of his beer glass, and grunted belligerently, 'Wot ya goona do for me then?'

I smiled and said coaching wasn't like that, and that it was about working together. While I fumbled to convince both of us that I knew what the hell I was talking about, he abruptly stood up and nipped to the toilets. Seizing my chance, I reached into my jacket pocket, pulled out a small book of coaching and speed read as much as I could in the three minutes he was gone. Hearing the toilet door bang open, I stopped and just managed to squeeze it back into my pocket as he sat down again. I smiled at him, with a secret smugness because my quick mental freshen-up had done the trick. I now had some words in my head and a fresh clip of questions to fire at him.

During that first session we talked through several improvement options, and he quickly worked out how he could save £50,000 in his business. The client and the conversation both relaxed, and I was off and away. Thanks in part to his need to empty his bladder, and in part to a small book tucked in my pocket.

A friend of mine said that 'You can fake it until you can make it.' And I have been guilty of

sailing close to the wind several times in the early days. Sometimes when under pressure I would suggest to the client that it was her turn to buy the coffee, and while she was at the counter I would do a hurried spot of revision. A bit cheeky perhaps, but when you're on your own you need to be resourceful.

It's a Catch-22 really, because you need experience and you can only get *that* by having a good experience. Sometimes you just have to hold your breath and dive into the water.

When I started to facilitate training workshops for clients, I was still being trained myself, and I would book the workshop for the week after my own training. This would give me a couple of days to prepare, and as the training was fresh in my head I would sail through and appear knowledgeable and confident. The reality was that I spent the first six months wetting myself that I would be found out and exposed as a 'fraud'. Not that I was doing anything fraudulent, just that people hate being told 'Thanks for being my first client, and I wish us *both* good luck today.'

A chum reminded me that when you are training people, you are OK as long as you stay one page ahead of the delegates. On one memorable occasion I was down to my last half-page of advance notes before we stopped for a break and I could swot up on the next section.

Today, I am an experienced and confident coach and trainer, but without taking a few risks in my business I would never have made it. You too can cut a few corners if you need to, as long as you're not doing anything illegal or unsafe. Of course, if you are a freelance brain surgeon I would tend to suggest you don't apply this helpful rule of thumb and make sure you get properly qualified before slicing open your first head.

Before we pause and turn to the personal planning kit, let's take a moment to think about what sort of business you would like. I started as a *sole trader*, where you and the business are one and the same. The business's money is your money, and the risk is your risk. Sole trading is quick and simple to set up, and I was advised to voluntarily register for VAT in order to look more professional. Remember kids, that VAT paid to you is not yours, and that when you register you become an unpaid tax collection service. On the upside, you can reclaim VAT spent on your start-up costs, and so it is well worth considering.

After a couple of years I incorporated my business into a *limited company* and put 'Ltd' after my name. Limited companies are more expensive to set up, and more complex to run, than sole-trading businesses, because the company is a separate legal entity. Getting your money out is harder, but can be more tax-efficient and this is one of the attractions of going limited.

Lastly there are *partnerships*, which are a bit like a limited company with a pre-nuptial agreement. Partnerships are also a legal entity, and if you're thinking of forming one it's essential to draw up a partnership agreement, or you could be dropped in a dung heap should you need to dissolve the arrangement in the future.

Whichever option you choose, sole trader, limited company or partnership, it pays to get some tax advice and to think about the costs involved in setting them up and winding them down.

Pause here for a moment. Think about what you would like to do, and don't let a lack of skills or experience get in your way. Then turn to the back of the book where the Personal Planning Kit is sitting waiting for you. Please complete the first section called 'A Sense of the Future' (on page 180). As you don't have to show it to anyone for now, just go for broke. What's in your heart? Don't worry about fear or practicality; if you edit your dreams then your life is going to be a bit short on fulfilment. Laugh, smile to yourself and go for it. Then when you're happy with your

answers come back here and continue.

Now you have put some words to your dreams it's time to dive into the word of the selfer and have fun, so without pausing for refreshment let's leave our corner-cutting behind us and think about keeping our bottom in good shape.

And I don't mean through liposuction.

