

dynamism@diversity

new ethnic entrepreneurs in modern Britain

Summary

A new-found dynamism is emerging in Britain's ethnic entrepreneurs, according to research for **One 2 One's Best 4 Business** programme. The new ethnic entrepreneurs are confident, innovative – and ambitious for success.

Many see their cross-cultural background as a positive strength which, together with access to modern technology and communications, can help generate business opportunities.

Whether drawing on cross-cultural resources to produce something new – or adding a modern twist to something old – the new ethnic entrepreneurs confidently combine modern skills with useful contacts as they develop their ideas.

Launched six months ago, **One 2 One Best 4 Business** is a programme of research into Britain's changing small business environment. The research looks at what helps the new generation of businesses – using modern communications to work in faster and more responsive ways than before – succeed.

One 2 One's Best 4 Business Awards for business support services in Britain found innovation and technological dynamism flourishing – reflecting the changing face of small business. **dynamism@diversity** finds these qualities characterise new ethnic entrepreneurs, too.

The new ethnic entrepreneurs cite running their own business as a positive way to transcend some of the negativity previously associated with ethnic identity. However, they are also keen for their work be seen in purely business terms. Even so, most share an awareness of the potential effect of their success on potential entrepreneurs from the same ethnic background. Many hope success will help bring about greater ethnic involvement in mainstream business.

From web-based design services and computer consultancy to multimedia approaches to music and exercise, the new ethnic entrepreneurs see running their business as providing more than simply employment – they also see it as a positive expression of Britain's multicultural society.

As such, they represent a profound optimism in the future.

Dynamism

Britain is changing fast. New technology, ever-improving communications, globalisation and cultural shifts all play a part in this change. Entrepreneurial activity is an important driver.

Achieving freedom and independence are the main reason given for starting a business in the UK¹, and Britain compares favourably with other advanced nations in entrepreneurial qualities like motivation, individualism, risk-taking and competitiveness.²

The **One 2 One Best 4 Business** research programme looks at the important area of small and micro businesses. It has found that much of this new dynamism is driven by wider access to effective and affordable communication technologies – from mobile phones and laptops to e-mails and websites – which have become available only relatively recently.

The **One 2 One Best 4 Business 1998 Award** recognised regional and national achievements by nearly 40 small business support services. They showed that innovation, value for money, relevance, accessibility and good presentation were important factors in success. Many of these factors have also emerged among the new ethnic entrepreneurs interviewed for this report.

Diversity

In 1991, Britain's population census asked a question about ethnic origin for the first time. This showed the total number of people in Britain from ethnic minority groups stood at over 3 million – or 5.5% of the population. For a variety of social, cultural and historical reasons, the majority tend to be located in urbanised areas of the country. Greater London alone, for instance, accounts for almost half (44.6%) of the ethnic minority population.

Rob Lewis, Director of Demographic and Statistical Studies at the London Research Centre, suggests that, "Our best projections indicate that, in 2011, the proportion [of ethnic minority people in London] will have risen to 28%." If white minority groups are added, he continues, "we can estimate that one in three Londoners will be from an ethnic minority group."³

Ethnic minorities have long exerted a profound economic influence – and this is likely to grow. Nevertheless, people from ethnic minority backgrounds are still *twice* as likely to be unemployed as white people – even while consistently showing average, equal or better levels of educational achievement. It is widely recognised, for example, that ethnic minorities generate significant amounts of entrepreneurial activity as a *response* to difficulties finding employment elsewhere.

Research in America shows that immigrants have personal characteristics – like risk-taking and initiative – that are by definition entrepreneurial. Often the *initial* pattern of entrepreneurial activity by specific minority groups has been in particular sectors (e.g. Chinese laundries, South Asian corner shops etc.) but this has reflected *opportunities* rather than cultural predisposition.

As part of its **Best 4 Business** research programme looking at small business in a climate of rapid technological and cultural change, **One 2 One** commissioned a short piece of qualitative research to take soundings among ethnic entrepreneurs themselves. Depth interviews were carried out by telephone with six entrepreneurs. They were asked about how they started in business, how they saw their business developing, whether ethnic background was a factor – and how they saw the future?

¹ Birley S and Wetshead P (1994), A Taxonomy of Business Start-Up Reasons and Their Impact on Firm Growth and Size, *Journal of Business Venturing*, 9, p7-31

² Lynn R (1991), *The Secret of the Miracle Economy*, London

³ Rob Lewis [London Research Centre] (1996) *The Demography and Geography of London's Ethnic Minorities*, Interplan magazine

The results provide an illuminating snapshot of modern Britain, small business – and the contribution of ethnic entrepreneurs to a changing landscape. Importantly, they also provide an insight into the very positive strengths that a diverse range of cultural backgrounds brings to the economy – and to society at large.

Start Up

Entrepreneurs of all kinds can usually point to the particular moment when they made the key decision to start up a business. Ethnic entrepreneurs are no different.

Although a number of the entrepreneurs interviewed had always been interested in setting up a business – and often had taken business-related qualifications to that end – external factors, particularly a period of unemployment, often provided the final ‘prod’.

For Kofi Kusitor, founder of *Cursitor Consulting* and architect of the highly acclaimed web news and features magazine *Black Britain On Line*, it was seeing others unemployed that was a key factor. As a law graduate working in the Lord Chancellor’s Department, he saw so many other law graduates – particular from ethnic minorities – waiting for a pupillage (the next stage in becoming a barrister) that he decided to develop the interest in IT he developed during his law degree in business terms. Even at that stage, he thought it prudent to invest in a Masters in Business Studies at the Guildhall.

Being made redundant led Alison Collins, a childcare professional of eleven years, to decide “it’s now or never”. She had long been interested in providing a ‘one-stop shop’ for nurseries and others to buy children’s books, cards and toys aimed at ethnic minority businesses.

André Lecointe-Gayle has long had a vision of running a music and media company with a difference, and did a business course at college in preparation – but he also took time to gather industry experience before starting work on High Rise Productions in partnership with Nicholas Beveney.

Nilesh Patel is the only pappadum manufacturer in Britain. Nilesh always planned to go into business but confesses that when he left university in 1995 he had “no idea” what he was going to do. The economy was still in recession – and “there was no ready employment”. The idea of making pappadums came to him at a time of sheer desperation – though access to (and experience of) “a secret family recipe” may also have been a helpful stimulus!

