

a **Beermat** publication

The Beermat Story

the e-book

*How we turned a good idea in a pub
into a successful business brand*



by **Mike Southon**

About the author

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He is a very experienced conference facilitator and moderator, having interviewed over 100 top business people, now featured every Saturday in his *Financial Times* column, 'My Business'.

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Mike built and sold his own company in the 80s and worked on seventeen different start-ups in the 90s (two later went public, three went broke!). Mike Southon is now the UK's leading entrepreneur mentor, and delivers over 100 presentations every year, all over the world.

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Chapter 1 - The Origin of the Species

This is **great stuff**
you should **write a book** about this

People often ask Chris West and me how our 'Beermat' books came about, and how we have developed the 'Beermat' brand.

As with many entrepreneurs, we had a good idea, we decided to give it a go, we more or less made it up as we went along, and certainly didn't get everything right. Of course, the journey (the learning experience) was the fun part!

Here is the story of what happened to us and what we did. We hope you find it useful!

A Bit of Background

The story begins back in 1967 when Chris and I met outside the headmaster's study at Wellington College. We were both rather overawed 'new boys', but it seemed the school could not separate us; an Exhibition (like a scholarship, only smaller) had been split equally between us.

We had completely different school careers – we were in different houses, and studied different things at A-Level (Chris did languages, I did sciences), but we remained best friends.

After school, again we embarked on two completely different careers, Chris going into marketing and later becoming a novelist, and me becoming a salesman. We did both run a 70s disco together (in the 70s!) and played in bands, most notably The Oxcentrics, a Dixieland jazz band, originally based at Oxford University. Chris was the drummer, I was the singer. 'Beermat' first started when I remarked one day, "I've had a great idea for a book..."

I would like to say this landmark conversation was in a pub, but actually, I cannot remember the exact details. Of course, this was not my first idea for a book that I thought Chris should write. Most of my ideas were politely declined. But this one seemed to have something, so he began to give it some thought...

My career in a nutshell:

I went to university twice; the first one (Imperial College) I was thrown out of for failing my exams, preferring drinking beer and chasing women to going to lectures.

I worked for a while, eventually making detergent out of sugar as a research project for Tate & Lyle. Then I went back to further education, this time to read Chemical Engineering at the University of Bradford.

When I graduated, I became a construction engineer, before finally ending up as a rather inept scaffolding salesman. I then met up with a Bradford chum, Mike Banahan. We had worked together at the Edinburgh Fringe while at University – I wrote the show, he did all the technical work, like hanging lights and running sound.

By now he was a computer science lecturer UNIX guru, and had co-written the first European book on the subject, with another Bradford chum, Andy Rutter. He recommended I took a job with a training company that they had been freelancing for in London.

Mike later joined me in London and within a year we had left and co-founded The Instruction Set with Pete Griffiths. This was in 1984. Andy joined us six months' later, and Pete's brother Dave, a vice-president of Goldman Sachs, after a year.

We sold the company to The Hoskyns Group in 1989 and I left what had then become Cap Gemini Ernst and Young in 1991. I then became Confused Disco Legend Mike Fab-Gere, playing full-time in colleges, theatres and corporate events.

Mike Fab-Gere and The Permissive Society is a ten-piece 60s/70s band, and along the way has had some great players in its ranks, from Deep Purple, Iron Maiden, Wishbone Ash and The Zombies. I still do the occasional gig to this day: www.fabgere.com

During the 90s I gradually moved from being Mike Fab-Gere full time to working with start-ups in a completely random way. They were just people I liked, with interesting products or services. I was always in charge of sales.

These 17 start-ups had mixed success – two eventually went public, after my time (Micromuse and RiverSoft), and three went under. One later did a trade sale (whereonearth to Yahoo) and some carry on to this day. A very mixed bag indeed!

But I was learning all the time. There were some very hard lessons; apparently I make a good Hunter but a terrible Sales Manager. And patterns were emerging – though I did not realise it at the time – about the nature of entrepreneurs and their teams, about how business was done, and about my role in all of this.

What was common in all of these experiences was my feeling that all the start-ups I

was involved in during the 90s were not as happy as The Instruction Set. Some, on paper, did better. Most did not. But even the most successful ones had ‘development issues’, to put it politely!

I would probably still be lurching from one start-up to the next (with varying success), but for the next piece of luck. Martin Rich, a lecturer at City University Business School, had seen me speak and invited me in to talk to their IT-related students about Open Systems (UNIX, Linux...). I did the first afternoon session in 1991 to an audience of 30. I was absolutely thrilled; I was now a university lecturer (in my mind at least!). A year later, I was invited back. And again the year after that...

Those who have seen me performing live will know I like to improvise, and become anecdotal, so my talks to Cass Business School (as it became) began to include more of what I was up to: the fun anecdotes about the ups and downs of start-ups.

By 2001, ten years after I first started lecturing, the talk was almost exclusively about my start-up experiences (Martin Rich did not seem to mind, which was very good of him!). And then one of the students made the life-changing comment, “This is great stuff; you should write a book about this.”

I spent about 30 seconds thinking about writing my autobiography, but soon had a much better idea and got on the phone to Chris West. He is a professional writer, and that is a big difference. His ‘Wang Anzhuang/Rosina Lin’ series of murder mysteries set in China had been published all around the world.

Today I have studied the art of writing and have a weekly column in the *Financial Times*. But back then, my writing was only barely adequate enough for a web log or customer pitch. If you have an ambition to write a book, and begin to think seriously about clarity, structure, readability, as well as the hard and very time-consuming business of sitting down and writing 50,000 words, then you will be well advised to consider hiring a professional.

Chris, of course, did not agree to write the book there and then. He said he would think about it and come and see one of my talks. Chris is primarily a novelist, but had earned a living working in journalism and marketing. So he also had a good general understanding of business, which made him sympathetic, if not convinced right away.

He came to see my presentation, and saw some good material, plus the beginnings of a structure. He was not going to write my life history, which would not be interesting to anyone outside of my family and close friends.

He was going to write a structured guide on entrepreneurship, from good idea to successful business, based initially on my experiences, but with much more added value, content, structure and simplicity.

So we sat down and started talking about the book, and the journey began!

Chapter 2 – A Novel Idea

it starts with some friends in a pub;
they do some things and eventually turn
a good idea into a **great business**

So Chris and I sat down to write the first book.

My inspiration for this was the person I consider to be the original 'Beermat Entrepreneur', Pete Griffiths, one of my co-founders of The Instruction Set in 1984. We would travel to the USA together, and Peter is one of those people you always see browsing intently through the business section of the airport bookstore.

He would eventually stagger onto the plane, burdened down not with several litres of duty-free booze, but a small library of worthy-looking business titles. By the time I had settled down, read the papers, had my meal and was weighing up the relative merits of the in-flight movie and a few hours' sleep, inevitably, Pete would thrust one of these books towards me, saying, "This is really good, you should read it."

Any suggestion on my part that the in-flight entertainment or some shut-eye would be of more benefit would be met with his riposte, "If there is one good idea in here, it is worth a few hours' time and the £10 cost." Pete did have a point; most business books usually have at least one thing of interest or practical use. There is only one problem; most of them are deadly dull.

In case you think this is merely professional jealousy on my part, I suggest you look at the business books on your library shelf. How many have you actually read all the way through, from end to end? I am quietly confident that there are plenty with a Post-It note about 25% of the way in. You got that far; it was very good, of course, but you will get back to it later, when you are not so busy...

The best praise we get for our books is when people say that they read it in one go, without stopping. Chris West should take all the credit for this, of course, as he is the one who actually writes them.

That was precisely the brief that Chris and I agreed to on day one. The book should, of course, have excellent content, but it should also be accessible, easy to read, and

tell a good story. Chris is a highly successful novelist by trade so his skills are in narrative and structure.

He was going to tell the story; not my life story, which is of limited interest, but the story of how to build a great business from scratch. It would be loosely based on my life, but Chris would take these experiences, anecdotes and observations and make a practical, logical model that ordinary people could understand, and then write it in simple, clear English.