A HAPPY BOTTOM

How to avoid a business spanking

2

Let's give some shape to the book. On the journey from miserable fed-up wretch behind an empty desk to a happy, worried, excited puppy behind a differently empty desk you need to consider some overall themes. Although these are embedded in each chapter it is worth collecting them up in one place so that you can see them and tuck them into your conscious memory. Keeping things in sight is a good idea, and the fun way to do this is to drum up an acronym. You know: the sort of thing that the experts at conferences always intimidate you with, having spent 10 years researching at the School of Flaky Management, department of Advanced Acronyms.

Some of these people are gurus and spend their sad lives living at the top of a saintly management pole. Some of them live in the real world and enrich our working lives with their shrewd observations. However, increasingly there is a tendency for people to forget that there is as much bollocks and showmanship in management and business theory as there ever was in a nineteenth-century travelling vaudeville show. Gasp at the latest theory, applaud the business boffin with a bad perm, or jot down the latest buzz word in your executive PDA. PT Barnum would be proud.

Because a selfer needs to work to eat, we need to keep things simple. If your business is loaded onto a PDA and it breaks, you're shagged. If you drop your diary it will bounce. If you drop your PDA it will break. Your business will break with it, and don't kid yourself that you will have backed everything up, because in my experience people can be really slack about this.

Business is not and does not have to be complicated. If the pyramids were built without batteries and the Wright Brothers pioneered powered flight without the use of SatNav and an arm-retracting television, your business can be built from the ground up in the most simple, cost-effective way possible. Keep business simple. Even airline pilots are selected on the basis of having one big thumb which they use to switch on the autopilot. If you make life all complicated and squiggly on day one you will load down your poor old biplane with a drinks trolley, and mess it up. And if you do that, you will get spanked. But not in a sexy way. No sir, you'll get spanked in a way that will leave your bottom sore for six months.

Before you go onto the internet to look up spank, spanking or spanked – and I suggest you don't do that if there are kiddies in the room – (so I'm told) what we have here is a word designed to knit together the key themes that you have to be mindful of in order to power your business off the foggy runway of hope and into the inky blue sky of your dreams. The word has been carefully machined out of an ingot of pure usefulness. It's a word you will remember, an acronym to fling at people with cheery abandon in order to combat some of the more sterile and no less contrived acronyms currently polluting the world of business.

Our word is SPANK and the bottom-smackingly relevant themes are:

- S **Self** – you are the talent and the key limiting factor on your business.
- P **Planning** – plan for cash, for uncertainty, for busy periods and for rainy days.
- A **Assumptions** – you will live or die by the ones you make.
- N **Networking** – get on your bike and tell the world you exist.
- K **Kick ass** – whip up your motivation, drive and determination and then let rip.

Self comes first because you are your business, and its level of success or failure is directly attributable to what you think, feel and do.

If you **plan**, then the risk of sudden cash shortages is reduced, time is made better use of, and people tend not to find themselves buying the Christmas turkey at Easter.

I shall make an **assumption** here: that we all make assumptions: such as that people who say they are successful must be telling the truth, that people who are told a price assume it is the lowest price on offer, and that to be successful you need at least four business degrees in assorted flavours. All of these assumptions are, to borrow a phrase, horseshit.

After assumptions we have **networking**, the big shh ... you know what, which we shall return to in a later chapter.

Finally we have **kick ass** because to work for yourself, in whatever capacity, means taking potshots at the market place so that you stamp out your presence and start to win customers.

To return to assumptions, it is easy to say 'check out your assumptions' and tougher to do it. They are sneaky snakes which slide up our trousers without us noticing, until their little fangs bite into our soft parts, with devastating results. You could wear bicycle clips at all times to keep the reptiles out but they might just draw some curious looks from those not in the know. To avoid sartorial embarrassment, think about the following general assumptions which I have heard from several clients. Which ones do you recognize?

If I set up in business people will buy my products or services.

Answer: why the hell should they, when there are perfectly reasonable people already providing the same thing already?

When I am in business it's OK to put all my receipts in a shoe box and leave them there until year end.