The Vision

Entrepreneurs are characterised by a passionate belief that they can make something happen. This vision of creating wealth through business is often a crucial prop to keep them going through the long hours and isolation many small businesses experience in their early stages. Once again, ethnic entrepreneurs are no different. What *is* changing is that new opportunities seem to be opening up in two directions.

First, technology is now highly competitively-priced. From more or less “essential” hardware like mobile phones, PCs, laptops to well-designed business planning, accounting and administration software packages, the elements necessary to organise and maintain a business have changed dramatically in the past decade or so. Expansion is no longer likely to mean hiring typists or even book-keepers – instead, it’s likely to involve an upgrade.

Second, changing culture has transformed Britain itself. A burgeoning multicultural society means new challenges – and new opportunities. Few are as well-placed to take advantage of this as ethnic entrepreneurs. As Nilesh Patel of *Shakti Pappadums* points out, curry is “already one of the country’s national dishes.” In this context, Nilesh sees setting up the first centre of production for pappadums in the UK as “an approach where everybody wins”. His use of modern technology to develop “a product with huge market potential” is a striking example of something common to the entrepreneurs interviewed: fusing experience from more than one culture to generate something ‘extra’.

Kofi Kusitor outlines his vision for *Black Britain On Line* in its motto: “to promote the strengths, diversity and success of Black people in Britain.” His vision is both explicit and challenging. He points out, for example, that while “Black people...have excelled in sports, entertainment and fashion...we have failed to make progress in other, arguably more important areas, such as economics and politics.” As a leading African Caribbean entrepreneur in a fast-changing high tech industry, Kofi Kusitor has strong views on technological change too:

“The Internet and other electronic commerce environments have globalised most economic and social activity. Yet we see none of the so-called leading Black businesses, especially the Black newspapers and their publishers, taking the leading role here. Late adoption due to a lack of vision later turns into “white people are holding us back.””

Interestingly, *early* adoption seems to characterise the new ethnic entrepreneurs. William Kwatia’s new company, *Aftershock*, provides personal fitness services – and seeks to expand into fitness holidays. There seems little obvious connection between personal fitness and technology, yet William has used the net for research and e-mail to maintain contact and network as far afield as Trinidad and Tobago – and with a range of clients for his personal training services stretching across London, his mobile phone is vital too.

However, William remains somewhat wary of the use of e-commerce at this stage of *Aftershock*’s development, arguing “there’s still a sense that things are changing too quickly”. He is nevertheless clear about the fusion of technological and cultural change: “Kids who are now fifteen or sixteen, when they get into their twenties will immediately see it as a normal part of business.”

The vision outlined by each ethnic entrepreneur included the standard entrepreneurial elements like growth, success and expansion into new markets. Other elements were also present. André Lecointe-Gayle and his partner Nicholas Beveney deliberately position *High Rise Productions*, for example, as more “collaborative” and “informal” than many mainstream businesses.

André cites both Richard Branson and Anita Roddick as trend-setters. Neither of these well-known entrepreneurial success stories come from ethnic minority groups – but both strike a chord with younger people. The views of the new ethnic entrepreneurs interviewed add confirmation to the

arguments of the Demos report *Genderquake*. This suggested that younger people – broadly below 50 years old – have outlooks more in common horizontally i.e. by age, regardless of ethnic background, gender or sexuality, with the most significant differences opening up vertically i.e. with older individuals from their own communities.

Alison Collins, for example, while seeing her primary market as ethnic minority groups, also sees a wider cultural purpose to *Positive Identity*. Alison sees a cultural rather than merely economic ‘value’ in her work, regarding the *main* point of *Positive Image* as “helping young black and white children to see that black people really do exist”.

André Lecointe-Gayle also sees business as having values beyond the economic, arguing that eventually moving into the mainstream will “help the population as a whole get used to the idea of black people having ordinary human characteristics.” Further, he wants to “buck the trend of every man for himself”, and sees his work in terms of cultural advocacy – initially for black people in the music business and then extending to those beyond the music sector.

As business people, the natural point of comparison is *other* businesses – with a typical pattern of aspiration to great success. Alison Collins again: “like many entrepreneurs, most of us aspire to be household names”.

Issa Abu Iata, the Palestinian behind *Mushroom Technology*, a computer services consultancy, characterises his work – as did a number of the entrepreneurs interviewed – in relation to bigger companies:

“Due to the fact we're a small business we provide a service that larger companies cannot compete with – their markets being so vast. Mushroom can guarantee prompt service contracts – within twelve hours of break-down.”

Issa identifies a further virtue to *Mushroom Technology*'s small size: “less overheads resulting in smaller prices”.

Meanwhile André Lecointe-Gayle envisages a breakthrough whereby Britain's music industry is transformed from the current situation, where “black people are just faces on the cover” to one like America, where “more of the real power-brokers” are black. He expects the effects to be as explosive as it was in the sixties, when black-controlled production companies and labels like Motown made such a lasting impact.

Kofi Kusitor, in an industry by definition at the leading edge of technology, has perhaps the most informed perspective of the entrepreneurs interviewed. He regards *Cursitor Consulting* as “way ahead of the game” in comparison with other businesses in the ethnic minority field. Kofi points to a reluctance, even among quite substantial black businessmen, to get involved in modern electronic media. Referring specifically to the need to grasp new technology, he reports that “as a community we're a bit backward at coming forward”.

He is also confident about how *Black Britain On Line* stands up against the mainstream opposition. Looking at news delivery – which Black Britain On Line leads with – he says “the FT and the Telegraph are way out in front – everyone else is basic. We are well placed in between”. And while *Cursitor Consulting* may have only a hundredth of the financial resources the national papers have, they have a developing base of in-house skills which mean they can produce websites of comparable quality.

Diverse Mix

A number of the new ethnic entrepreneurs made references to issues which would seem of particular relevance – such as racism, attitudes within their ethnic community and so on. However, these were, in general, *passing* references. There was a strong sense that the entrepreneurial class was a great ‘leveller’. Or as Nilesh Patel put it: “if there's a margin, most people will go for it.”

Nevertheless, ethnic background is *also* seen as both a potential strength and an issue which can give a greater edge to the pleasures of success. Alison Collins of *Positive Identity* summed this up when she remarked that she sees a value in “showing people you can be black *and* successful” and that “it will be good to see that black people can own companies”. But she also thought it would be good for this to elicit little comment, “to be accepted as a natural part of the business landscape”.