This is what we think is wrong with many business books. Some are written by academics who have no practical experience. Others are by consultants who seem hell-bent on over-complicating everything; there is sometimes the feeling that they are trying to impress, not inform, the reader: “Look at me, aren’t I clever!”

The Beermat Entrepreneur starts with the bold claim that ‘Business is Easy’.

We are not saying it is not hard work – sometimes 24 hours a day, seven days a week if you are starting a business – but that the basic concept and execution of any business is all about simple things, done well.

We resolved to keep things easy to understand, and here is where the consummate skill of Chris West shines through. He writes clear and simple English, based around an accessible model. It has to make sense to him before he puts it on the page. If it makes sense to Chris, then it stands an excellent chance of making sense to the reader.

This simplicity is not easy to achieve and requires significant effort. I am often reminded of Mark Twain’s great comment: “I am so sorry to write you such a long letter; I did not have time to write you a short one.” My style when performing live is anecdotal, so the presentation had developed a ‘beginning’, ‘middle’ and an ‘end’, illustrated with stories and conclusions.

This format lent itself well to the novel-style book Chris had in mind. Novels commonly have at first ‘a situation’ (a challenge, opportunity or problem), then some element of ‘complication’ (things happen, people intervene in some way), then a ‘conclusion’ – what was the result?

This formed the bare bones of the story we were going to tell. It starts with some friends in a pub; they write some things down on a ‘Beermat’ (or ‘coaster’ in the USA and Australia), and eventually turn a good idea into a great business.

This approach blends the two key disciplines that I see in successful professional speakers. Many have great life stories to tell; they were successful, perhaps in sport or business. Others have developed a methodology, often by highly successful workshops in, for example, public speaking or sales.

So we both set out on developing the content. I took on as many public speaking

engagements as I could, typically for free in the early days. This was to road-test the material, to see which topics and anecdotes had the most resonance with the audience.

Chris came along to many of these, looking for the subject matter and structure that would work in a book. He then looked at specific elements of the story, selecting an anecdote and asking me why certain things happened the way they did.

This was a very interesting process. My personal style is just to get on with things, and move on if things do not work out, chalking up my failures to experience (perhaps that is why I often keep making the same mistakes!).

Chris looks at things from a completely different perspective. He has the proven academic skills of the philosopher, with a First Class Honours degree in the subject from the London School of Economics. He is always looking for logical models, and how best to express them.

And that is why our team works; Chris and I have complementary skills and a deep respect for each other's technical ability. What eventually became 'Beermat' was essentially a 50:50 blend of our respective personalities. We have known each other since we were both 13, and have been in bands together, so we have an excellent rapport and play to each other's strengths.

So my key recommendation is that if you would like to write a book, you need to find another person. This is ideally someone you know, trust and like and who has complementary skills to your own. If it works, you will one day find yourself looking at the first draft of your book, which should be a genuine team effort!

Chapter 3 – Is It Any Good?

this was not the personal story of a great entrepreneur. In fact, **I'm not actually an 'entrepreneur'** at all!

We now had the first draft for our book. So did we like it?

This may seem like a daft question; of course we liked our own book, but Chris and I were looking at it through different eyes. Chris is essentially an artist. In simple terms, he writes what he wants to write. He is very 'internally referenced', to use a term from Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP). He knows when he has done a good job; he is confident that people will like what he writes, but he makes no advance judgement as to how many people will buy the book.

Chris is not commercially driven in the strictest sense of the term; he has never written a 'formula' book to order, just to achieve sales. I sometimes joke about this, saying he is always ignoring my good advice, such as to write about young wizards, come up with a new diet idea, or my latest one, to try and get Mary Magdalene, The Holy Grail and Freemasonry in there somewhere...

This is really an issue about artistic integrity; you need to write the book you want to write, that has something new and original to say, not churn out a commercially oriented pot-boiler, or copy the latest business fad. People will see through that, especially in the very competitive business book market.

I was obviously impressed with the book, and I began to look at it through a salesperson's eyes: How good was it? How many are we likely to sell? Who would buy it? This is because my next task would be to approach a publisher. I needed to know exactly what we had, and how best to plan that sales campaign.

First, we looked at the competition, to see who published them, and what their books were like. Interestingly, most of the competition at the time was from successful entrepreneurs like Richard Branson, Anita Roddick and Julian Richer telling their personal stories, or alternatively, general 'directory'-type guides, such as where to find key resources like addresses of Business Links.

This has changed in the last few years. There are plenty of other ‘step-by-step’ entrepreneurship books out there now, which we take as a real compliment! But going back to 2002, we looked at the competition and decided we were different, and this was very good news.

Our book was not going to be the personal story of a great entrepreneur. In fact, I am not actually an ‘entrepreneur’ at all!

This may come as a surprise to people who have read the liner notes on our books or some of our publicity material. Of course I have been involved in a number of highly successful (and unsuccessful!) start-ups. But my role, strictly speaking, was as Sales Cornerstone (using our definition) rather than the actual entrepreneur.

I have worked with, and observed the behaviour of, many entrepreneurs, and it is what happened on my various adventures, and the conclusions that could be made from these experiences, that became the source material for *The Beermat Entrepreneur*.

What mutual friends of ours have said about the book is that if you happen to know me, you will see me on every page. They feel that Chris has exactly captured my voice, which is a huge compliment to his writing skills. But if you do not know me, then you will still find the book accessible and practical; that is the skill of the writer, to take good material and make it relevant to the audience.

The book was certainly never intended to be a directory of useful information, or even an academic discourse on the theoretical tenets of entrepreneurship. It was intended to be a highly readable book, accessible to everyone.

So we thought we had something that was interesting and different. The next step was to send it to our friends, people we liked and whose opinions we respected. Almost all were very enthusiastic, and it was not just the flattery of friends, there were some real insights and suggestions, most of which Chris incorporated into the book.

We had one dissenter who did not like our ‘anti-dotcom’ approach and disagreed with just about everything in the book, especially our approach to funding. We noted his comments but changed nothing, though remained on good terms with him personally. I met him recently, and not only does he now share our point of view, he is now a senior executive in a very ‘Beermat’ style of company!

The best direct input we had was the title of the book itself. Our working title was *From Acorns to Oaks*, as we have a ‘seedling/sapling/mighty oak’ metaphor in the book. There was nothing wrong with this title; in fact Caspian Woods has since published an excellent book called exactly that!

But we were not happy with this title, as we felt it did not exactly represent what we had to say. So we decided to meet Bill Thompson, who calls himself a technology critic and essayist. You will probably know Bill from his frequent broadcasts and

articles for the BBC, and his web site www.andfinally.com. I was lucky enough to work with him in the company I co-founded, The Instruction Set.

Bill, Chris and I were sitting in a pub garden in Grantchester which has genuine literary connections. Not only have the likes of Bertrand Russell and Virginia Woolf met there, but nearby is the house of the notable author, Mr Jeffrey Archer himself!

Bill asked about our new book. We began to explain that it was about entrepreneurs meeting in pubs, writing on beermats, and he said, “Why not call it *The Beermat Entrepreneur?*”

Chris and I both looked at each other, and our jaws dropped. We now call this a ‘Million Dollar Comment’. Thanks Bill!

The Elevator Pitch

In *The Beermat Entrepreneur* we say that a good ‘Elevator Pitch’ is essential for any new business idea.

Here is our Elevator Pitch, based on the five ‘Ps’ that I detail when speaking live:

Pain

There is a large market for would-be entrepreneurs who do not know where to start

Premise

A simple, accessible book on entrepreneurship, suitable for everyone

People

Entrepreneurship expert Mike Southon and experienced novelist Chris West

Proof

Apart from my general credentials as an entrepreneur, none, until we became a bestseller

Purpose

- (i) large numbers of book sales, and hence royalties
- (ii) to enable more entrepreneurs to succeed and thus make the world a better place.

So we now had a book, a title and our own Elevator Pitch. It was time for some serious mentoring, to follow the advice of our own book. So I sent the manuscript off to Sir Campbell Fraser...

Chapter 4 – Mentor Magic

this is a **good book**,
you should **publish this**

“Aye, I’ll talk to you about your book, laddie – you can buy me lunch.”

