

College sideline becomes a world-leading business

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

He may look like Lenin, but his creed is as about different as it could possibly be. Charles Nixon has championed the cause of marketing worldwide, spreading the word, the message, the medium. Jenny Chapman gives him a bit of his own medicine.

DON'T you just love it when you hear about someone starting a little side-line to their real job and one day finding they have created a world-beating business.

It happened to Charles Nixon, newly-elected president of the Cambridgeshire branch of the Chartered Institute of Marketing, and founder of Cambridge Marketing College.

He was happily getting on with his career when, 10 years ago, he and a colleague suggested to Cambridge Regional College, where both were sometime lecturers, that it might be an idea to set up a proper marketing college.

The college, in one of its previous incarnations, did not want to do it, so Mr Nixon and his colleague, Ian Brownlee, decided to do it themselves. Thus CMC was born, a "virtual" college before "virtual" got its new meaning into the dictionary.

The administrative side of the business started where else? in Mr Nixon's spare bedroom, and the first intake of delegates (all who attend CMC, whether physically or virtually, are delegates, not students) was just a dozen people, meeting in their spare time at St John's Innovation Centre, where the college now has its fully-staffed administrative HQ.

Mr Nixon, who was about to begin full-time study at Warwick for a doctorate "Marketing strategies of English Universities", had no intention of being deflected from this academic pursuit, CMC was strictly a sideline.

"But it grew by itself," he says, not least because the delegates wanted the ultimate in flexibility from the courses and CMC was prepared to provide it, starting courses at different times of the year, differing times of the day and night, in places where people could meet and study together, but also via the internet, which brought in the rest of the world.

Mr Nixon, who studied history and economics at Manchester, went for his first job in sales and marketing straight from university: "I didn't get the job, but I had a two-hour discussion about whether sales should be in charge of marketing or marketing in charge of sales. A few weeks later they rang and offered me a different job."

It was while he was with Courtaulds, as their government relations officer, that his first task was to go on a course to find out about microchips (this was in the 1970s).

This job, and subsequent ones, took him to various parts of the world before he decided to go back to university, to do an MBA. In fact, he was one of the first.

His cv takes in Mercury Communications, Extel, Touche Remnant and Andersen but, after years of commuting to London from his home near Huntingdon, he opted for the academic route: "I have always enjoyed education. I met my wife on the MBA course."

Within two years of starting CMC he had 200 delegates on courses. Another eight years on and he has 1,700, mostly in the UK, with colleges set up in other cities, but also around the world, for delegates who use e-learning, sending him pictures of their new babies along with their homework.

Warwick asked him to lecture to post-graduates, which he happily has done, although, all these years later, he has still to make his final submission for his doctorate, and somehow, doubts he ever will.

"The college has grown and grown. We are now the largest professional marketing college in Europe.

"We founded it because we enjoy it, and the delegates like it, too. They feel they are setting out to change the world."

Courses last anything from six months to two years, depending on how much time delegates can give to their studies. A post-graduate diploma in marketing is the pinnacle, and opens the way to become a Chartered Marketeer, a Privy Council-approved benchmark for marketing directors.

"We teach analysis and decision-making, customer-relationships, finance, international marketing, and marketing communications. We don't teach entrepreneurship or anything like that, but what we do teach gives people confidence. We are pretty proud of our delegates, who are working all over the world."

Getting back to this "delegates" business. Mr Nixon says it is all to do with the way the college treats people. Students are people who buy their own coffee and biscuits, fend for themselves; delegates are provided with such sustenance as part of the package.

That's marketing.

"Ian says marketing is all about biscuits. Give the men Jammy Dodgers and the women chocolate ones, and you get killed in the rush."

Marketing is also the large boxes of kit delivered by TNT to offices in far-flung corners of Russia, South America, Australia and South Africa. The boxes look good. They have "Cambridge Marketing College" written all over them. Colleagues of those receiving the boxes decide they want one, too.

It costs around £1,000 to take a course. ("Although we do have a very low-price introductory course. We have a slight altruistic side, to spread the gospel of marketing.") There are now 25 tutors, all professional marketeers.

And the course material is made as accessible as possible: "People don't have enough time these days to read, so we have to get the knowledge in in other ways -- audio tapes they can listen to on the A14, CD Roms to go into their laptops, videos."

The plan, after celebrating the 10th anniversary, is to open more colleges. The next is likely to be Glasgow, then London, Moscow, India and Spain, and including a specialist course for marketing advanced technology.

Mr Nixon (Mr Brownlee has retired) has built a £1 million business from his sideline, and he works only 10 to 3 in the office, taking and collecting his 10-year-old son, Christopher, to school either end of the day, before logging on to CMC's e-chatrooms in the evening.

His wife, Melissa, is director of strategy at East of England Development Agency.

And as to the chicken and egg question: "Sales should be part of marketing, but the hardest part is convincing sales that this is how it should be."

Call CMC on 01223 421903.

* The best organisations at marketing are universities, but they never admit it, Mr Nixon says.

Of the 66 institutions still in existence since 1450 (the beginning of the Reformation), two are parliaments, the Icelandic and the Isle of Man, the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church, and 62 universities.

Of the Fortune 500 of a century ago, only four companies remain today.

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