

## From humble beginnings: entrepreneurs look back to their first office



Chris Lumsden (left) and Ken Forbes still display the Starbucks napkin they scribbled their first job on, in their new London office.

**Businesses can spring up out of nowhere. We speak to the successful small business owners who made it happen from the unlikeliest of places**

**Sean Hargreave**

Business owners know the feeling Dickens was describing at the start of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Launching a company is both the best and the worst of times but also a time of belief, incredulity, wisdom and foolishness. Those who have left perfectly good jobs to go their own way will know only too well the conflicting mixture of emotions they now may look back fondly on.

None more so than Chris Lumsden and Ken Forbes, co-founders of design and branding agency, Good. They had previously worked together at a design agency where Forbes was managing director and was asked to lay off several staff members. He thought it only fair to mention he and Lumsden were both thinking of leaving and setting up their own agency, in case it made reducing numbers a little easier. Within minutes, the pair had their corporate lives packed up in cardboard box for them and they decamped to the nearest Starbucks wondering what to do next.

“It was like something out of a movie, all we had was a cardboard box each and a rough business plan and both our wives were pregnant,” he recalls.

“Then my mobile went off and it was a client who had been holding back on some major work. He wanted to progress so I had to explain I’d left but he didn’t mind, he just wanted us to get it done. I wrote down the details on a Starbucks serviette and we were off. We’ve still got it framed on the wall.”

The pair knew a local printer who let them rent out a box room as their first office. As Lumsden recalls, it was far from ideal but very exciting at the same time.

“When the print works started up, we had to

go outside in the car park to take a phone call,” he says. “It was so shabby we weren’t take a client round, so we’d always arrange to meet at their offices. We now have thirty-two staff in our Glasgow and London offices that are all glass and exposed brick, as you’d expect for a design agency.” “Then my mobile went off and it was a client who had been holding back on some major work. He wanted to progress so I had to explain I’d left but he didn’t mind, he just wanted us to get it done. I wrote down the details on a Starbucks serviette and we were off. We’ve still got it framed on the wall.”



Jacyn Heavens (left) says being tight on costs during the start-up phase, meant that they had the revenue to invest in the product.

## “Our first computers cost £15 and our desks came from skips”

When it comes to starting up on a budget, few can rival Jacyn Heavens who was running a bar in his native Norwich and becoming increasingly disillusioned with point of sale technology. Cash register systems were expensive, no good at monitoring stock levels, or working in the cloud to enable him to access important figures from any device. So he set about building his ideal system, Epos Now.

“When we started we were in the room above my bar, our first computers cost £15 from

Gumtree, and our desks came from skips,” he says.

“It wasn’t a great work environment but, five years on, we’re refurbishing our latest office to include a hot-tub, bar and arcade. The only reason this is possible is because we’ve been tight on costs during our start-up phase, which has allowed us to invest in producing the best product.”

While partially sentimental for the days of second-hand computers and battered desks, Heavens is quick to point out that it is easy to over romanticise the early stages of business and forget why companies aim to get better premises and systems as soon as they can



afford it.

“When the company launched, our CRM system consisted of post-it notes and scraps of paper, which meant information was often lost and effectively had to be re-learned,” he says.

“Our phone system was the cheapest available. It was ringing non-stop and the only way we could tell how many people were waiting was to call our own number, and listen to the announcement telling us what place we were in the queue.”

The business has since grown to two hundred employees and Heavens was recently awarded a Queen’s Award for Enterprise.

## ‘My office was in the living room’

Like Lumsden and Forbes, Lucy Burnford was also a parent to be when she set up Motoreity in 2014. Having spent thousands on a car, she was alarmed at the repair bills that soon started to mount up, despite the car’s full service history. It was then she realised that the document is basically just a bunch of stamps which tell you nothing about the mechanical state of a car. She decided to set up a digital service through which MOTs, repairs and servicing data can be combined to form a

car’s digital history so potential buyers get the full picture.

“I used to wear baggy jumpers to hide my bump when I was meeting investors. I was lucky it was winter,” she says.

“My office was in the living room and once I’d had my son, I used to have to stage everything around feeding him and getting him off to sleep so I knew I might be able to get in a call or two or do a bit more work. I even used to arrange meetings that were near a coffee house so I could have my mum in there keeping my son happy until I could rush out of the meeting to feed him.”

In 2015 Burnford entered into a joint venture with the AA to form Automyze and is now based in highly presentable modern offices on a business park near Didcot Parkway station.

One irony which has not escaped most entrepreneurs is that growth comes in what Lucy Burnford describes as three stages, which can mean you finish where you started. “In stage one you’re in your living room and it’s very challenging,” she says. “Then you get nice offices where you can build a great team. Then, in the third stage, your team knows what they need to be doing and they can work from home a lot of the time. It’s quite ironic how you can go full circle.”



Lucy Burnford, founder of Motoreity, says successful small business owners may find themselves working from home again after building up a great team.