This was Sir Campbell Fraser on the phone (I hope you picked up the Scottish accent). Sadly, since the publication of the book, Sir Campbell has passed away and is still much missed by me and all the many people he came into contact with and mentored.

I must admit I approached the lunch with some trepidation. He was a lovely man, but had a long history in business and, when necessary, did not suffer fools gladly. He had been chairman of Dunlop and Scottish Television where one of the employees was one Gordon Brown. He had been Director General of the CBI for a year. He had been there, done that, and got the t-shirt (I will not go for the ‘kilt’ metaphor).

I met him when he was chairman of RiverSoft, a software start-up I worked with in the 90s. I always tell the story of when I met him for the first time. I arrived at RiverSoft on my first day, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, employee number nine. The other eight were software developers, so I was a little different. I arrived for work in a suit, for one thing.

It was early, and I noticed that the only other person there was a silver-haired gentleman in the top office, reading the newspaper. I assumed he was someone’s dad, so went to offer him a cup of tea. He accepted the offer of tea, and then introduced himself as our chairman.

I was slightly taken aback, but before I could gather my thoughts, he shot straight in with: “And what do you do then, laddie?”

“I’m in charge of sales!” I said proudly. “Interesting,” he said. “What exactly is it we’re selling here?”

I was rather off my guard, so went into a long, rambling discourse about complex IP network management, SNMP polling, subnet masks and other technical gobbledygook I had picked up in my interview.

“That’s splendid,” he said. “Now explain it again, please. This time, so I understand it.”

I have to say it took me a good couple of weeks and many discussions with Phil Tee, the founder of RiverSoft, before I got the RiverSoft premise down to: “our software pinpoints faults in large computer networks, thus saving money”.

He then hit me with another tough question: “So who would buy such a thing?”

I was ready this time. I was in charge of sales; I knew exactly who our target market was. Phil had told me.

“A telco, of course!”

“What’s a telco, laddie?”

“Oh. Er... a telecommunications company, Sir Campbell.”

“What, like British Telecom?”

“Exactly!” (Hooray, the old feller had got it!)

“One moment, laddie...”

Sir Campbell then strode casually over to the phone and dialled up one of his chums, Sir Ian Vallance, at that time chairman of BT. After a few pleasantries he said, “I’ve got a young man who would like to speak to you”, and handed over the phone.

I had a slightly flatulent moment, but managed to at least find out who I should speak to in BT – the head of BT Labs in Martlesham. This introduction was enough to get us an appointment, and they became our first customer.

I realised later that Sir Campbell was being my mentor. He was giving me good, basic personal advice, specifically that I needed to be able to explain our product to normal people, not just technical folk. Then, crucially, he was willing to use his personal network, experience and reputation to open doors for us.

Mentoring soon became a key part of the Beermat process, and I have since realised that mentors have always added significantly to any success that I might have had. But it is not always an easy process. They should also give you the bad news, that you are being an idiot; that your idea will not work.

Sometimes you will ignore them, and look back ruefully. And if you happen to have written a book which you like personally, but is actually rubbish, then someone needs to tell you the bad news, sooner rather than later.

I met Sir Campbell for lunch and was petrified. I remembered the board reports I had written and given to him for review that he had metaphorically torn to shreds (in the nicest possible way, of course!), because they were indeed rubbish.

He was sitting there at this smart restaurant in St James' with our manuscript in front of him, and teased me slightly by going through the pleasantries, first: "How's the family?... Did you see the papers this morning?"

Eventually he said, "Ah yes, your book." He opened it, and started leafing through it. I could see each page had a tick against every paragraph. "This is a good book, you should publish this." And a final tease, with a twinkle in his eye: "Some of the English is a bit contemporary for my own taste, but I'm sure the younger folk will enjoy it. Please pass my best compliments to Chris, and tell him he's done an excellent job."

I was cock-a-hoop. As Larry Grayson used to say, my hoop had never been so cocked. We had a good book. Sir Campbell would have said if it was not. I was bursting with confidence. I was ready to send the manuscript off to publishers.

So Chris and I sat down to write our pitch for the publishers. There were going to be two sections. The first, written by Chris who fully understood the content and knew what publishers were looking for, was going to explain why the book was different and interesting, and where it would fit into their 'lists'.

I was going to write the promotional plan, how we were going to ensure the book was a best-seller. Chris had explained that publishers very rarely spend much on book promotion, unless, ironically, the book is already a success. The Harry Potter books (after the first one!) had had bigger and bigger budgets.

This was not a problem for us in general, or for me, specifically. I am used to bootstrapping the marketing effort with no budget; it is what I had always had to do in start-ups. I would pull in favours, leverage my network, and do anything it took to raise the visibility of our excellent new book. I put all this into the marketing plan, which, as I recall, was only a few pages long.

Next it was time to assemble a list of publishers, so we purchased *The Writer's Handbook* (highly recommended for any would-be author) and looked at books we admired in bookstores to see who published them. We were ready to go!

Chapter 5 – The Big Pitch

your book is **unpublishable...**

With the confident endorsement of mentor Sir Campbell Fraser ringing in our ears, we then set about the task of rounding up some endorsements for the book and getting ourselves a publishing deal. While Chris had taken on the main work (actually writing the book), I was now in my element as this was essentially a sales job.

We drew up a list of publishers and immediately discounted those who would only deal through agents. I did not want to do a double-selling job (first to an agent and then to a publisher), plus, as an experienced salesperson I felt I could do most, if not all, of what an agent could do.

We sent the manuscript to someone senior in a media company who I had known for many years. He sent back a charming letter to say that, in his view, the book was ‘unpublishable’, but he would make an introduction to a publisher, anyway.

We soon had a short list of six publishers, some small, some big. I thought we would send our pitch off to them first, and when these six all turned us down, we could learn why, modify our pitch accordingly, and then send off to another six. If eventually everyone turned us down (a genuine possibility, Van Gogh never sold a painting in his life), then we could always self-publish.

The first publisher we sent it to, one of the smaller ones, asked to see us and made us an immediate offer, with a £500 advance. We were well chuffed; we might be onto something, but let us see what everyone else had to say.

One famous day, we started at 10am, meeting a well-known, independent business publisher, the introduction from Mr ‘Your Book is Unpublishable’ mentioned above. The person we met had our manuscript on their desk. “Ah yes, *The Beermat Entrepreneur*; well, I’m afraid I’m going to have to be frank...”

They did not like the book. They did not like the title. They thought it did not have enough examples. The book was so bad, they could not even think of where to start fixing it. We, of course, disagreed, and I explained how I was going to promote the backside off it and make it a bestseller.

Their response was direct, and negative. “Mike, you don’t understand how books are sold. Someone might go into a bookshop. They *might* go to the business section. They *might* look at the small business shelf. They *might* notice your book if it has sufficient shelf space. Then they *might* buy it, if you’re very lucky indeed.”

I thought this was rubbish. I had a different image, of people queuing up at midnight on the day the book came out. I was right, this did indeed happen. Sure, it was not for our book, but for *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows*, but nobody’s perfect...

I left the meeting fuming. Chris was much more rational; he had been published for many years, knew the score, and explained, “That’s what publishers are like.”

But ‘onwards and upwards’, as they say. As it happens, we had another meeting with a publisher that very day, over lunch. We met with Rachel Stock from Pearson Education, who said it was one of the best books she had ever read, and made us an immediate offer. We almost bit her arm off!

So there you have it. The truth of the matter is that *The Beermat Entrepreneur* is actually somewhere between both opinions: “unpublishable” and “the best book ever written”, but at least we had found someone who liked it, and was willing to give it a try.

Of course, with 20:20 hindsight we were right not to be put off. *The Beermat Entrepreneur* is now a business bestseller, one of Pearson’s most popular titles ever, with sales in the UK of over 60,000 as I write (a normal business bestseller is between 5000 and 10,000), and has also been published around the world in many languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Russian and Spanish.

But William Goldman nailed it, perfectly.

William Goldman is one of Hollywood’s most successful screenwriters and script doctors. His credits include *All the President’s Men*, *Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid* and *The Princess Bride*. In his excellent book about 1970s Hollywood, *Adventures in the Screen Trade*, he talks about the eternal challenge for industry professionals: trying to work out if a good script is eventually going to make a successful and profitable movie.

