

life support

Interview **Fiona Lawrie**

Portrait **Kirby Koh**

A combination of design and business skills has enabled James Dyson (below left), with the help of fellow RCA-trained Mark Bickerstaffe, to transform a £1m overdraft into sales of 1.4 million vacuum cleaners a year

James Dyson Mark and I have an innate love of design in common. Mark's enthusiasm for it pervades everything. He drives a Ducati, the ultimate design motorbike, and zooms out of the car park at 90 mph every night. I discovered design at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in the mid-Sixties. I helped to design the Sea Truck [military boat] as part of my degree course. I then organised the manufacturing and selling of them for five years. In a sense, I was an arms salesman; many of them were sold for military use. Scottish lairds also went crazy for it. The Sea Truck's ability to land on beaches meant that they could ferry sheep and provisions from island to island without the need for a jetty. I wanted to do something on my own and had the idea for the Ballbarrow [a wheelbarrow with a ball instead of a wheel]. I made every type of mistake, but it did capture a large chunk of the market, which gave me the confidence to do vacuum cleaners.

After 12 years cleaning my house, I got fed up with vacuum cleaners. I put in a new bag and was amazed to discover that while it worked well for a couple of rooms, by the third it wasn't picking up dust. The bag was empty, but the first dust that went into it blocked the bag and clogged the pores. That is what spurred me to think of the dual cyclone, which spins the dust out of the air by a non-clogging technique.

In the beginning, it was just me. I had a coach house across the yard at my old house near Bath. I started employing engineer/designers in 1987. In the mid-Eighties, we started getting licenses to make vacuums for Japanese and US companies. We lurched from one financial crisis to another, but we just about managed to keep our heads above water.

In the early 1990s, we decided to make our own product, the DC01. Mark joined us in 1992. I needed engineers with training in design and it was natural for me to go back to the RCA to recruit.

Suddenly, Mark was involved in things he had no experience of, such as going to Taiwan to find and supervise toolmakers during a civil unrest. You can give people from college total authority from the word go and they respond brilliantly. Mark is an absolute shining example of that.

I react more emotionally to things than him, and he's a much better people manager. I don't think he has any weak points, which is why he's head of Research and Development and a group board director at a very young age (31).

I wouldn't want Mark to become a competitor. I'm aware that people may well want to leave and do their own thing. That's fine by me. I did the same. However, I wouldn't say I'd encourage it.

I'm not extravagant; I have about two outfits. I have the odd holiday, a week off in January somewhere hot, and two weeks in the summer at our house in Provence.



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I truthfully like vacuuming. I learn a lot from housework; things that are inefficient give me ideas. It isn't the money – coming up with products that work better is my motivation. People will buy something if it works better, even if it's more expensive. I don't want to get big, either. We're not empire building.

Mark Bickerstaffe The company has grown so fast and achieved so much. It was very risky in the early days, but we felt it was up to us to make it work. We'd be working in the coach house overnight, slaving away, with matchsticks propping open our eyes, and the light in James' house would click on. Ten minutes later, he would wander over with coffee and hot cross buns. James is very good at motivating people.

James is incredibly shrewd and bright. You can have an in-depth technical discussion for hours, consult James, and at the drop of a hat he's got your answer. James is not just a designer – he has a business

mind. It's that combination that I respect. Because he's so motivated, he wants to get involved with everything, and with a business this size, it's a bit difficult. We do have some fairly heated debates sometimes.

James is an open, frank human being who I would classify as a friend. There's a lot of interchange; he came to my wedding; I've been round to his house for meals; I go fishing on his water, sometimes with his son Jacob. James and his wife Deirdre live in an old mill house near Malmesbury – where the Dyson Head Office is situated – that they bought from Lord Putnam. It has 38 acres, with a river running pretty much past the house.

We've seen James' family grow with the business. When I started, his youngest son Sam was at school and his older son Jacob was just off to university. Now Sam works as a designer at Dyson, and Jacob and his daughter Emily have their own businesses – Jacob designing products and interiors, Emily, bed linen and nightwear.

Each new employee goes on the production line, builds a vacuum cleaner, buys it and takes it home. I must have about seven or eight. I do use them, but I also have a cleaning lady. My favourite upright is the DC05. It's lightweight and the design is fantastic. There are other domestic appliances in development but I can't talk about them yet. We might be five years away from bringing a product out – but it's all top secret. I don't even talk about it to my wife.

If you're up to the job, then age or experience are fairly irrelevant at Dyson. What matters most is your ability. There's a lot of very young senior management for a company of this size. James lets you run with it and make mistakes. He's the first to say as long as we've learned something, it's not disastrous. He gives people vision, the capability to do anything. The next five to 10 years won't see me needing to move anywhere for another challenge. A lot of people would have to say that if they came up with a good idea, they'd love to do a Dyson, do it themselves. Yes, I would like to set up my own business. You go so far, and then you want to have the success that James has had.