This understandable ambiguity – pride in background and community and a desire for mainstream acceptance – is found in Issa Abu Iata’s remarks about having a Palestinian quality he describes as “indomitable spirit”. He cites the *Intifada* as the best known example – saying this spirit expressed itself there as “throwing stones!”. For Issa, this spirit is part of his business success. “It’s a refusal to accept you're beaten, no matter how tough it gets,” he says, adding, “Whatever it takes. I plan and then – I *do*.” Having said which, Issa goes on to emphasise the fact that his business partner shares many of the same qualities which help make a successful business – and is English!

André Lecointe-Gayle wants *High Rise Productions* to act “as a dynamic and visible symbol for other black people – to show them that it *is* possible to actually get to where the power is”. Setting up in business on your own or with a friend is seen as a particularly effective way of side-stepping the racism that has been a significant part of the experience of young blacks in this country.

André sees entrepreneurship as a way moving of beyond the negative stance of victimhood:

“Though there may be racist forces out there, I try not to let anything set limits on my ambition, even if that's the way society is.”

Kofi Kusitor is another example. His background gives him a sensitivity to issues of particular relevance to ethnic communities – the structure and content of Black Britain On Line reflects this – but being an entrepreneur, he says, “goes deeper than ethnic background. It's a lot to do with my individualism – and a dogged determination to do things well.” Much of this determination, Kofi says, has its roots in personal upbringing, which he summarises as: “Always do your best”.

For Alison Collins, the “Unique Selling Proposition of *Positive Identity*” is the provision of more suitable materials for children from ethnic backgrounds. From the Caribbean Expo to local nurseries and playgroups she has had “very positive responses”. The only place she did receive some resistance was in a private nursery “where most of the children were white”. However, this experience persuaded Alison even more of the case that there is a place for her products *outside* the ethnic communities that are currently her main market. As Alison puts it: “You don't have to be black to buy a black doll – or even a book whose hero is black.”

Nilesh Patel also feels his cultural background enables him to take “a different perspective” on business matters. With three major cultural influences (Asian, African and European) on his life he is able to look at things from a much *wider* perspective than usual.

Alongside the growing technological and cultural confidence of the new ethnic entrepreneurs there is also, inevitably, a tension between one’s ethnic minority background and the mainstream business world. However, the entrepreneurs generally regarded this tension as a positive and productive one. Nilesh Patel, for example, feels people sharing his ethnic background are “more highly motivated to succeed in education” than many of their counterparts – and that this motivation translates itself into business.

The Support

Support for business start-ups has frequently been identified as a crucial factor in their success. Conversely, an absence of support – and the isolation of long hours – can be a significant burden. Once more, the new ethnic entrepreneurs reported a similar pattern. A number of these entrepreneurs had been helped through the Prince's Youth Business Trust (PYBT). This is unsurprising: the Trust is the largest start-up agency in the voluntary sector, and “particular effort is made to help those from Ethnic Minority communities” (alongside other priorities).

Family support was common to all those interviewed. Issa Abu Iata's father, also a businessman, provided advice on evaluating competitors. Kofi Kusitor's family, meanwhile, offered a variety of support, both in terms of encouragement and in practicalities which will be familiar to most entrepreneurs – like bringing food to the office when working late.

Alison Collins has help from her family, particularly her husband, when preparing for exhibitions – and friends with children have also acted as “market testers”. Friends, particularly those also in business, have also helped André Lecointe-Gayle and Nicholas Beveney market test their ideas for *High Rise Productions*.

William Kwatia meanwhile gets plenty of encouragement from the classes he teaches. He also sees himself as at the forefront of *developing* future levels of support for other ethnic entrepreneurs who might follow in his footsteps. By joining professional associations he aims to be both more visible to others from ethnic minorities – and to keep up “gentle pressure” for greater involvement.

Financial and other business support remains a problem for many small businesses. The Prince's Youth Business Trust (PYBT) has played an important role here for a number of new ethnic entrepreneurs – not least in providing reassurance to the high street banks.

For instance, though Nilesh Patel now enjoys the support of the banks in securing new premises, it was different when he started. He thinks this was “less to do” with his ethnicity “and more to do with being a start-up”, with no track record and few financial resources. PYBT made an initial loan of £2000 in May 1995 – now paid off – and recently a further ‘expansion loan’ of £2500.

Nilesh has been particularly impressed with the support he got from PYBT volunteers. He felt they were committed to his personal success as a business. He contrasts this support with the “too professionalised” approach of the various official business support bodies.

Although the trend in business support services, for example Business Links, is towards providing support that is much more sensitive to local needs, Alison Collins, for example, ran into some unexpected problems. She found identifying reliable suppliers difficult, and has found little support with the “difficult, long and complicated” processes involved in trade-marking designs.

While Alison enjoys the exhilaration of having her own business, she's also found that the boundary between her business and the rest of her life has become blurred – for one recent stocktaking session she was up until 5 a.m. Most of the selling involves Alison visiting various groups and nurseries, which means considerable amounts of travelling – and a lot of time spent on her own. As with many small businesses, loneliness can be an issue. However, with exhibition work there is more company – as well as plenty of positive feedback about what she is doing.

New Ethnic Entrepreneurs

For many of the new ethnic entrepreneurs interviewed, particularly those from African Caribbean backgrounds, there was a sense that their communities were beginning to wake up to the benefits of the community supporting its own businesses.

As Alison Collins says, “Just being in business is a big thing in our community”. Alison also notes that African Caribbean business people look with “some admiration” to the coherence of Asian and Chinese communities – and the consequent willingness to spend within their communities. In Britain this approach has been poorly replicated among the black community. Alison thinks that the first stage might be “a wider consolidation within the community” – before getting into the position to make an impact on the mainstream.

André Lecointe-Gayle agrees, arguing that the industrious and successful images of Chinese and Asian business people have helped blaze a trail – and “now is the time for African Caribbeans to follow, and to open up new avenues for themselves”.

Within the black community itself, William Kwatia particularly encourages women to bring along their children to their classes – to see that “someone from their own community can be motivated to get out and make things happen”. He sees *Aftershock* as a way of saying, in effect, “once you open that door, you have a lot of opportunities”.