His conclusion: “In Hollywood, nobody knows anything.”

This is true for any endeavour, be it a book or your business idea. You have to believe in it, despite what ‘clever’ people say. There is, of course, eventually a time when you have to give up, but not straight after your mentor, someone whose opinion you trust, says: “you should publish this book.”

So we had a publishing deal with a highly respected educational and business publisher, Pearson Education. The next step was to get some quotes for the jacket.

We leveraged our network for real entrepreneurs who would add credibility. They all liked the book and provided quotes. Tim Smit at the Eden Project (who we did not know personally) very kindly gave a quote.

We thought that giving a royalty from the book to the Prince's Trust was a good idea, very in-line with the philosophy and purpose of the book. Pearson were a little sceptical at first, but soon agreed, and this was rewarded later by a fine quote from Carphone Warehouse co-founder Charles Dunstone, who is still on the Prince's Trust Council.

I also found a beer sponsor. I cannot quite remember exactly how, but I found someone at Foster's willing to give us 1000 bottles of beer in exchange for their logo on the cover and throughout the book. Excellent, we thought, that will do for the launch party!

Chapter 6 – Publicity and Promotion

I looked on **Amazon**, and your book is a **business best-seller**

We were now getting ready for the launch, so it was time for some serious PR and promotion!

We did, of course, meet with Pearson Education's publicity people, but soon realised that they were not going to do much as they had limited resources, as well as literally dozens of other books to promote at any given time.

This is obvious if you think about it, but most authors we know complain about being disappointed that their respective publishers seem to be doing the square root of next to nothing on their behalf to promote their esteemed books.

Authors sometimes even call their publishers in high dudgeon, to complain that they are not on the front page of every newspaper and on *The Jonathan Ross Show* the day of release of their new book.

This is never going to happen. For one thing, this is the business book market, which usually involves hundreds rather than thousands of copies being sold. You have to face the facts: as a business author, you have to do all the press and publicity yourself. If you, as the author, cannot generate interest for your book, then nobody else will be able to do it for you.

The most your publisher will do for you will be to send books out for review and arrange for some book signings. I suggest you worry little about either of these. Reviews do very little to boost sales, and they are few and far between in the business book market, anyway. And every book signing I have done was very reminiscent of the album-signing scene with Artie Fufkin in *This Is Spinal Tap*. Realistically, no one will turn up to these, except for your friends and family.

What we did instead was trawl our network for freelance journalists who might be able to help. I came up with Jim White, who had written a very nice piece on my alter-ego Mike Fab-Gere in *The Independent* ten years earlier, and we had remained friends ever since. Jim produced a very nice piece, 'The Groovy Guru' for *Business Life*, the in-flight magazine for British Airways.

Then there was Sally Jones, who, back in the 70s, had been the tap dancer in our band The Oxcentrics. Sally is a very successful freelance journalist and arranged an introduction with the *Daily Telegraph*.

I thought the piece when it appeared was rather snide and cynical, but everyone else thought it was excellent coverage, almost half a page, with a nice picture.

We did one or two book signings, but decided we would rather invite all our friends to come to a launch party. You probably have a mental image of book launches, or might even have been to one: a nice room (often in a bookstore), a modest gathering of people, a few nibbles and a glass of wine, a short 'thank-you' from the author, and half-an-hour of book signings for family and close friends.

We had a different concept. We hired the Palace Theatre in the West End (at that time showing *Les Misérables*) and revived the theatre show that I had toured extensively in number one theatres around the country: *Freak Out!* featuring Mike Fab-Gere.

Bizarrely, it was a struggle to even get our publisher to turn up (they eventually did, with only 100 books for sale), and we had big arguments with the theatre, who did not like the idea we were going to hand out 1000 bottles of beer. They insisted on charging us £300 for 'corkage', as they were worried about their bar takings. We made the event a benefit for The Prince's Trust (which to this day still gets a royalty from the book) and charged £20 per head, of which every penny (not just 'proceeds') went to the charity.

Over 1500 people turned up – lots of our friends of course but plenty of other interested parties too. We had a cracking night, starting with a presentation from The Prince's Trust, then Chris and I said a few words (I remember giving Chris totally the wrong first cue, but he coped admirably!).

Once the charity and book chat was over (no more than 20 minutes, as I recall), we had a serious rock and roll party, with Mike Fab-Gere's Love Trousers working at 'Industrial Strength'.

The free beer went in about 15 minutes, and then the audience drank the bars dry. The bars manager told me they sold more in this performance than in an entire weekend of *Les Misérables*. I suggested to the theatre manager that they should donate the £300 corkage fee to The Prince's Trust, but they declined. Apparently this was not one of the charities that Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber (who owns the theatre) supported.

(I must have sown the seeds of a good idea here, as I noticed that the next big première that came in, *The Woman in White*, was attended by Prince Charles and was a benefit for The Prince's Trust.)

The 100 books were sold in an instant, so I directed the other 1400 people to Amazon, as I was not sure we were in the bookstores yet. Pearson Education had introduced me to Iain Campbell, who at the time was business editor at Amazon (he later moved to the publisher Wiley). He had liked the book and wrote a very nice review on the Amazon site.

A few days after the launch event I went into Waterstone's at Piccadilly in London, which has one of the largest business sections of any bookstore. I was pleased to see that our book was out on display, as a 'Recommended Item'. I assumed this had been the work of the Pearson representative, but apparently not.

I asked the very nice lady who ran the business section why she had chosen our book above all the other potential candidates to put out on display, and her reply was very interesting: "I looked on Amazon, and your book is a business bestseller."

Indeed it was – we were around number 30 on the Amazon chart. Not just number 30 in the business chart, but number 30 of *all* books on Amazon, including Harry Potter, Dan Brown's latest book, show business autobiographies, diet books, and other popular favourites.

How had we done this? I am sure the launch party helped, but the main factor was that Iain Campbell had done an e-mailout about *The Beermat Entrepreneur* to appropriate people on the Amazon database (such as people who had bought Richard Branson's books), and it had worked.

Plus it seemed that people really liked the book and were telling their friends. Word of mouth had taken off and we were now bestselling authors!

Chapter 7 - Leveraging the Beermat Brand

you can **immediately** start developing **a speaking career**

Being a bestselling author is great – I can thoroughly recommend it!

You get to go into bookstores and sign your own book which is nice, especially at airports. This is good on various levels: you feel important, it helps the bookstores sell them, and it means the bookstores find it more difficult to send your unsold books back to the publisher (the dreaded ‘returns’).

It also means that you start getting e-mails back from people who have read the book and found it useful, which of course does wonders for your feeling of well-being and your personal contribution to the general good karma of the universe.

Being a bestselling author opens lots of doors, bringing several potential revenue opportunities.

What it does *not* do is bring in loads of royalties, unless you are JK Rowling, Dan Brown, Jeremy Clarkson or another show business personality whose books sell in very large numbers.

This is because there are two big mouths to feed before you get your cut: that of the bookstore and the publisher. Royalty rates for authors are quite small, however well you negotiate your contract (of course, again, we advise you to get the best possible legal advice you can afford before signing *anything*).

The money in a bestselling business book is not in the royalties, but in the leverage it gives you in the marketplace, specifically keynote speeches and workshops.

There are many business speakers out there, but not all have written a book, let alone had a business bestseller. It is a real differentiator; I often say I use our books as high quality, if expensive, brochures.

We get a 50% discount on our books, so it costs me £7-8 each time I send one out as a gift. Sometimes I just give them to people I like, but more often it is to people I want to impress, who might be interested in booking me for an event.

A book with your name on it is much more impressive than a brochure, and less likely to become out of date. I consider the books I give away as my main direct marketing cost. Also, it tests the buying intentions of the recipient; did they even bother to read the book? Did they enjoy it?

If they did enjoy the book, they are very likely to enjoy having me come in and speak to their audience. Everyone who knew me said Chris had expertly captured my personal style in the book, even if it is a non-specific anecdote or philosophical point. This means potential buyers can hear my 'voice' even if they have not already heard me speak in public.