Whoa there, horsey. I don't know any accountants who use shoe boxes, so take a tip from them. The accounting shoe box is the business equivalent of a Christmas present from Great Aunt Monolith: you know, the one with the goatee and the pulsating wart. At some point you are going to have to open both the box and the present, and who knows what disasters will be waiting for you. At least with the Great Aunt all you have to do is kiss her. This is much more pleasant than shovelling through a pile of receipts at year end, because your Great Aunt is not going to bankrupt you, whereas ignorance of your cashflow could.

Be warned. Ignorance makes a poor business partner, and without cash you will have to give Great Aunt Monolith a big tonguey one to keep your baby business afloat. Yuk! We shall return to the perils of the shoe box at the end of the book, with a couple of cautionary tales to do with business accounting.

People will buy my products for the price I ask.

Be careful. If you want to sell a bunch of flowers for £10 and everyone else sells them for £8, then either you will sell nothing, or you will have to think of a way to justify your price. When you work out how much you need to sell your products for, it pays to salt your numbers with some local research, or to reduce your optimism to avoid a nasty surprise.

I know how much it will cost to set up and run my business.

No you don't. You can have a guess and add 20 per cent to be cautious, because things in life always seem to cost more. Every time I go to the supermarket, intent on picking up a few essentials, I always come away with more than I need, but just the right amount that I want. I'm a sucker for 'new' things.

and for shiny packaging. Have you noticed how the price of items is not on the packet itself? Once the goods are in your trolley you have no idea how much the bill is going to be, and business can be the same. Despite your best intentions to be frugal there is always something extra to buy. I have spent about 10 times more on personal training than I ever thought I would need to. It's money well spent just not money well budgeted for!

Be cautious and always add in some sort of contingency. I mean, you would if you were having the builders round, wouldn't you?

My family has the stamina to go through with it.

Hmm ... Don't overlook the fact that the people closest to you will invest emotionally in your business. Don't assume that you have enough credit in the Bank of Family to allow you to fund your venture. Talk to them and find out how much time they will support you for, or whether they are prepared to see little of you whilst you toil away to get things going. Or how happy they are that you're going to delay buying the latest high-definition, fold-away flatscreen television and combine drinks cabinet because you need to spend the money on a big roll of packing tape.

From the moment you push the go button on your new venture, you keep drawing on your credit in the Bank of Family, and if this gets overstretched they may just call in the debt. If they do that, the emotional bailiffs will come round and will repossess your heart.

To be successful in business we all need to have happy bottoms, and that means not getting spanked. When I started out I made most of the above assumptions, didn't think about my own limitations enough, planned only for the next six months, nearly drowned in assumptions, avoided networking and only kicked ass when my wife kicked ass with me. And I made some assumptions, did I mention that?

My original business plan had me working only as a coach. To be successful I needed 20 clients a month who would all pay me the same amount. I didn't think about the cost of running my car, the difficulty of finding and maintaining such a client list, and even the time taken to research, interview and win new customers. I assumed that it would all fall into place. I even nearly turned down a chance to join a networking group, on the grounds that I was a) scared to talk to people and b) found the idea somehow beneath me. Then just to rub salt into a raw wound, I proudly announced to my wife that I would do nothing for three months, whilst I qualified in psychometric profiling.

I had no idea how much in love I was with my big plan, and completely missed the reality of it all. However, once the money started to flow out of the house and the bills began to stack up, I realized a fundamental truth about business: you can't sell if you are sitting at home in front of your laptop. So I went out selling and never looked back.

All of this was extracting credit from my Bank of Family at a hideous rate, and although I'm successful today, I'm still paying off the emotional overdraft that I racked up to keep the bailiffs away. It hurts!

Stop here and catch your breath.

There are two things to add to your personal planning kit. They are to do with the assumptions you are making and the amount of credit you have with those closest to you.

It might help to grab a biscuit and a hot milky drink here to sustain you through your thinking. You might also want to fiddle with some rough numbers and see whether they add up and your business looks viable, or in business argot, whether it has legs. The profit you will make is the total

income you generate from sales less the cost of running your business. Remember that until you've been in business a year, you don't really know these numbers.