This “sense of responsibility” is present in Kofi Kusitor’s approach. *Cursitor Consulting* offers a range of services and opportunities for organisations, both to grasp the advantages of getting online (e.g. training and consultancy) as well as to develop an effective presence on the internet (e.g. websites and e-commerce). Unsurprisingly, with the high profile of *Black Britain On Line* and networking across an impressive client list, many are also run by ethnic entrepreneurs.

Black businesses and community leaders previously resistant to the idea “have viewed the site – and gone away impressed”. But further development into a really active online service depends on the commitment and support of such people – and the ethnic press. Kofi has also set out to challenge a preconception among some commentators that “ethnic communities are not widely using the net”: An on-line survey aims to capture research data to refute this belief.

As William Kwatia puts it, “more and more of the concerns of ethnic communities are being taken on board”. Ultimately, he sees setting up a successful business as part of a process enabling people from ethnic backgrounds to represent themselves to their own community – and to others, too.

Ultimately, however, Issa Abu Iata sees entrepreneurs as needing ‘universal’ qualities:

“You need to be on a path, and to *stay* on it you need the right vehicle. Everyone can do these things – you need faith.”

Future Business

All entrepreneurs look to the future. Some even prepare for it. Whether the arrival of the Euro, the Millennium Bug, a looming recession or dealing with success, an eye to the future is a necessary management skill. Increasingly, technological change is driving the future direction many businesses must consider. And the new ethnic entrepreneurs are astute about the role of *technology* in their future businesses.

Research indicates that more than half of ethnic minority entrepreneurs regard technology as “a key factor in helping them to succeed”.⁴ Those interviewed were well aware of how technology was helping their business. Most used mobile phones and e-mail as regular business tools. They also had websites, were setting them up – or contemplating developing them “when appropriate”. They were generally alert to e-commerce – but tending, on the whole, to wait for it to develop before making a commitment.

Kofi Kusitor, unsurprisingly, looked even further into the future. The next development in the unfolding saga of the web is, according to Kofi, likely to be web TV. “Whereas now there is a substantial number of people who can't afford it, it's going to go domestic”, he says. “Even so, it's still difficult to gauge the extent of its impact” which he believes will depend on how it's implemented – and “the kind of support services put in ‘behind’ it”.

Kofi also saw skills development as “a vital part of the approach” for any modern company. His own team spend around half their time undertaking product research and in developing their skills base. “Technology is not the be all and end all of everything – but it is important” says Kofi, arguing that education is crucial:

“It's important for black businesses to engage now – in five years time it will be too late, the game will move on. We want to help black businesses engage now.”

André Lecointe-Gayle recognises that the music business is high tech – and getting more so. They plan to use a mixture of computer production and live music. “That is where the industry is at, so that is where we're going.” Before their first year in business is over, *High Rise Productions* plan to have short computer and live music productions to promote their artists – showing on their website.

Nilesh Patel is also keenly interested in the value of websites to promote future business expansion into overseas markets – particularly the potentially vast American market. “You've got to be optimistic”, he adds.

William Kwatia is also ultimately optimistic: “I enjoy what I do”, he says, adding that “in the future ethnic entrepreneurs will excel.”

Alison Collins echoes this view. Talking about the growth of a new entrepreneurial spirit among her community she says: “At the moment we don't hear about it, but I hope this will change, so that ordinary people from ethnic minorities can say to themselves ‘*I can do that*’.”

⁴ Intuit Press Release, June 2 1997, *Technology Paves The Way For Minority Entrepreneurs*

Case history summaries

Kofi Kusitor has a substantial background in business education. In just over three years he has developed **Cursitor Consulting** from start-up to a high tech computer consultancy company on the verge of a £250,000 turnover. Kofi's approach is both intelligent and dynamic. He retains a grounded understanding of his company's position in the market, yet is clearly guided by optimism and vision of the future. His launch of a web-based news and lifestyle magazine, *Black Britain On Line*, was a bold move that raised the company's national profile. He is committed to encouraging other black entrepreneurs to engage with technology and the way it is changing how business is done in Britain.

Positive Image was born directly out of **Alison Collins'** 11 years experience as a child care professional. Established in March 1998, the company brings together a wide range of multicultural materials to sell into childcare and family centres. Alison hopes to increase her market penetration by developing a catalogue. As well as aiming for commercial success, Positive Image's work helps reinforce the message that there is a place for everyone in society. Alison is confident of the future and planning on expansion.

A graduate in mechanical engineering, **Issa Abu Iata** found himself drawn into the world of computers early on. Issa's technical skills have helped **Mushroom Technology** build a solid reputation for efficient and prompt service. As a result the company is now well placed to embark on major change by expanding from a largely local client list to a national presence. He is unequivocal on the need for entrepreneurs to not only generate good ideas – but to make them work.

High Rise Productions is a forward-looking company aiming to become a cutting edge player in the music business. **André Lecointe-Gayle** and business partner **Nicholas Beveney** between them draw on a range of experience from business studies and music through to film, video and theatre. They expect this will open up promotional opportunities in the future. Essentially a collaborative venture, a major strength of High Rise is its close connection with – and commitment to – new talents emerging in the black community.

Aftershock is a new business with an impressive track record. **William Kwatia** first started in the fast-growth world of aerobics in 1985. Among the first to close the gap between dance and simple exercise to music, and in the top 2-300 presenters in the UK, William regularly features at events with high profile celebrities. He is currently developing Aftershock's first "UK fitness holiday weekend" with a view to expanding them to overseas resorts as a major part of the company's activity.

Undoubtedly **Nilesh Patel's** early familiarity with diverse cultures in three different countries gave him a particular breadth of vision when he formed **Shakti Pappadums**. Since setting his company up in 1995, Nilesh has worked consistently at expansion. Currently negotiating deals with British multiples, he is confident of a *15-fold* increase in turnover next year, as well as a move to new purpose-designed premises. The idea is simple yet potent: by using an old family recipe and combining it with modern drying technology, Nilesh gains access to a potentially global market.

Case history 1

*It's important for black businesses to engage now –
in five years time it will be too late,
the game will move on.*

Kofi Kusitor, *Cursitor Consulting*

Summary

It doesn't take long to 'click on' to what makes the *Cursitor Consulting* Group special; all their services are clearly presented on the internet. They provide website design services for a range of groups, including charities like the African Foundation for Development (AFFORD), the Family Holidays Association and the African Caribbean Leukaemia Trust. Their acclaimed *Black Britain On Line* was described by The Guardian as "a model site" and provides news, lifestyle, business contacts – even dating services. For Kofi Kusitor, founder of the group, "it's about staying ahead of a fast-changing game". Just in order to keep up with developments in a rapidly-moving business sector, Kofi's team spends about half of their working days on skills development and research. With a predicted turnover this year of £250,000 Kofi is still wary about being overconfident about further expansion. Nevertheless, the quality of the services *Cursitor* provides suggests a positive future.