So I decided to leverage the Beermat brand for my personal profit and it was clear I should concentrate on becoming a business speaker. I will talk later about how I first generated and then increased my speaking revenue (I do over 100 events and workshops per year), but for now I will concentrate on the important question: 'is being a professional speaker a good career move?'

I meet great speakers all the time. Some are professionals, like me; others are (to use a term from *The Sopranos*) 'civilians'; more specifically, people who have not yet charged for their speaking work. What is common to both groups is their enjoyment in standing up in front of a group of people and addressing them.

Not everybody is like this, of course. For some people, public speaking is top of their list of morbid fears, with 'networking with strangers' and 'death' in places two and three (see the excellent book *And Death Came Third!* by Andy Lopata and Peter Roper for more details).

If you are in this second group and are required for your work to formally address audiences of any size, then you *must* get training and coaching to learn the best techniques and overcome the fear. Even so, you should always defer whenever possible to someone else in your team who feels more comfortable in this role.

Every time I do a company event with in-house speakers there is always at least one person who I tell (in all honesty) that they could do my job if they set their mind to it. They are naturals and look relaxed in front of an audience. They are engaging, often very funny. They enjoy the limelight.

More specifically, they have something to say, probably not anything as grand as winning the Ashes or even being a successful entrepreneur, just material about their experiences at work: what happened and what they learned from it, which might be of interest to the listener.

If you are like this, you can immediately start developing a speaking career on the side. There are innumerable organisations looking for good business speakers: Rotary, Round Table, breakfast, lunch and dinner clubs, networking organisations,

trade organisations, Chambers of Commerce, Business Links and so on. Just get yourself some bookings and start practicing, then start charging (more on this later).

And start learning. Go on as many presentation skills courses as you can; you will learn something new from each one. It is all about confidence, technique and practice. Once you understand the basics of speaking in public, then it is time for some coaching.

I always say the better you are, the more you need coaching. Wayne Rooney and Roger Federer get coached almost every day by people with less skill than themselves, but who are experts in motivation and improving other people's technique.

I was lucky to start from a good place in my quest to be a successful professional speaker. As well as 25-years' experience in sales, I have also been a professional actor, a stand-up comedian and have fronted bands since the 70s, so standing up in front of a group holds no terrors for me.

However, even the most experienced speaker always gets nervous before a gig. If not, you are getting too complacent, or bored, and your performance will suffer. You look bored, and will soon bore the audience.

The centre of my own Continuing Professional Development (CPD) as a speaker is the Professional Speakers Association (PSA) www.professionalspeakers.org. I cannot recommend this organisation too highly. If you have even got a vague interest in speaking for a living, you should definitely join. There are regular local meetings, with specific help for 'newbies', including the chance to be mentored by experienced speakers, who will mostly do this for free.

And even the hardened old hacks like me learn amazing new tips at every meeting of the PSA, from platform skills through writing an e-zine to how to make 'passive revenue' (money while you sleep) on the internet.

Chapter 8 – Building a Revenue Stream

reduce the PowerPoint to a minimum
and **tell stories**

If you genuinely have something to say, then how do you turn this into a revenue stream?

The most effective and common way to get business is by personal referral. Unless you happen to be a celebrity, or have been instrumental in the building of a well-known brand, the speaker agencies will probably not be interested in you.

They might put you on their books on the off-chance that someone might ask for you, but you should not expect them to make a big effort to sell you. They might put more effort in if you offer them an exclusive deal, but even in this case, you should not expect them to work eight hours a day on your behalf.

You can work this out by looking at a typical speaker agency and the number of people on their books. Then you should count the number of people in their office, and listen out for the number of incoming calls when you go and visit them. Then do the maths; they are very unlikely to get you three bookings a week.

Many speakers put themselves on every agency's books on the hope that they might get some work, and occasionally this does happen. But in the eight years that I have been a full-time, professional speaker, I have only had a small handful of bookings from speaker agencies, mainly because I put a great deal of effort into my own web site, and go out and find my own work.

I strongly recommend that you do the same, but the more you market yourself, and make yourself available on the internet and on the various social networking platforms, the less attractive you are to speaker agencies, who are always worried that people will contact you directly.

My being a salesman by trade, of course, made the process easier, but finding your own speaking engagements is not rocket science, just simple things done well and plenty of hard graft. Many of the presentations at the PSA are about this, and I always go to listen and pick up top tips from my peers.

You need to understand your target market; the people who are going to benefit from hearing you speak, and work out exactly who does the booking. Start with your friends

and work colleagues – who do they know who might be interested in your story? What events do they go to?

In the early days this involves a lot of legwork, networking and sheer determination, but it will not take you long to find yourself talking to a long-suffering events organiser, looking for a speaker for their next event. You need to persuade this person that you can do a good job, and you do need to ask for money.

Of course, we all do keynotes for free when we start out, but as soon as you have proved yourself, you should ask for something, even if it is a nominal fee or donation to charity... plus expenses.

My experience is that everyone who gets a group of people together to hear a speaker can afford to pay something, even if it is only £500. And those £500 fees soon add up to something substantial, if you work hard and get rebooked.

I do not agree with people who think that you should speak for nothing as a promotion for your other products and services. You may well have workshops or consultancy to 'sell-on' to the delegates, but audiences are very resistant to presentations that have little real content, but are a thinly-disguised sales pitch. You should always provide excellent content, and charge accordingly; if you connect with the audience, you will get follow-on bookings, without over-selling at the event.

The biggest question is how much to charge for an event. My fees vary greatly, depending on a number of factors. These include how much I think they can afford, how much I want to do it, how close it is to my home and how full my diary is.

A key motivator for me is that, as a default, I would like to do the event, if I can. I love public speaking and would do it three times a day if I could. But if people can afford to pay, they should always do so. You should give value and if you entertain and help people, then that is worth something.

Here are some general pricing guidelines:

If you research your market, it should not take you long to work out what your market rate is, based on your experience and reputation. Sadly, we cannot all command the same fees as Tony Blair, but you can get useful advice from members of the PSA, as well as any friendly speaker agencies.

This figure will probably be your 'ideal price' – what you would like to get for every event, in a perfect world.

Then you should have a 'regular price' (probably around one half to two thirds of the first amount), which you can go down to if the client asks for a discount.

Finally, you should have a 'walk away' price, below which, the event is uneconomic. You

can accept this price for events that have a social purpose (such as an event in a school or for a charity), or ones that fill up your diary at short notice.

So if someone asks your price, always offer the 'ideal price', and discount down from there (most people start with the 'regular price', which is a mistake).

If someone definitely wants to book you, they have heard you or you come well recommended, and they have a fixed date some months away, it should always be the 'ideal price'.

My best tip on your presentation itself is to reduce the PowerPoint to a bare minimum and tell stories. If you can engage a crowd with stories that not only make them laugh but also have a business message, then you will have a successful speaking career.

If people like you they will refer and rebook you. Soon you will hit a 'Tipping Point' where the amount of incoming interest means you do not have to do too much expensive marketing; all of your business is from referrals.

Plus you will have a great quality of life if you are the sort of person who enjoys travelling, meeting new people, learning new things, and can accept the rough-and-tumble of the occasional less-than-perfect engagement (we all have them, now and then). You will also be well paid for something that does not really seem like proper work to you.

We were very lucky (or clever, depending on your point of view) with Beermat. Chris had written an excellent book which sold well and I love public speaking. He wrote the next book for a bigger advance, and I was out speaking three or four times a week.

It was then that we made what was (in retrospect) a series of wrong decisions...

Chapter 9 – Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

so we waited for the book sales,
speaking engagements and workshops
to come rolling in...

A year after the release of the book, things were looking very good for Beermat. We had a bestselling book, and it was great to see Chris earning some decent royalties. His detective novels set in China had sold around the world, but he was not earning a living wage from this. Few authors do – they tend to supplement their earnings by other activities such as copywriting, marketing and PR.

I was also building a speaking career and my own personal brand. Very useful in this respect was Ecademy (www.ecademy.com). I started as a regular member, and discovered that if you want to grow your network and establish your own brand as an independent consultant, then Ecademy is excellent.