Please don't fall into the trap of working out all your costs first and then just add on enough sales to cover them, because people who do this tend to have a nasty habit of buying luxury cars, oak veneered shop interiors, Gucci toolboxes, or thermonuclear powered laptops.

Given that lots of business people have failed at some point, but only talk about their successes, it's likely that you will only ever hear good news from them. I have seen some people go bankrupt, and others come close, because they made silly mistakes and fell in love with their dream, instead of falling in love with the harsh reality of being a *selfer*. As the sages have it:

Business is business. If you want a friend, get a dog.

I like this and would add:

Don't get spanked. Get wise and keep your bottom happy. So there I was, at home again with no job and possible success just a whistling train in the distance. A train that might or might not come puffing into my station on time. Bugger!

Pause here and ponder on the need to avoid a spanking. Then turn to section 2 in your Personal Planning Kit, called 'Assumptions and Bank of Family' (on page 182). Write down the assumptions you are making and find out how much emotional credit you have to draw on.

Except this time I was excited and full of hope. The world had stopped turning for a moment and all around was silence. I had decided to stop working for other people and instead to embark on a journey which would swing between the highest of highs and the lowest of lows, sometimes all on the same day and occasionally in the same hour.

Then the spell was broken by my wife, who looked around the smart new house that we had moved into only six months before, and said sadly, 'I suppose this will have to go.'

YOU YOU YOU

What sort of firework are you?

3

Benjamin Disraeli has been quoted as saying that there are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies and statistics. This could be the most profound thing that anyone has said in the history of business. Sadly however, he never actually muttered those particular words. Mark Twain only said that he did, and in all probability the quote can be attributed to Leonard H. Courtney, who was overheard mumbling it in 1895. As any schoolboy knows, Lenny, as he was popularly known, went on to become the President of the Royal Statistical Society. It's a society whose members aren't noted for their ability to get smashed and play table rugby, but they do still insist on calculating the winner of the Christmas raffle to six decimal places.

Given that lots of business failures are attributable to the use and abuse of numbers so dodgy that if they turned up to take your daughter out for a date, you would grab your shotgun and shout, 'No git offa ma land' at them, it pays to look at all business numbers through extremely dark glasses, to avoid being blinded by their cheeky smug grins. However, one statistic which is probably true is that one in two businesses fail in their first two years.¹ A whopping 50 per cent bite the dust, and take a large slice of investment capital with them.

A statistic that I made up, purely to stimulate thinking, is that 99.6 per cent of all these business failures are attributable to the person who set up the business in the first place. The other 0.4 per cent are down to alien invasion, meteorite impact, or a sudden and unexpected win at the international super-lottery, followed by a lifetime of persecution by money-grabbing charities and bleeding heart cases.

The point is this. If you are in business it is your business. It is chock full of your strengths and talents – and weaknesses and blind spots. Stir in some prejudices and useless received wisdom, and you can quickly draw the boundaries to your entrepreneurial world.

For example, I knew a salesman who insisted that he did not call on new prospects on a Friday because that was not the done thing. I pointed out to him that I was a prospect, and that actually Friday was a very good day to call, as my week was behind me and I had often had time to listen to a new pitch. He was adamant that this was not what *professional* sales people did. Perhaps there is a sales law that says, 'Thou shalt rest on the fifth day.' I don't buy this myself. If this person had been working for himself, he would have lost 20 per cent of his selling time, simply because he believed something which was not true. Given the increasing competition businesses face on all fronts, it seems ludicrous to cut yourself short, but that's just what people do.

If I had my time over again, I would not spend three months scaring my wife witless by sitting home 'preparing'. I would get a second job to make ends meet, and I would spend time visiting new people. The result of my apparent laziness, largely through being nervous about meeting new people, is that I drew heavily on my credit at home and spent more of my meagre savings than I really needed to.

It wasn't a great start, but now I enjoy my work, like meeting people, and have sold and sold and sold. However, I used to be a shit salesman. Terrified that I would disappear in the darker parts of a major city and never be found again, except for a hubcap and a couple of ribs, I stayed home and kept myself safe.

The best way to learn fast is not to have a salary and still have some kids and a goldfish to feed. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What skills do I need to polish in order to survive?

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