

# Going for **bespoke**

From advertising CEO to furniture maker for the famous, Nick Gutfreund reveals how starting a business has finally given his creativity full reign

**C**reativity is important to Nick Gutfreund. It's a word that's peppered throughout his conversation, cropping up repetitively as he describes the progress of his career. Until you pick up on this, his CV seems bewildering – a rollercoaster of unconventional volte-faces that takes him from Bristol fishmonger to the lofty heights of advertising CEO and finally back to college to retrain as a furniture maker. But a passion for creative expression underpins everything he's done – even selling fish.

"There was a lot of creativity in that," he says. "The business was focused around providing unusual fish to the public. Most

fishmongers were selling cod and haddock, but we were selling lobsters, smoked salmon and langoustine – and we were telling people how to cook it too. At the end of three years, we ended up with two shops."

Nick was in his early twenties when he bought his first business – and while his academic-minded contemporaries studied for their degrees, his energies went into developing a successful commercial enterprise. Before long the business was thriving, but Nick had begun to wonder if selling fish was really for him. "After those three years it seemed like time to move on," he explains. "I was interested in advertising, and so I persuaded an ad agency to employ me."

In a degree-centric industry, Nick was at a disadvantage. He hadn't been to university, and even in the '80s it was notoriously difficult to progress up the ranks of the big advertising agencies without higher education. But luck stepped in with a helping hand. "I ended up getting my big break when I managed to get talking to the MD of a large London agency who had come into the business without a degree. He gave me a chance, proving that you don't have to have a degree to succeed."

In a remarkably short time, Nick had moved from an entry-level position in advertising to be MD of a large agency. He was in charge of around 100 people, and his role had evolved from a strategic to a managerial one. In his own slightly dispirited words, "I was doing more and more of being an MD and less and less of advertising."

It was at this point that he realised he wanted to do something completely different. "The agency I was running wasn't mine, and I missed the creative side of things and wanted to express myself more. My wife Marie-Claire and I did a lot of soul searching, thinking about what we could do, and I realised that I wanted to have my own business.

There were three things that I really →

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WORDS HANNA LINDON

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enjoyed doing and thought that perhaps I could turn to account – cooking, photography and furniture making. But I needed to earn a living out of whatever I decided to do, and I thought that, in a commercial environment, I would get the most satisfaction out of furniture making.”

Leaving his lucrative position at the ad agency and committing to two years of retraining at the Building Crafts College in Stratford was a move that Nick describes as “a leap of faith”. On the one hand, he hoped that by starting his own business he would have more time to spend with his daughters – then both under two – and his wife. On the other, his ambition was to build a small, bespoke operation rather than a large and profiteering one, and that would entail some compromises.

“It’s one thing thinking about it and another coping with it,” he says dryly. “There are lifestyle changes and compromises you have to make, and that was really the hardest thing to come to terms with. There are things that we used to be able to do that we can’t now, but ultimately the quality of life far outweighs the loss of income. Life is all about compromises – the key is to think about the ones that you’re prepared to make.”

Of course, there are compromises and compromises. They might have made some financial sacrifices, but to an outsider the

Gutfreund family appears to be living the dream. A year after Nick finished college they moved from London to an idyllic part of the Devonshire countryside, and now both parents work from home. Nick’s commute is a 30-second walk up to a workshop in the back garden with the dogs trailing along behind him. “I see my girls every day, do homework with them, read with them,” he says, “although it’s still not enough apparently!”

It may have found favour with his kids, but was Nick’s decision to exchange corporate life for creative entrepreneurship paying off commercially? Was he, I ask, actually selling any furniture?

“I started doing commissions from the moment I began college,” he says. “One of the biggest challenges in this business is really how one can promote oneself in an appropriate manner. I spent a lot of time talking to people, and I’ve made pieces for MTV and Rolls Royce simply because I knew that they would be seen. Financially that wasn’t beneficial, but from a profile perspective it’s phenomenal. A lot of my ‘marketing budget’ is also spent doing charitable pieces. You never know when you’re going to get a call from someone saying that they’ve seen something I’ve made and would like to commission a piece for themselves.”

Partly as a result of a strong commercial sense and partly because of his undeniable

talent as a furniture maker, Nick’s business has been a real success story. His clients now range from local celebs such as actress Caroline Quentin to the Royal Navy – he designed and made the captain’s table for their “first in class” brand-new type 45 destroyer – and he was recently asked by City and Guilds to design a piece for their retiring president, HRH Duke of Edinburgh. “Last month I met Prince Philip and presented my designs to him,” he tells me. “When I went in there I was nervous, obviously, but when you start talking about what you believe in...”

He trails off, and so I ask the obvious question. What does he believe in? Is there a philosophy that underpins his work?

“Well, philosophy is a big word,” he laughs. “But an underlying principle is to try to link the pieces of furniture I’m designing inextricably to the people and places they’re going to belong to. That can exhibit itself in all sorts of different ways, from the choice of timbers to the preferences of the individual.”

It becomes clear as Nick talks that he loves his business, and gets all the creative satisfaction from it that was lacking in his old job. He dwells on the enjoyment of developing a new design, his delight in the reactions of his clients and the kick he gets out of surprising people. Nick is unusual among entrepreneurs in that his aim is to limit the size of his business rather than to pursue substantive growth. Again, the motivation behind this ambition is creativity: he’s keen to continue to participate in the whole process of designing and making a commission. “The real rewards in this business come from the cycle of executing a commission – from coming up with the idea to seeing the client’s reaction,” he says. “It’s a circular process, and I get my satisfaction from being there from the beginning right through to the end.”

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