You join, start networking on-line (using the amazing software tools available), as well as off-line (going to events) and you will soon have a dazzling array of new contacts.

Clearly, you need to have something to offer people, but if you are good at what you do and are nice to people you will soon find yourself very well connected and build up a good reputation.

My view is that to be a successful independent consultant you need to have 150 'close friends', people you like, who you would recognise instantly if you met them out of context. These people should regularly give you work or will refer you to similar people who might employ you.

In addition you could have 1000 or more 'loose contacts'. These are people you might not instantly recognise if you bumped into them in the street, but who still might pop up with some work now and then.

These people you can network with on-line, in places like Ecademy, Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter or via an e-mail newsletter. Being in the right place at the right time enabled me to take over Beyond Bricks (originally a DTI initiative), and over the

course of three years develop it into the Trusted Network 'Beermat Ecademy', the 'Beermat Entrepreneur Club', growing it from 4000 to over 8000 people, all of whom are potential purchasers of our books.

During my networking on Ecademy, I met top Beermat 'Dream Team' members Simon Graham and Nick Saalfeld. Simon is responsible for the design and implementation of the web site and runs our sales and marketing workshops.

Nick Saalfeld has a background in broadcasting and communications and produced over 100 of our excellent 'Beermat Radio' podcasts. They are a mixture of interviews with entrepreneurs and large company people, with the only common theme being that I like them and they have something interesting to say.

We had also made some inroads into the corporate market. At the request of a friend of mine who was HR Director of a pharmaceutical company, we applied the Beermat model there to see if it worked. On a cold November morning, we found ourselves facing a group of not very happy factory workers – who ended up loving the show and coming up with some great ideas.

We thought we had discovered the subject matter for the next book: 'entrepreneurship in large organisations', often called 'intrapreneurship'. We assumed that there must be a huge market for this, as well as some very good potential revenue.

So Chris started work on the book, which eventually became *The Boardroom Entrepreneur*. He did his usual meticulous job of research. First, he looked at other models and books on the subject, added the Beermat philosophy as well as the feedback from the workshops that we had done, and finally produced an elegant, well-written book, in his usual clear, easy-to-read style.

Rather surprisingly to us at the time, Pearson Education, who had published *The Beermat Entrepreneur*, turned down this next book. However, we now had an agent, David Grossman, who found us some more potential publishers. Two were interested; we were sorry to turn one of them down, but decided to go with Random House, as they were the largest publisher in the country.

We felt we needed a heavyweight to add credibility to the book, so I approached Sir John Rose, CEO of Rolls-Royce. I have known Sir John for a long time. He is a good friend of David Griffiths, one of my co-founders at The Instruction Set, and we had even tried to hire him back in 1987!

John very generously says now that we turned him down, but my recollection was that he (rightly!) felt his future career would be better served at Rolls-Royce. I think he was right – he would never have got a knighthood working for The Instruction Set...

He liked the book, and, as we had worked on a number of intrapreneurial projects at

Rolls-Royce, very kindly gave a foreword for it. I was also able to get good quotes from several well-known entrepreneurs, including Simon Woodroffe (Yo! Sushi), Karan Bilimoria (Cobra Beer) and Sahar Hashemi (Coffee Republic), as well as some large company people and two professors at London Business School.

The Boardroom Entrepreneur was eventually published in March 2005, three years after our first book. We arranged a launch event through Ecademy and busily promoted the book to our network. We were mentioned in a number of good publications, including the *Financial Times*.

So we waited for the book sales, speaking engagements and workshops to come rolling in.

And we waited, and waited. I was still busy, doing keynotes on entrepreneurship and growing businesses and even some on our new topic of intrapreneurship, typically focusing on how the entrepreneur can help people in large organisations deal with change. But the anticipated intrapreneurship workshops remained very thin on the ground.

In the end, we came to the conclusion that for UK PLC intrapreneurship is a little unfashionable nowadays – it was a big topic for the consultancy industry in the heady days of the late 90s, but not any more.

We had also made the mistake of tinkering with our brand without thinking that carefully about it. We had a new publisher, so the book looked very different to *The Beermat Entrepreneur*. Worse, we had omitted the magic word ‘Beermat’ from the title. This word (and associated philosophy) is our real USP, a powerful metaphor, based on keeping things simple and developing ideas in a social (in this case pub) environment. And were big corporations the natural market for our workshops?

It was time to go back to basics and think again!

Chapter 10 – Sell, Sell, Sell!

by nice people for nice people

So it was back to basics for the next book, and the chosen subject (obvious in retrospect) was ‘Sales’.

I am, fundamentally, a salesman, and have been so for a good part of my working life. I was once a chemical engineer, and eventually graduated to working for a construction company, building oil refineries. Eventually, I was put in a van and told to sell a range of construction services, including scaffolding.

This did not go terribly well, but as luck would have it, I hooked up with a bunch of old university pals, and ended up selling UNIX training, consultancy and software development. Originally, I did not know much about computing, but it soon seeped in and by the time we sold The Instruction Set in 1989, I had a very impressive track record in sales at all levels. I had even been on a sales course, once.

So I had plenty of experience in sales, but Chris could not just sit down and write the book, I had to develop the source material first.

I did this the same way as for *The Beermat Entrepreneur* – I developed the ‘show’ first. As we had a good network on Ecademy, I began to offer, once a month, a free half-day *Sales on a Beermat* workshop, open to everyone.

At first I had some slides, but soon ditched them as I had ‘learned my lines’. The material definitely seemed to resonate with the Ecademy audience, especially those who were sole traders, typically ‘Delivery Cornerstones’, but who realised they had to go out and sell. There was a definite ‘Sales for Non-Salespeople’ flavour to the workshop, so I decided to widen the audience to professional people such as accountants and lawyers, who end up having to sell to succeed in their organizations.

Finally, I realised that the course worked well for all small, growing businesses, and began delivering it to clients of all kinds. The most popular element of the course was ‘Mike Southon’s Magic E-Mail’, a simple, four-line device, designed to get appointments. This replaces much of the dreaded telephone cold-calling that nearly everyone hates doing and absolutely everyone hates receiving.

It took about a year, but finally I felt I had a show that worked, so invited Chris down to have a listen. He agreed that it was very Beermat – it had the important elements of simplicity and friendliness, and could easily be turned into a logical model. Also, it had

a new approach. There are plenty of 'Close that Sale'-style books for sales professionals, but nothing that started with the important message: 'Be liked'.

Chris wrote the first draft, and what came back was a faithful representation of my live show. I was very happy with this, but Chris insisted on sending it to a few of our close friends for review. Chris and I have known Graham Michelli since we were all at school together. He built his own marketing company in the 80s and 90s (where Chris worked for a while), and is a totally reliable source of honest feedback.

He began to ask some hard marketing questions, including the classic: "precisely who is it aimed at?", and I remember Chris getting a little prickly about what might have been interpreted as criticisms of his writing ability. But he went away, and over the Christmas break completely re-structured the book. It came back considerably improved – so thanks, Graham!

I was delighted with the book and set about getting jacket quotes with a vengeance. I went for one of pretty well every type of company: bank, law firm, accountancy, software company, trade association, franchise company, SME and so on. We even had some people who had used the Magic E-Mail with excellent results.

I was really looking for a big name for the foreword. There had been quotes from some well-known business people in the past, but I wanted someone who epitomised the 'being liked' and 'non-salesperson' flavour of the book. I was lucky enough to meet first John Mitchinson, and later John Lloyd, producers of the *QI* television programme, and went to some studio recordings, where I had some brief conversations with Stephen Fry, and knew he would be the perfect candidate for the foreword.

With the help of the two Johns I was able not only to get a personal referral to Stephen Fry, but also to help compose a foreword that he would be happy with. Having our book described by him as written "by nice people for nice people" will be one of my all-time career highlights!

And I felt much more comfortable promoting this book than I did *The Boardroom Entrepreneur*, as it was based on my own personal experience, turned into an elegant logical model by Chris (as always). It has a simple premise – "everyone earns a living by selling something" (a quote from Robert Louis Stephenson, found by Chris), but adding that in order to sell, you do not have to be sleazy or unpleasant.

