



Mis-adventures in business

I always thought I would be good at business, until I came to try it ...and to keep on trying it! Looking back, I should have heeded the skydiver's maxim: *'If at first you don't succeed, skydiving is not for you!'* Substituting the word *business* for *skydiving* and taking the analogy a step further, I never truly plummeted head-first into terra firma, like a falling tombstone, but on occasions It was a perilously close call.

Luck of the draw in UK

In the early 20th Century, actor/comedian, W.C. Fields, came up with another quote to fit the circumstance: *'If at first you don't succeed, then quit. No use making a damn fool of yourself'*. Thus, towards the end of my ten-year tussle with business, I did begin to feel that perhaps I was living out the worst of that quotation, by in fact making a damn fool of myself. So in the end I did quit, or almost anyway. I seem to be saddled with an impulsive character that always feels there can be one more golden opportunity around the next corner.

I should have taken the hint from my son, to whom I am diametrically opposed when it concerns matters related to luck and money. He started out as a toddler, by winning a camera, from a drawing competition run by a local TV channel, then graduated a few years after that, to walking away with the biggest teddy from the local fairground stall, before moving on to the most admired arm in baseball, and later, to picking certainties on the Australian stock exchange. If he had ventured into horse racing (and maybe he did) I am sure he would have become the bookies

nightmare: pushing his bets across the line and cramming notes from them into his wallet. But as inferred, the corresponding best I could do, was a sort of negative luck of the draw, where I narrowly avoided drowning at sea and being killed by car roll-overs on land. If it were picking the losing horse in the *Grand National*, then I could probably be relied on to come up trumps, but there's usually no pay-out for that!

But with a wealth of experience and zero good results, I can at least claim that it wasn't all my fault. Before the business phase, I had been moderately fortunate in a more philanthropic world, which involved managing projects across four continents; then as soon as I hit the world of enterprise and endeavour, negative influences seemed to whirl around, like *Hurricane Katrina* hell-bent on obliterating New Orleans. At times it seemed like *Katrina* was my middle name! Too late I realised that good business results depend on preparation and know-how, but at the same time, my experience has shown that the throw of the dice can also play a major role.

Take for example, my first sortie, as millionaire to be, into the high-flying worlds of Branson and Zuckerberg. Towards the end of 2007, I found I had money to burn as they say. Why not real estate? The basic plan - with a close friend - was to develop and sell a piece of prime real estate, located in the most lucrative area of Cheltenham, one of the blue-belt housing areas in the UK. *"Nothing can possibly go wrong with this one,"* we said to each other. *"House prices are always on the up around here. It's a sure-fire bet, if ever there was one!"*

A year or so after purchase - when we had almost completed the development - those blue-sky horizons suddenly and astonishingly melted away, as our universe was hit for six by the worst economic crisis since the stone age. Unfortunately, this financial heist, denied all our previous bullet-proof predictions and included Cheltenham amongst its victims: the safest real estate bet on Earth! We could only sit back and watch as house prices nose-dived all around us, the only (somewhat selfish) consolation being that they were nose-diving for millions of others too.

Regrettably and as hitherto mentioned, the business in focus involved a very close (French) friend ... plus a paint stripping, 80% mortgage (which as it transpired, I

carried fairly and squarely on my own shoulders). Thus two additional and important maxims came into play here, which haunted me at least until the next business debacle took root: (1) *on debt* – ‘*don’t jump in at the deep end if you can’t swim*’; and (2) *on friends* – ‘*never mix personal affairs with business undertakings*’.

I well remember our last words to each other, as he sat dragging on a *rollie*, behind the wheel of his faded *Veedub*, at the traffic lights. Over the rattle and hum, I yelled out what I thought (or at least hoped) was a given truth:

“Of course Francois, I guess we’ll share the losses, just as we had planned to share the profits, won’t we?”

I was the front man in the enterprise and as a trusting soul had taken out the mortgage in my own name, involving my friend only as a sleeping partner; in part to help him back into the world of work. He was a carpenter - or *chippy* as he liked to call himself - more or less jobless for a year or two prior to our start-up.

“No mate, not sure about that one,” Francois replied, staring at the lights and in turn avoiding my rather stunned look. “You might be on your own there.”

These were his last words to me, before I got out of the car and slammed the door ... hard! So hard that his old jalopy shuddered in response, just before he took off in a cloud of blue smoke, from the lights. ‘Pissed-off’ would have been quite mild terminology for the way I felt at that moment in time. We had shared so many wine-sodden nights together, and this was the way it was to end! Sad.

In this case, plummeting to ground at the speed of sound, would have meant the somewhat shaky north-country mortgage outfit, could sell the house from under me ... and most likely well under the mortgaged amount. It was incredibly stressful just thinking about this: bad enough to lose the deposit and all the monies that had gone into developing the place, but to sink below the bottom line and be faced with handing over more money, just to repay the fucking loan - or even worse, to have to declare myself bankrupt – felt like the whole world was caving in.