Background History

When he left school, Kofi originally did a business course. During this course, his law lecturer remarked on his ability – he'd achieved the top marks in the college that year – and suggested law as a career path. Having taken a law degree from Greenwich University, Kofi spent six months working at the Lord Chancellor's Department, the epicentre of British law. In that time he saw law graduates – and, particularly, many black people – who were unemployed and waiting to be taken on for the 'pupilage' stage of becoming a barrister: Kofi decided the law was not for him. Taking a part time job working on databases he rapidly renewed and expanded the IT skills he'd first acquired at college. Certain that he would set up his own company, he embarked on a Masters in Business Studies at the Guildhall.

By July 1995 he was ready to start, though at that stage it was by necessity still part time. Within two years *Cursitor Consulting* was a full time operation, and Kofi has now recruited a 6-strong team (plus an advisory board) for *Black Britain On Line* – which he is actively expanding.

The Vision

Compared with other businesses in the ethnic minority field, Kofi sees *Cursitor Consulting* as "way ahead of the game." Kofi points to a reluctance, even among quite substantial black businessmen, to get involved in modern electronic media. "As a community we're a bit backward at coming forward", he notes, referring to grasping new technology.

Kofi is robust when comparing his companies with the mainstream. Looking at news delivery (which *Black Britain On Line* leads with) he says "the FT and the Telegraph are way out in front – everyone else is basic. We are well placed in between". And while *Cursitor Consulting* may have only a hundredth of the financial resources that the national papers have, they have a developing base of in-house skills which mean they can produce websites of comparable quality.

A Diverse Mix

Clearly Kofi's background gives him a sensitivity to issues of particular relevance to ethnic communities – the structure and content of *Black Britain On Line* reflects this – but being an entrepreneur, he says, "goes deeper than ethnic background. It's a lot to do with my individualism – and a dogged determination to do things well." Much of this determination, Kofi says, has its roots in personal upbringing, which he summarises as: "Always do your best".

Support

Kofi received a variety of support from his family, both in terms of encouragement and in practicalities which will be familiar to most entrepreneurs – like bringing food to the office when working late (a habit he's yet to shed).

In the first three years, Kofi had no financial support or external investment – save “the occasional indulgence of a very small overdraft”.

New Ethnic Entrepreneurs

Cursitor provides a range of services which offer favourable opportunities for businesses and organisations to both grasp the advantages of getting online (e.g. training and consultancy) as well as to have an effective presence on the internet (e.g. websites and e-commerce). Unsurprisingly, with the high profile of *Black Britain On Line* and networking across an impressive client list, many are also run by ethnic entrepreneurs.

Black Britain On Line was launched in late July this year – with a good media angle focussing on black players in the World Cup. Within three days it had scored 16,000 hits. It went on to clock up 48,000 hits in August – and in the first ten days of September, 22,000. Black businesses and community leaders previously resistant to the idea “have viewed the site – and gone away impressed”. But further development into a really active online service depends on the commitment and support of such people – and the ethnic press. Kofi has also set out to challenge a preconception among some commentators that “ethnic communities are not widely using the net”: An on-line survey aims to capture research data to refute this belief.

Generally, the mainstream press has been very impressed. The Independent, The Guardian as well as a range of internet and IT magazines have all made positive comments – which are quoted on the website.

Future Business

Cursitor wholeheartedly embraces technology as part of its core business – as well engaging in a proactive advocacy of technology for others. In addition, *Cursitor* take careful note of customer feedback – and is committed to ensure staff have a breadth as well as depth of skills. In a market where products can emerge and become obsolete with months, Kofi sees this as “a vital part of the approach” for any modern company.

The next development in the unfolding saga of the web is, according to Kofi, likely to be web TV. “Whereas now there is a substantial number of people who can't afford it, it's going to go domestic”, he says. “Even so, it's still difficult to gauge the extent of its impact”. He believes its impact will depend on how it's implemented – and the kind of support services put in ‘behind’ it.

Cursitor Consulting already has a range of mainstream clients, as well as agreements to work as resource partners with IT companies like Microsoft and Compaq. Kofi lays great emphasis on building his company's resources so that *Cursitor* are well placed to go after big contracts. To Kofi, it's important to build up a *range* of such partnerships so that *Cursitor* can follow where their market is going – rather than be constrained in their main resource providers.

“Technology is not the be all and end all of everything – but it is important” says Kofi, arguing that education is crucial: “It's important for black businesses to engage now – in five years time it will be too late, the game will move on. We want to help black businesses engage now.” Nevertheless, overall, Kofi says: “the future's positive”

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Case history 2

Just being in business is a big thing in our community.

Alison Collins, *Positive Identity*

Summary

Alison Collins set up *Positive Identity* inspired by her own difficulties, as a childcare professional, in finding children's books, cards and toys aimed at ethnic minority audiences. Set up in March this year, she aims for a fourfold increase in turnover by her second year, to £48,000. She is already working on a catalogue to bring together in one place an increased range of resources suited to a multicultural society. She also hopes that by diversifying into providing materials for other ethnic minorities she can contribute to raising awareness as to just how diverse culture and ethnicity in modern Britain really is. As Alison says, "You don't have to be black to buy a black doll – or even a book whose hero is black."

Background History

Alison worked in nursery and family support centres for 11 years as a childcare professional. During that time she had to go to great lengths to obtain resources aimed at any ethnic minority. About five years ago she had the idea of setting up a service where people could come and buy a wide range of products for children. In 1997 Alison was made redundant from the family centre where she was working. Almost immediately, she thought: "it's now or never".

First she went to the Prince's Youth Business Trust (PYBT) for a three week business course and then, in January 1998, she secured a £4000 start-up loan from them. In March Alison started trading.

The Vision

Alison feels that 11 years working with children in professional settings means she has a clear idea of what will sell. She feels her business is special because *Positive Identity* provides a 'one-stop shop' supplier for books, cards and children's toys. Currently there is little in the way of competition, as those shops that do have ethnic materials tend to carry products only related to their business i.e. books or toys.