The starting point of the *Sales on a Beermat* workshop is "let's double sales, immediately!" I doubt if there is any company in the world that does not have that ambition, even if they might at first be sceptical that it could be possible. But both the book and the workshop deliver on their promises, whether to a group of double-glazing salespeople or a group of bank managers, lawyers or accountants.

I have now done workshops with all types of audiences and many more types of people, a very enjoyable way of earning a good living. We had another winner!

Chapter 11 – Money and Marketing

get a **Finance Cornerstone**

Our proposed next book *Finance on a Beermat* was a very interesting concept. We had met Stephen King and Jeff Macklin of FDUK, now part of The FD Centre www.thefdcentre.co.uk, which provides part-time ‘Virtual Finance Directors’, or ‘Virtual Finance Cornerstones’, as we refer to them in the Beermat model.

Most companies have a bookkeeper or accountant, but these people are always looking at history: “Oh look – you’ve just gone broke!” What companies need is someone to take an analytical view of a company, based on financial and other data, and advise accordingly: “Unless you do the following, you will go broke...”

In large companies, this is the job of the Finance Director, but small, ambitious companies need this expertise, perhaps only for a few days a month, if that is all they can afford. We realised this fitted well with the Beermat model and was the next logical step in the process: first, try out an idea (*The Beermat Entrepreneur*), then boost the sales (*Sales on a Beermat*), then control the finances, making the company efficient and well structured.

We had seen many companies nearly fail due to too much success, having fundamental problems, such as controlling cash flow, which could be solved if addressed in time by the Virtual Finance Cornerstone. The only problem in writing a book on finance is that Chris and I had only marginal knowledge of the subject. In fact I had spent most of my working life avoiding financial issues, and, like most salespeople, have very little knowledge of, or interest in, subjects like ‘cost of sale’.

Fortunately, Chris’ analytical skills were up to the task, and he got on well with Stephen and Jeff. He made many trips to their office in Bristol, accumulated and filtered large amounts of information, and the result was the first manuscript for *Finance on a Beermat*. Once again, Chris’ writing skills were superlative, making a potentially very complex subject simple, especially for entrepreneurs who have short attention spans and an extreme dislike of detail.

My name originally appeared on the book, which was a reflection of the ‘Mike Southon and Chris West’ brand. But I had very little to do with the writing of the book, so my name was removed for the second edition.

My job was mainly in the launch and promotion of the book, getting the cover quotes, boosting the Amazon chart placing, and all the other things you need to do to create the buzz for a book release.

Feedback for the book has been excellent, but we always knew this would sell in smaller numbers than *The Beermat Entrepreneur* and *Sales on a Beermat*. The book is a little like medicine; an entrepreneur will read it when they think they have to, not out of choice.

Finance on a Beermat extended the Beermat brand significantly and was very well received by accountants, banks and other finance professionals. It proved that the best entrepreneurial organisations have mixed teams, and should always include a finance professional, even if part-time at first. There is a great myth (expounded in many entrepreneurship autobiographies!) that success is due solely to a lone, charismatic entrepreneur, with a few bit-players in the background.

All the successful entrepreneurs have a Finance Cornerstone working quietly in the background. Few people have heard of Robert Devereaux, but everyone knows Richard Branson, for whom he was the Finance Cornerstone early on. Without Robert Devereaux, Virgin would certainly not have been so successful so quickly.

So the Beermat on the front of *Finance on a Beermat* has as a first step: 'Get a Finance Cornerstone', a sensible message for entrepreneurs, and good news for finance professionals who would like to be involved with start-up businesses. Also we hope it is good news for bank managers who are often being pitched at by over-eager entrepreneurs, waving their arms around and making often unrealistic demands for loans or other facilities.

Enthusiasm is always good, but very much more effective if backed up by a Finance Cornerstone, a 'sensible person with glasses' (to use a favourite stereotype of mine) who understands spreadsheets and speaks the same language as the bank manager.

My major personal benefit from *Finance on a Beermat* was to find myself more often invited to speak to groups of bank managers and accountants. The commercial reality is that all banks and accounting practices can look very similar on paper. This makes the market very competitive – how do you choose one bank over another? And which of the many accounting firms is the best for your needs?

The deliberately simplistic Beermat approach is to find someone you like, and the bankers and accountants understand this. They know they need to develop their networking and business development skills, all simple elements from *Sales on a Beermat*, where the message is 'be liked' not 'be pushy'.

The Beermat brand provided me with more credibility when speaking to these organisations, based on the fact that we have a book written for their subject area, even if my understanding of the subject remains superficial at best!

More importantly, we clearly had now developed a genuine and far-reaching brand. Beermat covers a wide range of subjects in considerable depth and tackled some very important and complex subjects, particularly in the case of *Finance on a Beermat*.

Chris West followed the Finance book, with a Beermat book written entirely from his experience, with the help of some experts in specific areas. *Marketing on a Beermat* was released to excellent reviews in 2008, and has been very successful, with great reviews, strong sales and excellent feedback, including: "...the best book on the subject I have ever read", on the Amazon web site.

Chris also offers some excellent and very popular *Marketing on a Beermat* workshops – you can find details on www.beermat.biz.

The Beermat Entrepreneur is now on its umpteenth re-print and its second edition was published by Prentice Hall Business (a division of Pearson) in 2008. The *Sales*, *Finance* and *Marketing* books were re-published by Random House as a series of 'Essential Guides'.



I have also developed a 'signature' keynote presentation on entrepreneurship and creativity, which draws on both my business and music experience.



Something About The Beatles uses the Fab Four as an example of great British entrepreneurship and is packed with their wonderful music and videos. I have delivered this to every kind of audience, from kids in schools to senior business people at major international conferences, and it always goes down a storm.

But I was soon to find something that enhanced our brands even further, though it did require my developing a completely new skill-set.

Chapter 12 – The Financial Times



Originally, Chris and my roles were very well defined, and separate. He wrote the books and I went out to promote them.

Just after the publication of *The Beermat Entrepreneur* in 2002, we were offered a monthly column in *Director*, the in-house magazine for the Institute of Directors. This was called *From the Beermat* and featured a picture of both Chris and me, even though Chris wrote the column on his own.

This column ran successfully for several years, though I was aware that it took Chris a significant time to write, and that as time went on he was finding it harder to find source material. Unlike me, he is not always out on the road meeting entrepreneurs and uncovering interesting stories. Chris eventually stopped writing the column in *Director*, and all of his excellent *From the Beermat* columns can be found as a free download e-book on www.beermat.biz

I was then approached by *Real Business* magazine to write some articles on sales, and found that I was able to do this without spending too much time preparing them. This was very important, as, generally, you do not get paid for writing these types of column; they are regarded as part of your promotional activity.

Having gained some confidence in my column-writing ability, I then approached Jim White, who by now had moved to the *Daily Telegraph* where he writes a very successful sports column, as well as writing more generally for other publications. He also appears regularly on television, in programmes such as *What The Papers Say*.

Jim very kindly gave me some advice and mentoring, and introduced me to the then city editor (now overall business editor) at the *Daily Telegraph*, Damian Reece. By then I was producing a weekly podcast, and writing my own weekly Beermat e-zine.

Damian's idea was for me to write a monthly column in the *Daily Telegraph* on a particular subject, such as sales, selling your business or young entrepreneurs, and back these up with four podcasts which would also be put on the *Daily Telegraph* web site. My day-to-day contact would be the enterprise editor Richard Tyler, who was very helpful and supportive.

When I told Chris West that I had secured myself a regular column in a national newspaper, he made a telling comment: “You’ll have to raise your game.” I realised this was definitely the case, so asked for more mentoring from Jim White and studied hard the craft of column-writing, taking inspiration and learning from columnists I admired, such as AA Gill, Jeremy Clarkson and Craig Brown. But the writer whose style gave me the most direct input was Chris himself, and all my columns try to capture his simplicity and attention to detail.

My monthly columns in the *Daily Telegraph* were well received, and I also wrote a series of articles based on my sales experience. Soon, I came to the attention of other editors, most notably Jonathan Moules, enterprise editor at the *Financial Times*. He does a profile on a successful start-up every Saturday and adds 100-word comments from subject matter experts, such as lawyers and accountants.

