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Ted Smart Founder of The Book People

The first job Ted Smart ever had was analysing dog food for Spillers, the pet-food company. It did not go well. He says: 'On my first day I had to open six cans of competitors' dog food and smell them. I threw up and resigned on the spot.'

After working his way through another 14 menial jobs in quick succession he briefly became an air traffic controller at Heathrow airport. But when he was called up to do National Service he decided to head off to Hong Kong instead, where he got a job as a police inspector. While Smart was there he started taking photographs of Hong Kong in his spare time and decided to publish them in a book. He persuaded a printer to let him pay the bill only once the copies had been sold, because he had no money. He also held an exhibition of his photographs, which transferred to London where it was opened by celebrity photographer Lord Snowdon. Smart says: 'I thought, here we go – it really started my life.'

In 1967, however, Smart was badly injured during the Cultural Revolution riots and spent six months recovering

Between 1969 and 1988 the firm published more than 600 books. As a small company, however, they often found it hard to sell their publications to bookshops. So one afternoon, on a whim, Smart sent an assistant out to Guildford High Street to try selling books to people working in offices. Within a few hours the employee had sold £400 worth of books, more than the company had managed in the previous fortnight.

The idea of selling books this way refused to go away. When Smart parted company with his business partner in 1988 he decided to build a new company from scratch, basing it entirely around the concept of selling books direct to people who would never normally visit a bookshop. He called it The Book People. He quickly pulled together a team of sales representatives and sent them into offices and factories, where they would leave a selection of books for people to look at and then return the following week to take orders. He says: 'It was controversial at the time because in those days books were only sold through bookshops. But I wanted to go direct to the public.'

Smart also decided to buy outright all the books he needed from publishers instead of returning unsold copies as other booksellers did. This meant that he was able to secure big discounts and so sell his books at much reduced prices. The idea was an instant hit with the public and within two years The Book People had outgrown Smart's former company.

Smart's unique approach did not, however, go down well with other booksellers who felt that The Book People represented unfair competition. Smart is unrepentant. He says: 'I am always being criticised by the industry because I like doing things a different way. But I don't regret a thing. I don't think they understand that I am a great supporter of the industry. Sometimes we just get our wires crossed a bit.'

Not all his decisions were quite so inspired, however. After a few years Smart sold the company to an American firm in return for an annual £600,000 salary and 6 per cent of the gross sales. But after just 12 months he realised he had made a big mistake and bought the business back for £1.5 million. He admits: 'I couldn't stand being told what to do all the time.'

He also got a horrible personal shock in 1991 when he realised he was supposed to have been on the ill-fated Pan Am flight that blew up over Lockerbie. He only missed it because he had just returned from a trip to America and at the last minute felt too exhausted to fly back so soon.

But The Book People thrived and in 2003 Smart sold a stake in the company to American children's book publisher Scholastic for £15 million, leaving him with a 75 per cent stake valued at £75 million.

In 2007 The Book People acquired its competitor, Index, and also bought Puffin Book Club. The Book People now sells 18 million books a year in Britain and has around 2.75 million customers. As a result in 2009 the business is

Fact File

Date of birth: 9 April 1943

Marital status: separated with three children

Highest level of education achieved: boarding school

Qualifications: three A levels

Interests and hobbies: watching Manchester United play, gardening, keeping parrots

Personal philosophy: 'Work hard but make sure you enjoy life too. And always treat people with respect.'

expected to have a turnover of £100 million. Indeed, it sells so many books that every year its most successful authors, such as celebrity chef Jamie Oliver and Maeve Binchy, come to personally thank the sales team at the company's annual conference.

Now 65, Smart says: 'Everybody can do whatever they want to do if they want to do it. All you need is belief in your ability. When you start something up, there are times when things go fabulously right and times when they go wrong. You just have to keep your nerve.'