A Diverse Mix

Positive Identity's 'unique selling point' is to meet a demand Alison identified by virtue of her membership of the African Caribbean community. She saw a gap in the market – and is determined to fill it.

Alison is now putting together a catalogue which she feels will be necessary before further expansion can take place. To date, she's had "mainly very positive responses". The one place where Alison did have some resistance was a private nursery where most of the children were white. However, this experience persuaded Alison even more of the case that there is a place for her products *outside* the ethnic communities which currently constitute her main market.

Support

Alison's family – especially her husband – help getting things ready for exhibitions like the Caribbean Expo. Friends, particularly those with children, have also provided useful market testing and moral support.

While Alison enjoys the exhilaration of having her own business, she's also found the boundary between her business and the rest of her life has become blurred – for one recent stocktaking session she was up until 5 a.m. Most of the selling involves Alison visiting various groups and nurseries, which means considerable amounts of travelling – and a lot of time spent on her own. As with many small businesses, loneliness can be an issue. However, with exhibition work there is more company – as well as plenty of positive feedback about what she is doing.

Financial support, particularly for the publicity and marketing dimension necessary to growth, remains a problem. PYBT involvement has helped her with the banks, who are more than happy to advance a loan – but for the moment Alison “prefers to keep things as tight as possible” until she starts to generate a surplus.

She has also discovered a raft of difficulties and drawbacks that she didn't know about before she went into business – and for which there seems to be little resource to provide adequate support. These include reliable suppliers and the “difficult, long and complicated” processes involved in trade-marking designs.

New Ethnic Entrepreneurs

As Alison notes, “Just being in business is a big thing in our community”. She sees a value in “showing people you can be black *and* successful”. Alison sees a cultural value in her work, regarding the main point of *Positive Identity* as “helping young black and white children to see that black people really do exist”.

Alison also notes that African Caribbean business people look with some admiration to the coherence of Asian and Chinese – and the consequent willingness to spend within their communities. In Britain this approach has been poorly replicated among the black community. Alison thinks that the first stage might be “a wider consolidation within the community” – before getting into the position to make an impact on the mainstream. Nevertheless, she adds, “like many entrepreneurs, most of us aspire to be household names”.

Future Business

Alison envisages using electronic media to help promote her products to a wider geographical market, and is currently researching Internet Service Providers for her planned website. She also hopes to produce much of her advertising material in-house using Adobe graphic software.

Alison also sees a future expansion of the range of products carried to include items relevant to children of other ethnic communities.

Of the future, Alison is realistic, and says “I hope we'll be in business”, but acknowledges that if it doesn't work out, “it won't be a be a big deal”. She thinks “it will be good to see that black people can own companies” and for this to elicit little comment – that is, to become accepted as a natural part of the business landscape.

“At the moment, we don't hear about ethnic entrepreneurs but I hope this will change, so that ordinary people from ethnic minorities can say to themselves ‘*I can do that*’.

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Case history 3

Whatever it takes. I plan and then – I do.

Issa Abu Iata, *Mushroom Technology*

Summary

Issa Abu Iata's company *Mushroom Technology* supplies and maintains computers. He puts a lot of their success down to being a small company which can offer a higher quality service than larger outfits. Founded in 1989, today *Mushroom Technology* has four employees, and a current turnover of around £150k. So far *Mushroom Technology* has acted as a broker for computer manufacturers, but by moving into a freelance role as suppliers, he envisages an expansion over the next two years to an annual turnover of £1 million.

Background History

A Palestinian by birth, Issa originally came to Britain to do a mechanical engineering degree. He developed an increasing interest in the working of computers, and was soon doing jobs for friends. In due course, he had built up his volume of work into a viable business. Although living some distance from home, he had some support in the form of encouragement by his parents and family. His father, who himself has his own business, was particularly helpful when it came to studying the market – and evaluating competitors.

The Vision

“Due to the fact we're a small business we provide a service that larger companies cannot compete with – their markets being so vast. *Mushroom* can guarantee prompt service contracts – within twelve hours of break-down.” Issa also identifies a further virtue to *Mushroom Technology*'s small size; “less overheads resulting in smaller prices”.

A Diverse Mix

Issa cites a Palestinian quality, famously shown in the *Intifada* (or as he puts it: “throwing stones!”), which is to do with showing “indomitable spirit” – seeing this as part of what has made his business a success. “It's a refusal to accept you're beaten, no matter how tough it gets.” Issa adds: “Whatever it takes. I plan and then – *I do.*” However, Issa is also at pains to point to the fact that his business partner is English – and shares many of the same qualities which help make a successful business.

Support

Aside from his family's backing, there is little by way of immediate support from any ethnic grouping for Issa because there is no settled Palestinian community in Nottingham – though many Palestinians come to Britain as students. Consequently, if Issa does join with another ethnic group for social activities, it tends to be the local Egyptian community.

New Ethnic Entrepreneurs

Although acknowledging that part of his success can be put down to an “indomitable spirit” commonly found in Palestinians, Issa is adamant that his ethnic background is fundamentally irrelevant to his success: “I don't look at it that way. Anyone can do it. There are two kinds of people, those who plan and dream, and those who actually do it.”

Future Business

As you'd expect from a mechanical engineer running a computer company, Issa is comfortable with the full panoply of modern technology at the disposal of modern businesses. As well as mobile phones and laptops, *Mushroom Technology* also make extensive use of telesales. As to e-commerce, Issa is slightly more wary,

saying that they will “move on the web when it's appropriate”. Issa notes that though the web has achieved significant e-commerce use in the US, it has not yet caught on the UK – and estimates it may take “anything between five and ten years to get become that significant”.

Technology aside, ultimately Issa sees the entrepreneur as needing universal qualities. “You need to be on a path, and to *stay* on it you need the right vehicle. Everyone can do these things – you need faith.”

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Case history 4

It's an idea I've had for a long time. It's great to put it into practice.

André Lecointe-Gayle, *High Rise Productions*

Summary

Although André Lecointe-Gayle did a lot of preliminary work on *High Rise Productions*, it's early days yet to see whether it pays off – the company only officially started in June. That said, there are already six people working together on *High Rise Productions*, and even though they are not yet taking out wages, their ambitions more than make up for this. *High Rise* sees itself becoming a substantial and cutting edge music and film production company, engaged in a much closer relationship with both its artists and target audience than is usual. And before the year is out, they plan to have short computer and live music productions showing on their website to promote their artists.