He asked me for a few of these expert comments, which I found I was able to do very swiftly, sometimes within an hour of receiving the request. After I had delivered several of these, Jonathan said that he enjoyed my weekly e-zine, and would I be interested in turning this into a weekly column in the newspaper?

I realised I had to ‘raise my game’ to another level completely, but this was definitely worth the effort. At the time of writing, I have been doing the column for over two years, having just delivered my 118th article.

I am published on Saturday in the ‘Money’ section of the *Financial Times*, and it is always a thrill to pick up a copy of the newspaper every week. I also provide my column the day before in my weekly e-zine, which is part of the free subscription at www.beermat.biz

Mostly my columns feature interesting entrepreneurs I meet along the way, who have useful learning points for my Beermat audience. More recently, I have delivered some pure comment pieces, as I gain confidence and develop my own voice.

Being a weekly columnist at the *Financial Times* has done wonders for my personal brand and has had a very beneficial effect on my speaking fees. I am now introduced at live events as “Mike Southon, weekly columnist from the *Financial Times*”, and it is a great honour to be associated with one of the best business brands in the world.

I am often asked how I ended up with a national newspaper column, which is many people’s aspiration, especially professional speakers. My story, like most entrepreneurial tales, is a combination of hard work and being at the right place at the right time, but I am happy to provide a few extra pointers.

The most important issue is that you must have something interesting to say, and be able to replicate this on a weekly or monthly basis. Most people, given enough time, can eventually produce a good column but to be able to do this week-in week-out requires a significant amount of creativity and dedication. Jonathan Moules

approached me as he liked my e-zine, but just as important, he had noted that I had been delivering it, every week, for over a year.

I am constantly looking for subjects for my column, and typically spend an hour interviewing potential subjects. Then, I am very structured and disciplined, spending no more than an hour writing the column, and a further hour refining it, making it read well, and ensuring it comes in at exactly 600 words. I usually do this on a Sunday morning, at a specific time.

I then give the column to my wife to read; she is very good at picking up typographical errors, as well as highlighting sections where she cannot understand what I am trying to say, or she feels the sentiment is wrong.

Then, I deliver my column to Jonathan, always a couple of weeks in advance (it is every editor's nightmare to be chasing copy from contributors on deadline day). I am also happy for him to tweak my copy without consulting me first, whenever he sees fit.

Jonathan is an excellent editor, one of the top professionals in the country, and I always trust his judgement. He will never change the sense of a piece, of course, and occasionally will bounce back a column if he feels it needs improvement. But when he does make any changes they always improve the column.

One part that is invariably changed is the title. I always put in a draft title, often a song lyric, just for fun. But I am aware that Jonathan or the production editor may change the title into something that is better suited to drawing people into my column rather than skip to the next section. A great example of this was a column I wrote about Stephen Fry and Twitter, which I titled after the Genesis song *Follow You, Follow Me*. Jonathan switched this to *A Wit and to Woo*. Genius!

My advice to anyone aspiring to have their own column in a national newspaper or magazine is to learn your craft by writing a blog or e-zine regularly every week or month. Once you have found your voice, developed a style and attracted an audience over a significant period of time, then approach the editor of a publication you admire, where your thoughts and views would be relevant.

All the editors I meet say they are constantly looking for new subject matter experts and thought leaders; if you succeed in securing a column the reward is well worth the effort.

Chapter 13 – Onwards and Upwards

what do Yoodoo?

So what are we up to today?

Chris continues to write non-Beermat books, including *Myths About Doing Business in China* (written with Harold Chee), *Think Like an Entrepreneur* (written with Robbie Steinhouse) and an excellent book on how to write well (which I have found invaluable), *Perfect Written English*. He is also working on his next novel, as well as delivering regular marketing workshops.

You can find out more about Chris and his books at www.chriswest.info

For my part, I was getting restless. Beermat is now established as a very successful brand in the small business space, I had a national newspaper column and I was speaking several times a week, but I was already looking for the next challenge.

One of the people I featured in my *Financial Times* column was Harry Freedman of Career Energy (www.careerenergy.co.uk). He helps people of all ages to make the most of their careers and change direction, if necessary.

He explained that people tend to work in seven year cycles: even if they are successful in one field, after seven years, they will often find themselves looking for a change. Also, I was approaching 56 years of age; a time, Harry explained to me, when people often move from a period of maturity and self-awareness towards thinking about the legacy they leave and whether the world will be a better place for their having been in it.

(My *Financial Times* column featuring Harry Freedman is on www.beermat.biz, called 'The Seven Year Itch').

My personal journey in the last few years had brought me into contact with Roger Hamilton, whose Wealth Dynamics model I have found very useful in understanding myself, and in providing mentoring for others. You can find more details here: www.wdprofiletest.com.

Roger Hamilton founded the XL Group, which is committed to social entrepreneurship all over the world, especially in developing countries. Coming into contact with Roger and the other members of the XL Nation started me thinking about how to leverage the Beermat brand to positively affect very large numbers of people.

Clearly, I needed help in this endeavour; and Roger's Wealth Dynamics system, which includes a psychometric test for entrepreneurs, identified the type of person I would need. The first time I completed my Wealth Dynamics profile, I came out as 'Star': extrovert and intuitive, which made total sense. I made a living from my personal brand, and loved to be the centre of attention.

Wealth Dynamics showed me that I had been successful in the past when I had worked closely with a 'Mechanic'; someone just as intuitive, but more introverted. Typical Mechanics are inventors, software engineers, writers, project managers, marketing experts, researchers and analysts. Mechanics I have worked with in the past included the UNIX gurus in The Instruction Set, the session musicians in my band, and (perhaps the best example) my co-author Chris West.

Thanks to a long-standing friend and investor, accountant and entrepreneur Tony Taylor, there had already been significant investment and resources into developing the content-rich 'Beermat' site, with over 100 podcasts and much other useful content, including eBooks and self-study guides.

I realised I needed someone very experienced in business to realise my dream of radically expanding the Beermat concept; someone like Ray Kroc, the entrepreneur who built the machine that is McDonald's, which makes money from a combination of hamburgers, real estate and franchising.

Back in the 1980s, when I was working at The Instruction Set, Tony Heywood was busy growing a UNIX software company, Uniplex. In the 90s, I saw him building other ventures, being the European CEO of American software companies and involved in mergers and acquisitions; all very grown-up stuff.

I approached him about how best to expand Beermat, and whilst rather sceptical at first, he decided not only that it could be done, but that he wanted to be involved personally.

He came up with a radical idea which, while simple in concept, would require serious work to implement. It would be difficult, but not impossible. Together, we raised some angel funding from some friends of mine, who were definitely more impressed with Tony's ability to build a proper business with real value, than my rather vague ideas for world domination.

Then I did the best possible thing, which is to take a back seat and let Tony get on with it, without interference. One of the first people he involved was content expert Nick Saalfeld, who soon became a full-time member of the team. Chris and I made our own small contributions when asked, but Tony had soon approached another 85 subject matter experts, and assembled a team of specialists in both the technology and user experience fields that would be required for success.

Two-and-a-half years later, the team has finally launched the result: the Yoodoo.biz website, and I am very proud to be a founder and shareholder. While acknowledging its Beermat roots, Yoodoo is a completely new concept which goes a long way beyond the original idea of Beermat. Yoodoo.biz, the first manifestation of Yoodoo, is not aimed specifically at the 70,000 people who decide to start a business in the UK every year, although they would undoubtedly gain much value from the site.

Yoodoo.biz is for the 17,000,000 people in the UK that have a general aspiration or dream to start a business, be self-employed or generally make a better life for themselves. Most of these, sadly, do not know where to start, or feel it is all too difficult or out of their reach. Yoodoo.biz is designed for them. The principles behind Yoodoo will soon be applied to a whole range of other areas where people want to try or learn something new.

Thank you for reading *The Beermat Story*, which I hope you found interesting and useful. You should definitely now make Yoodoo.biz your next port of call. It is a wonderful, ground-breaking and highly practical site (though I will admit some bias here). You will definitely enjoy the experience, and the best news is: it is ***completely free.***



www.yoodoo.biz