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Richard Beggs

Founder of Moving Venue Group

Richard Beggs always dreamt of becoming the manager of a large hotel. After spending every summer working in tourist hotels in his home town of Weymouth, Dorset, he left school at 16 to do a four-year apprenticeship with the Savoy Hotel group. He says: 'I was hell-bent on becoming a hotshot hotel manager working in a corporate environment.'

When he got a job as the manager of the Dover Street wine bar in London's Mayfair, however, he began to think his future might lie in other directions. He started organising parties for customers and soon discovered he really enjoyed it. When he was asked to organise the opening of a big furniture showroom it went so well that, in 1984 and at the age of 26, he decided to leave his job to set up his own catering and event management company.

He says: 'I suddenly realised this was a formula for a very successful business and knew I wanted to pursue it



further. By being in a less bureaucratic environment I could have a greater influence over decisions.'

He funded the start-up of his business with savings of £3,000 which he had been intending to use as the deposit on a flat. Instead he moved in with his girlfriend and used the money to get a £10,000 overdraft facility from the bank.

His decision to go it alone did not, however, get wholehearted approval from his family and friends. He says: 'The Dover Street wine bar was packed out every night. Everyone thought I was completely round the twist walking away from that.'

Just three months after he opened for business, though, Beggs struck lucky. He was cold-called by an insurance agent who hoped to sell him some insurance. Beggs agreed to meet him on the condition that the agent introduced him to some of his clients.

As a result Beggs landed a huge contract to organise a social programme for a group of businessmen in London

for a conference. He says: 'That was what really put me on the map. I had been organising events for £500 and £600 a time and suddenly here was a £30,000 piece of business.'

Not every venture went as smoothly, however. When Beggs was asked to organise a party to launch British Caledonian's inaugural flight from London to New York, his team had the inspired idea of holding it in an art gallery and decorating the walls with an exhibition of paintings of New York. But when the paintings arrived they turned out to be of Paris. So Beggs and his colleagues had to rush out and spend a fortune buying posters of Manhattan and getting them framed. He says: 'We were still nailing things together as the first guests were arriving.'

Then in 1989 recession struck and demand for events management dried up overnight. The situation was made worse by the fact that Beggs had invested heavily in commercial property.

He says: 'I thought the best way forward was to buy premises rather than have enormous exposure to big rents on offices. But it was almost as if I was signing on the dotted line and Margaret Thatcher was shouting "Right, you can start the recession now, he has just put pen to paper." We owed the bank £500,000 and it was evident our bankers had lost confidence in us.'

The day before the staff Christmas party his lawyer advised him that the only way out was to go into voluntary liquidation. But Beggs refused. He says: 'It would have meant taking a lot of people out with me because my suppliers would have got hit at a time when none of them could handle it. I just felt it would be the most shitty thing to do.' Instead he arranged a meeting with his bank. He says: 'I went in there thinking I have got to give the pitch of a lifetime. I was terrified. I put the keys on the table and said, there they are if you want them, but if you are prepared to let me carry on working then I will repay the debt.'

The bank reluctantly allowed him three months to get the business back on track. Beggs immediately shifted the focus toward organising events for clients he thought would do best in a recession, such as bankers and lawyers. The business survived.

When Sydney was unveiled as the venue for the 2000 Olympic Games, Beggs decided it could be the opportunity he had been waiting for to turn his company into an international player. He realised there would be a huge demand for conferences in Sydney in the run-up to the games – and that his company had just the experience to organise them. Within two months of the announcement he had invested £10,000 to set up an office in Australia, using the services of a former employee who had recently emigrated there.

He says: 'I wanted to make a statement. I thought it was time we elevated ourselves out of the small-business scenario and showed our clients we were up for the long haul.' The gamble paid off. Beggs quickly got work organis-

Fact File

Date of birth: 18 September 1957

Marital status: married with one child

Highest level of education achieved: secondary school

Qualifications: CSE Grade 1 in Art, professional degree from the Hotel and Catering International Management Association

Interests: marathon running, playing with son

Personal philosophy: 'If you see your ship coming in, swim out and meet it. If you can see an opportunity, seize it.'

ing conferences for companies hoping to get contracts for the Olympic Games. Then later his company got work putting on big parties to celebrate the completion of those contracts.

In 2005 Beggs also opened an office in Dubai and now organises events throughout the region. His company, which he wholly owns, has 48 employees and is expected to have a turnover of £9.5 million in 2009. High-profile events have included the Queen's official visit in 2007 to open the newly refurbished St Pancras station in London, home of the new Eurostar terminal.

Beggs, now 51, says: 'There is an element of entrepreneurial flair in everybody. The more of it you can apply and use, the more successful you will become.'