Background History

André and one other partner Nicholas Beveney are the core of the business. Both have had independent careers in the arts and music business. André had accumulated his first full sound system by the age of 18, when he was still at school. On leaving school André did a business studies course at college to prepare for setting up in business himself. Meanwhile, his partner Nicholas brings experience of theatre and films to the company. Though *High Rise* is currently concentrating on music management and production, they have plans to diversify into film.

The Vision

The different backgrounds of those in *High Rise Productions* are seen as an asset, giving “a wider perspective” on what they're doing and where they're going. André also see this broad perspective as giving them “greater flexibility in the market place”.

Their plans are far-reaching. They want to develop collaborative relationships with the artists they sign. In this way, they hope to avoid the generally perceived trend of independent producers as “letting artists go when a big enough offer comes in from one of the big companies”. The intention instead is to work with their artists to develop their music “in a way more compatible with the nature of the individual artist”.

The company will start with production, but intends to move incrementally through setting up a label of their own; management; and then some strategic control over distribution.

According to André, in Britain at the moment “black people are just faces on the cover” – unlike America, where “more of the real power-brokers are black”. Envisioning a breakthrough, André expects the effects to be as explosive as it was in the sixties, when black-controlled production companies and labels like Motown had such an impact.

A Diverse Mix

High Rise is a very young company, and hope this will be an inspiration to other young people to “get out there and do it themselves”. Another important role, says André, is to act “as a dynamic and visible symbol for other black people – to show them that it *is* possible to actually get to where the power is”. Setting up in business on your own or with a friend is seen as a particularly effective way of side-stepping the racism that has been a small but significant part of the experience of young blacks in this country.

Though racism may be experienced (or represented in extreme news stories of racially-inspired violence) on a daily basis by many young blacks, André sees entrepreneurship as a way to move beyond the negative of victimhood. “Though there may be racist forces out there, I try not to let anything set limits on my ambition, even if that's the way society is.”

André also recognises that his own cultural background as an African Caribbean informs his work for *High Rise*. He feels there is a lot of black talent that is simply not being picked up on, and that even when they are

noticed, they are not handled in the best way because “white producers often push an artist in a way that doesn't suit them”.

Support

Support from friends, particularly those already in the business, has been vital in helping *High Rise* market test their ideas. They have also had expert help in putting together a business plan.

As yet *High Rise* have no premises, though they are actively seeking suitable space in which to begin production. Although they planned to use a proportion of turnover to fund setting up a music studio rather than seeking a bank loan, the initial cost in setting up a studio is high, so they will be seeking some form of low interest loan. André's experience of banks as a student has made him particularly wary of taking out a standard loan.

New Ethnic Entrepreneurs

André thinks ethnic entrepreneurs can make a difference by “bringing positive messages” into the arts work they do. By “getting on and making things happen”, *High Rise* also expect to face down the negative image that particularly attaches itself to “the typical black man” in the wider imagination. By moving into the mainstream, André hopes to help the population as a whole get used to “the idea of black people having ordinary human characteristics.”

André believes the industrious and successful images of Chinese and Asian business people have helped blaze a trail – and that “now is the time for African-Caribbeans to follow, and to open up new avenues for themselves”. Eventually, André would like to set up a parent company to help give others them a chance “to work things through for themselves”. He wants to “buck the trend of every man for himself”, and sees his work in terms of cultural advocacy, initially for black people in the music business and then extending to those beyond the music sector.

His bottom line is that “we're here to do more than get the message across in music”. “This ethos”, he believes, “should come across both in our business practice – and even in the way we interact with people.”

Future Business

Music production is a high tech business and *High Rise* want to be at the cutting edge of developments. They plan to use a mixture of computer production and live music. “That is where the industry is at, so that is where we're going.”

As well as using email, they have spent some time looking at the marketing possibilities of the net. André also notes how technological change has been accompanied by a more informal style in business. “Already business has changed a lot. What high profile, youthful entrepreneurs like Roddick and Branson have done is to take the edge off the formal way in which business has been done in the past.”

As André sees it, “The opportunity is there, and there's little doubt that the talent is there – all it needs is the drive.”

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Case history 5

Once you open that door, you have a lot of opportunities.

William Kwatia, *Aftershock*

Summary

Aftershock is the company through which William Kwatia offers aerobics instruction and personal fitness training while using his dance background – and the very latest music – to add a contemporary quality. He sees his growing profile on the aerobics scene, as well as membership of official bodies, as having a subtle but positive impact. He also encourages people to bring their children to his events and workshops to encourage them into physical fitness. *Aftershock's* current turnover is around £18,000, but William sees enormous possibilities in developing a market for personal fitness holidays. He is planning to arrange a short weekend fitness break in this country soon, and if that is successful, branch into longer overseas holidays.

Background History

William has a background in theatre and dance. His girlfriend at the time took him to his first aerobics class in 1985. He immediately saw the potential of developing a deeper dance element from its simpler origins as “movement to music”. After investigating available possibilities, William soon passed the RSA ‘Exercise to Music’ exam and began freelance work with a variety of groups near where he lived. Initially, this was very much a supplement to his theatre work.

By the summer of 1997 William was working for a publishing company and ready for a move. Having carefully considered his options he decided it was time to make a break for it and try to make it alone.

In the next six months he made preparations to go out on his own. The Prince's Youth Business Trust provided him with a low interest loan of £2500 in January this year to buy the sound system he needed to work on his own. He also began to diversify into working as a personal fitness trainer.

The Vision

Aftershock is a flexible and mobile operation. William's catchment area now stretches from Peckham to Kingston in London and beyond, to the outer reaches of the commuter belt. William is also regularly invited to make presentations at ‘aerobathons’ throughout the UK – and even as far afield as Trinidad and Tobago.

William sees tremendous growth potential for the future, particularly through developing ‘fitness’ holidays.

A Diverse Mix

William sees his Ghanaian background as a ‘moderately important’ factor in his success. He reckons that he is often tapping into the widely held perception that “if he's black – he's got rhythm”, suggesting that “perhaps unconsciously they are looking for a loud, brightly coloured, black person to get them to lose their inhibitions!”.

More directly, his West African heritage is a positive factor in areas like Peckham where most of those attending his classes are from African or African Caribbean backgrounds.

