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My First Million — Thornton Tasker

From small beginnings, window cleaning business swept the country



Fourth-generation window cleaner Thornton Tasker, 49, started out at 18 knocking on house doors in Ilkley, Yorkshire, with his 17-year-old brother Austin. Twenty years later, in 2005 when they sold the business, turnover was £6m. In 2007, Mr Tasker launched Nationwide Window Cleaning, based in Leeds, with £50,000. Today, the company has satellite depots in Canary Wharf and Manchester, employs 285 staff, carries out 35,000 monthly visits, and has £12.1m turnover. Clients include Royal Bank of Scotland and most high street banks, Sainsbury's, major high street retailers and hospitals. In September 2014 the company raised £3m from the Business Growth Fund to expand, and is now considering acquisitions.

CV

Born: Otley, West Yorkshire, December 1966

Education: Prince Henry's Grammar School, Otley. Left at 16 with three O-levels, then joined the army for six months as a junior leader with the Royal Engineers, Dover.

Career: In 1985, founded Tasker Brothers, domestic window cleaning service. Within five years he acquired commercial clients in Leeds. Sold the company in 2005, then worked for new owners for two years. In 2007, started new commercial window cleaning business, Nationwide Window Cleaning.

Lives: Outside Harrogate with wife Cleo. He has four children, aged from 20 to two.

Did you think you would get to where you are?

I don't know if I did because when I started out with my brother we had so little. I sold my 18th birthday present from my mother, some scuba equipment, to raise £76. That money paid for a couple of ladders and buckets. We borrowed another £100 from an aunt. Our first vehicle was an old mustard-coloured Rover that guzzled petrol. It cost £200 that we financed over six months, often struggling to pay back the fortnightly instalments. I thought that we would build a business. It was clear that if we presented ourselves professionally we would not be short of work.

When you had made your first £1m did you want to slow down?

We made our first £1m profit last year, and definitely did not want to slow down. We carried on and it was business as usual. We were being pulled along, as the business has got so much momentum. We saw that money as a stepping stone to expansion, and used it all for future growth. The business is very structured. We have plans to be three times our present size. The way we see it we are only one-third of the way through the journey. Our first million pounds turnover was a much more significant moment.

What is the secret of your success?

It is having the vision of being able to consolidate what is a rather fragmented industry. My brother and I were hungry for success, and early on we saw that by approaching what appears to be a simple task in a professional manner we would appeal to prospective clients. When we were teenagers knocking on doors, we wore ties. We had our own uniform of moleskin trousers, blue and white checked shirts and blue ties. Homeowners decided to give us a chance.

What was your best preparation for business?

The example my father and grandfather set of working hard was really magnificent, obviously learnt from my great-grandfather who was also a window cleaner and sole trader. My father and grandfather were window cleaners, often starting work at 5am and not returning until 5pm, six or seven days a week. Without that strong work ethic, I don't think we would have had the stamina or perseverance to get from nothing to a £1m turnover, which took us eight years. It was harder to achieve that than to go from £5m to the £15m turnover that is forecast for next year. Our first week's turnover was £63; and £13,000 for the first year.

Do you have time for personal financial planning?

My PA Sarah handles the day-to-day domestic finances like utilities, transfers and school fees, which is just as well because I am dreadfully bad at administration. In June this year I joined UBS, a Swiss private bank. I wanted to put my pension, insurance and life cover in one place where I could speak to the same person about progression and forward planning. It just seemed to be a grown-up, sensible thing to do.

What is your basic business philosophy?

We have got to treat people the way we would like to be treated ourselves. We have to be fair and tell the truth. We are traditional, and aim to be a good employer. We only have 40 hour contracts in our business. Welfare is important to us.

What was the most challenging period of your career?

The toughest time was towards the end of our first business, when we ran out of cash through overtrading. We could not fund the rapid growth because we just did not know how to. We did not have the skills or the experience. The bank became very nervous and reduced our facilities. We ended up selling the business. However, the two years' experience that I gained as an employee working for a Plc, understanding their structure and processes formed the platform of the current business. It wasn't easy, to watch someone else owning my first business. I knew I had to start again.

Do you want to carry on till you drop?

The thought of not having the business is daunting. However, the business runs day-to-day with the existing management team. So by my mid-50s I envisage myself easing back. When I work a bit less I would like to spend time with start-ups or small businesses, because I believe I can add a lot of value to the initial stages of an enterprise. I would love that. Materially, I have got everything I want. I believe that if we do the right things in business, then the business will look after us.

Have you made any pension provision?

Though the business was doing well quite early on, I still thought it important to have a fallback. At 22 I paid £250 a month into a pension, increasing it to £500 before I stopped 10 years later. At 45 I resumed the plan, contributing a four-figure sum each month to build up the fund. However, I am confident that the equity in my company will be more than sufficient to provide for us.

Do you believe in giving something back to the community?

Absolutely we do. We have taken on 15 apprentices over the past two years. We support Calderdale SmartMove, a charity that assists local homeless people. In the second week of September our management team — 12 people including myself — did a 150-mile cycle ride from Aberdaron to Manchester, raising £3,000 for that charity.

Do you allow yourself the odd indulgence?

Our indulgence is being able to live in the country. Last year, I sold a minority shareholding in the company to the Business Growth Fund and the proceeds allowed me partly to fund the home of my dreams. The purchase was an astonishing coincidence. It was the prettiest house I had ever seen when I was 17 and cleaning their windows with my grandfather. It's an understated house that has acres of land and a distinctive cobbled drive.

I have got a small cabin cruiser, moored off the west coast of Scotland, outside Greenock, where the scenery is beautiful, and I go to get some peace and quiet. Another extravagance is that my wife and two eldest daughters ride horses.

Do you believe in leaving everything to children?

In the event that I sell out for a large sum of money I would not be looking to leave my children any more than they need. I would leave some capital in trust for future generations.

I think my children will need further education. I will encourage them to take out student finance, because if they want to go to university and not do anything they should pay the loan back. If they work hard I will contribute towards their fees. I would like to provide each of them with the deposit for their first house. I am against giving my children large sums of money unless they have got a use for it.

I will definitely leave a percentage of my wealth to worthy causes that would help young people develop their own business, especially in areas of high unemployment.

How have you survived the recession?

The recession was significant for us in that it created an opportunity for growth, albeit with lower margins. Our clients were looking for ways to save money and consolidate the number of suppliers they had. If a client had 300 or more sites around the country they may have had 30 different local window cleaning contractors. We were able to save some money by taking over the work and providing a national service. Between 2009 and 2011 our turnover almost doubled. The sole traders would not have gone out of business because there is a lot of glass out there.