I travelled from the UK to Australia amongst all this and remember being unbelievably stressed out about the whole thing, for the whole time I was there. It's astounding how money issues can have such a devastating effect on one's psyche, but they do. I could be washed up in my sixties with a correspondingly bleak looking retirement just over the hill. I even spoke with my son about borrowing money to dig myself out of the hole. How I was to pay it back was anyone's guess.

Then with Armageddon on the horizon, almost miraculously, two pieces of good luck came into play: the mortgage company agreed to extend my loan for one year, then within that time a buyer came along at the eleventh hour and bought the place for slightly above the mortgaged amount. My huge sigh of relief could be heard all around The Cotswolds!

On the downside, the loss of a fair proportion of my savings came as a severe body blow, along with the fact that failure of the business caused the end of a fifteen-year friendship. We had stood to gain as much as £75,000 each in the venture, but in the end, we lost, what was for each of us a significant amount of money, plus a highly valued relationship. Many would say that like the banks and financiers who caused the whole thing, we were just being too greedy. Others might simply offer up another maxim: '*Shit happens!*'

Start-up attempt in Kenya

However, at the time it happened, these warning signs of business-related doom were not very well noted. Even before the UK disaster had finished, I had launched into another one: *Millimani Classique* - a hairdressing wonder-world, set in the somewhat seedy surrounds of a very local bar, not far from the centre of Nairobi, in Kenya. More accurately, the business was arranged between two pubs and a small slum, but surprisingly, it was to be one of my more successful ventures: *almost* returning a profit, plus being sold on for *almost* as much money as was poured into it!

Set near a world of alcohol in Kenya, it soon became obvious that male customers might be a better bet than female, so an emphasis on ladies' hairdressing quickly gave way to a focus on hair-cutting for men, along with massage done by young

females: *Millimani Classique* downgraded to *Beertown Barbers*. It was all very much above board of course (though we struggled on several occasions to maintain that line!). There were contentious issues, such as barbers brawling in the grounds over access to customers and the landlady tapping the electricity meter ... not once, but three or four times. We agreed to provide illicit electricity to a soup-kitchen in the slum, via a cable out the back door and also ran a hire car business on the side, comprised of four vehicles (two of which were stolen). But in general - and considering what was going on for me at about the same time in the UK - business in Kenya moved forward reasonably smoothly, over a three-year tenure.

The car hire business is worth dwelling on for a moment or two. Hiring out four-wheel-drive cars seemed like a good idea at the time, but experience told a different story. Kenya's roads are full of potholes and the hire industry mostly peopled by a bunch of rogues, so the vehicles either get broken or stolen, while people are up to all sorts of tricks to make sure you don't get paid. One car (luckily insured) was whisked away - it was thought at the time - over the Ugandan border, while another we stopped from being stolen in the nick of time, after a night-time search around one of Nairobi's estates, with an armed policeman on board, and a laptop following a tracking device up front ... it felt like we were starring in an action-packed movie!

Followed by bigger fish

The same dubious success could not be claimed for the next one. Again, it was a health spa type of establishment, with hair and beauty services, but about ten times the size of the initial undertaking. Since the earlier mission failed to return anything that resembled a profit, it is hard to fathom, in hindsight, why I thought doing something similar, but ten times the size, would be any different. Anyway, I did, and *Euphoria Fish Spa* was launched on the unsuspecting, monied class of Nairobi. I thought it would line my path to the pearly gates after retirement, but in fact it did something much to the opposite of that.

Euphoria by name; Euphoria by nature. A 100-metre, tree-lined driveway led to an enormous and exotic, one-acre garden, within which was the spa. The corresponding

monthly rent was accordingly huge. With gold lettering over the entrance door, a golden reception desk and gold chandeliers all around, the place was designed to be glamorous ...and to a large extent, indeed it was. The drawcard was a unique offering of *Pedicure by Fish* ...something which I was told worked like a dream in China, but unfortunately for me, bombed like a lead weight in Kenya. Families would arrive looking for a fish restaurant, only to leave disgruntled, when they understood the size and purpose of the fish on show. Fully grown, they were about the size of one's little finger and programmed to be turned on by nibbling your feet.

There was a bit of bad luck attached to this failure too, including a very devious, national election, which coincided with Euphoria's second year of operation and seemed to suck 99% of the money in circulation, out of circulation, meaning that people had more meaningful things to do with their hard-earned savings than pay for fish to eat their feet. There was also the small matter of my partner - and boss of the show - doing a line with one of the staff members; a male hairdresser with a soprano voice who was a gym addict and walked around in public strapped to an enormous pair of headphones (along with the obligatory Puff Daddy black cap and shades of course!): all a bit *uncool* for staff morale and my own self-esteem!