William has also obtained good publicity by working at events alongside leading black sports personalities like Ian Wright and Fatima Whitbread.

Support

William receives support in a direct sense – from the classes he teaches. A strong self-starter, William also recognises that in his sector he is at the forefront of building wider support for ethnic entrepreneurs. William belongs to several professional associations. He hopes through these to keep up “gentle pressure” to help increase the numbers of people from ethnic minorities involved in this work. “There is a long way to go...at a recent event, out of fifty presenters, only two were black.”

Though he has only recently had access to the net and email facilities, these have been useful in maintaining commercial contacts with people he met in Trinidad and Tobago. William anticipates this is likely to increase in importance as he develops his plans for fitness holidays. He's also found the net very useful for research purposes, even though it is not yet a primary commercial resource in his business.

New Ethnic Entrepreneurs

Within the black community itself, William particularly encourages women to bring along their children to their classes – to see that “someone from their own community can be motivated to get out and make things happen”. He sees *Aftershock* as a way of saying, in effect, “once you open that door, you have a lot of opportunities”. William is also concerned that there are “a lot of kids who just aren't getting into sports in the same way as they used to”, and sees *Aftershock* having a role, in part, to encourage kids into fitness-related activities.

William says that despite “this perception that black people have a greater sense of rhythm than whites, blacks are vastly under-represented in the national ranks of aerobic presenters. Out of something like three or four hundred people who regularly feature as top flight in the press, only around five are black.” William feels that this is something that has to change – and that by retaining his position amongst them he is “encouraging others to come in”.

“TV is helping. Ten years ago there was no such thing as ethnic television. More and more the concerns of ethnic communities are being taken on board.” This helps the process of people with ethnic backgrounds both in being represented to themselves – and to others.

Future Business

William anticipates a growing use of the net, both for his business and in a wider sense: “Kids who are now fifteen or sixteen, when they get into their twenties will immediately see it a normal part of business.” However, William thinks that for the moment, with the possibilities of digital television still being discussed and developed, as well as the nature of what can be done through the net changing almost month by month, “there is still a sense that things are changing too quickly” to be useful to business on his scale. He contrasts larger companies, with greater resources devoted to exploring the net's usefulness, to SMEs who are “wary” of getting “too involved” at this stage. William thinks that though things are moving on, most people are effectively treading water waiting for developments to settle down.

His own future ambitions for *Aftershock* are clear: he wants to develop the fitness holidays idea as far as possible and “I would like to open my own gym with a night club attached”.

“I enjoy what I do”, says an ultimately very confident William: “In the future,” he adds, “ethnic entrepreneurs will excel.”

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Case history 6

If you have an ambition to succeed – you will do it.

Nilesh Patel, *Shakti Pappadums*

Summary

An old family recipe inspired Nilesh Patel's new business. *Shakti Pappadums* is currently Britain's only pappadum producer – and in less than four years Nilesh has built the company from scratch into a thriving concern with a £100k turnover. *Shakti Pappadums* is now poised for very rapid expansion indeed. Currently negotiating deals with British multiples, Nilesh is planning on a *15-fold* growth – expecting a turnover next year of £1.5m. With the third move in the company's career imminent – to a 4000 square foot factory – Nilesh is already seriously considering the massive potential of the American market as a route to even greater expansion.

Background History

Although born in India, Nilesh Patel spent much of his early life in Africa – although most of his education, to degree level, was carried out in England.

With a family background in business (running a sugar cane farm in Africa), Nilesh always planned to go into business. However, when he left university in 1995 he had “no idea” what he was going to do. The economy was still in recession – and there was no ready employment. The idea of making pappadums came to him “at a time of sheer desperation”.

The Vision

The British market until now has been totally dominated by pappadums imported from India. Most pappadums manufactured in India are sun-dried. This process inevitably means they will contain “an element of foreign bodies”. In contrast, *Shakti Pappadums* are air-dried, and Nilesh is thus able to exert a greater degree of control on their production – and to provide quality and content guarantees. This is particularly important to wholesalers dealing with multiples, and to the lucrative American market – where Indian-made pappadums are currently banned, as they are considered to be unsafe for public consumption.

A Diverse Mix

Nilesh sees his background in three very different cultures (as well as speaking four languages), as an asset. In combining his family's cultural background with the up-to-date production techniques used in West, he believes he has created “a product with a huge market potential”.

Nilesh also feels his cultural background enables him to take “a different perspective” on business matters. With three major cultural influences on his life he feels able to look at things from a wider perspective. He thinks people sharing his ethnic background are more highly motivated to succeed in education than many of their counterparts – and that this motivation translates itself into business.

Support

To begin with, most of the help Nilesh received came from his family and friends. He was able to use them as market testers for the product itself. A friend who was also an accountant gave him advice early on about how to approach the various financial problems associated with setting up a business. The family has continued to provide support both physically (helping out when Nilesh was in business meetings etc.) and, crucially, with moral support.

Though now Nilesh enjoys the support of the banks in securing new premises, it was different when he started. He thinks this was less to do with his ethnicity and more to do with being a start-up, with no track record and few financial resources. The Prince's Youth Business Trust (PYBT) made an initial loan of £2000 in May 1995 – now paid off – and recently a further ‘expansion loan’ of £2500.

Nilesh has been particularly impressed with the support he received from the volunteers at PYBT. He felt they were committed to his personal success as a business. He contrasts this support with the “too professionalised” approach of the various official business support bodies.

Ethnic Entrepreneurs

Although Nilesh has encountered one or two incidents of racism, he prefers to forget about it. In fact, he argues, people in business are less motivated by race than by viable business opportunity. Put simply, “if there's a margin, most people will go for it.” Nilesh also notes how ethnic entrepreneurs are creating jobs and making a significant contribution to the UK economy. With curry “already one of the country's national dishes”, Nilesh sees setting up the first centre of production for pappadums in the UK as an approach where “everybody wins”.

Future Business

Even when was studying for his degree, says Nilesh, “I knew I would succeed in business – once I'd found the right idea”. From the start he has been working towards sales to the British multiples, while simultaneously keeping an eye on America as a future market. This far-sighted outlook is coupled with a modern approach to technology, from production techniques and a mobile phone to planning a website. “You’ve got to be optimistic,” he says, pointing out how a website could play a role in helping develop overseas markets.

Nilesh is quite clear: “If you have an ambition to succeed you will do it”.

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