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Rik Hellewell

Founder of Ovenu

A friend of Rik Hellewell's came back from a holiday in New Zealand and happened to mention that he had noticed an unusual barbecue-cleaning business out there that seemed to be doing well. Hellewell was intrigued. The operation was run by two men who would turn up in a van to dismantle the barbecue where it was. They would then clean it by immersing all the parts in an old cut-off oil drum filled with caustic soda.

His friend thought no more about it. But Hellewell did. He suddenly realised that the concept might work in Britain – on domestic ovens. He says: 'At that time you could get someone to do your ironing and window cleaning and mow your lawn, but having your oven cleaned was one of the only things left indoors that you couldn't get done professionally. I realised that it was a niche market with big potential.'

Brought up in Bradford, West Yorkshire, Hellewell originally planned to become an engineer. He left school at 16 to take up an apprenticeship with a local engineering firm.



But he quickly realised it was not for him, and as soon as he had finished his apprenticeship he left to join a carpet and upholstery cleaning company. He says: 'I was never very comfortable in a factory and being told what to do by people who didn't have the faintest idea themselves. I wanted to be the master of my own destiny.'

He stayed with the carpet-cleaning company for 10 years, rising to become a well-paid manager. But he always knew he wanted to run his own show one day and had often thought the service sector offered the most potential. When his friend told him about the barbecue-cleaning business Hellewell knew it was the opportunity he had been waiting for. He quit his job and using his knowledge of engineering spent £500 designing and building a portable cleaning tank that could hold every segment of a dismantled oven. Then he registered the design at the Patent Office to stop anyone stealing his idea.

Next he asked a local chemist to create a cleaning substance that, unlike existing products, did not contain

caustic soda. That meant it could clean every part of the oven without damaging it. Hellewell says: 'We didn't want to turn up and do half a job. We wanted to be able to clean the whole appliance. And by registering the design of the equipment and by having our own products, we weren't going to make it easy for anyone else to come in and try to compete.'

Then he went to the local council tip and dragged home a couple of old ovens on which to test his new cleaning system. He admits: 'There was a lot of trial and error. There is only one way you can learn something brand new and that is to get stuck in and do it. I wanted to make all the mistakes myself first.'

When he was satisfied he had got it right, he had some leaflets printed and took out an advertisement in the local paper. Then he waited for the phone to ring. Luckily it did. In the first year Hellewell cleaned 368 ovens. It was hard work doing it all himself. But he deliberately chose to work alone, because from the start he decided that if the concept worked then he wanted to be able to use the data he had collected to turn his Ovenu business into a franchise operation.

Hellewell says that after working for a big company he was convinced franchising would be the best way to grow his business. 'When I was working in the carpet game we had 120 subcontractors and it was just wall-to-wall hassle', he says. 'I wanted a system where people could own their business, but trade under a corporate identity. People who have got their own businesses tend to behave better than subcontractors because they are responsible for the direction of their business. You don't get the Friday afternoon syndrome.'

In the end, however, it took Hellewell five years of running his business alone before he felt he had enough

sales and marketing information to launch the franchise. He says: 'I was determined to make my business work. And if people know that the whole company is run by somebody who has been there, done it and got the T-shirt, they appreciate that and are going to want to work with you. There are a lot of companies being run by people who haven't got the faintest idea what goes on at the grass roots and I don't think that is terribly bright.'

His single-mindedness has paid off. Hellewell now has 130 franchisees with 200 vans between them, who pay a one-off fee of £9,750 to join Ovenu and a monthly fee of £165, producing a collective turnover which is expected to be £5 million in 2009. Hellewell has expanded his franchise overseas and last year started up a new venture, The Gredi Box, a plastic container which holds cooking ingredients, which he hopes will appeal to secondary school children doing compulsory food technology lessons.

He says: 'There is a huge amount of synergy between cooking, making a mess and what we do at Ovenu. This is going to introduce the next generation of clients to who we are.'

Fact File

Date of birth: 6 November 1958

Marital status: twice married with six children

Highest level of education achieved: grammar school

Qualifications: six O levels, OND in Engineering

Interests: rugby, golf, spending time with his children

Personal philosophy: 'Believe in yourself. If you have self-doubt you are not going to get there.'

Success has, however, come at a price. Hellewell thinks his focused determination to make the business work and his long working hours contributed to the breakdown of his first marriage. Now 50, he says: 'Anybody can be successful at whatever it is they want to do if they want to do it enough. But you have to be prepared to put in the extra hours and be blinkered. You are not born lucky, you make your own luck.'

But Hellewell says the sacrifices were worth it. He admits he is totally driven by the idea of being the best: 'If you are going to do something, you have to do it wholeheartedly with the ultimate objective of winning the race. Nobody ever remembers the person who came second. I tell my kids that it is not the taking part that counts, it is the winning. There is nothing that makes you feel as good as picking up the reward for your efforts.'