After a turbulent three years – at the office and at home - The choice finally came down to closing and selling off the furniture, or selling the business on a walk-in-walk-out basis, to some unsuspecting soul, at a considerable loss. Then not dissimilar to what had happened towards the end of the initial venture in the UK, just as the clock ticked towards midnight and money to pay the massive rent and enormous electricity bills was running out, another miracle happened, when an unsuspecting buyer emerged from the throng. "*Alleluyah!*" I cried, as I jumped for joy around the office desk. It was better than selling the furniture, but in the cold hard light of day, was still a massive loss., which certainly left my pension plans in ruins. As business catastrophes rated, this was probably my worst, eclipsing even the UK fiasco!

The final straw came one bleak night, with the sale almost a done deal, when I stood at the front gates of Euphoria in the pouring rain, only to be robbed at gunpoint by a marauding motorbike passenger. "*High time to move on,*" I thought the next day,

after recovering from the shock of the night before. And so I did, moving away from Nairobi and my Kenyan partner of ten years, to start a new life, supported by a reliance on an unexpectedly reduced retirement fund, but buoyed by the beautiful and tropical coastal environs of Kenya. By the time I exited Nairobi's endless traffic jams and polluted waterways, the truth had finally come home to roost: I was indeed not destined to become the world's next Jeff Bezos.

A grand finale, but on a much smaller scale

Almost unbelievably, it was only a few months after that, when I launched into yet another attempt to win the war against business failure. This was *The Blue Kuku*: a cafe in the slums of a district called Shanzu, on the North Coast of Kenya. It was a miniscule venture compared to those that had gone before, so perhaps I was beginning to learn my lesson and tone ambitions down to manageable size (of success or failure), but I still do not seem to be able to stay away totally, from the thrill of the challenge ... to achieve unbridled success in business.

In some ways similar to that first adventure in the UK, where part of the story was an attempt to get my best mate back to work again, with Blue Kuku the underlying aim was to try and provide independence for a close friend and her nine-year-old twins. I myself was not expecting to reap any rewards; it was essentially philanthropic.

The café was clean and brightly coloured, with a large blue kuku (chicken in Kiswahili) - copied quite ingeniously from a cornflakes packet, by a local artist - emblazoned on one wall. It was a very basic and simple place. However, some of the locals thought of *BKC* (the name sometimes given) as an amazing spot to *chill* - in the energy sapping tropical heat! - and they would come most days to do just that; one rather large lady famously saying:

"Please give me another plate of those deeelicious chips, I can't bear to leave this place and go home to my house; Blue Kuku is soooo beautiful!"

Was the Blue Kuku business more of a success (in a much smaller way) than ventures that have preceded it? Perhaps the best way to describe the outcome

would be to say it registered as a relatively minor loss! After a few months of business, various unexpected obstacles began to raise their head. The most damaging was jealousy towards café staff, to be found amongst local ladies - largely unemployed and idle – who would sit opposite the shop each day to pass negative comments to all and sundry about the foods and drinks on offer. Rather staggeringly, these bad-mouthing locals included the landlady, whom the shop manager paid rent to. It was all a rather steep learning curve: who would have guessed that jealousy and envy within the ranks of the poor would be a business risk that a manager had to endure and circumnavigate?

So what have I learnt from my comparatively brief whirl through the commercial sector? On the whole has it been a positive or negative experience?

Well, a bit of both I guess. In overall terms I probably regret ever having thought about doing business of any size or shape, at all. The two main ventures – one in the UK and one in Kenya – were financial disasters, on a scale that was extremely worrying in terms of my bank account, and very stressful to my mind. The smaller ventures in Kenya did not bring any major financial headaches, but they did take up a lot of time and effort, which could perhaps have been directed towards more worthwhile concerns – more reading and writing, learning an instrument, painting water colour beach scenes - or if all else failed, just plain enjoying myself.

On the plus side, there is a feeling of not being afraid to try; to move ahead: to do something: life is all about risk-taking. As the saying goes: *it is better to have tried and failed, than never to have tried at all*. Maybe it would appear to outsiders that I failed miserably as regards *bringing home the bacon*, while what some friends said about Euphoria when we started converting a mansion into a health spa, was at times quite negative and even hurtful. But we persevered and at least we tried, while they sat back and did nothing of any significance.

Yes, perhaps I should have taken more heed of the doubters, but to balance their negative jibes – these were people who stuck to their desk jobs and their nine to five hours - it was a whole lot of fun which took us into many new worlds. And one of the

great things about Euphoria was that it brought me much closer to a wonderful man called Norbert, who devoted many months of hard work and brilliant ideas towards its development. We became great friends through those three years of the spa, which was sold on soon after his untimely death, in 2017.

While trying to make Euphoria work, I learnt so much about the world around me ... and if I am to be truthful, about myself. The same probably applies, in a lesser way, to the other initiatives before and after, both in Kenya and the UK. After all, life, from birth to death, is a continuing learning curve ... for all of us.

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