

Episode 5: Black + Blum – Dan Black

Hunter Ruthven, senior content manager, Be the Business

Dan, welcome to It's The Small Things podcast. Fantastic to have you on and talk about the evolution of your business as product makers and some really interesting stuff about your evolution as a business owner and leader. So thank you for coming on.

Dan Black, co-founder and lead designer, Black+Blum

Great to be here.

HR

Tell us about what Black+Blum does today. And then explain why that's quite different to what it's done over the evolution of its lifetime, because it's quite an old company in the grand scheme of things.

DB

Yeah, we're 21 years-old. But today we are a food and drink on-the-go business. We specialise in creating unique products ourselves, so we design it, we source it, we make our own lunch boxes, water bottles, food furnaces and accessories. And that's a departure from what we were previously known for.

We made the decision to only focus on that category two years ago. But prior to that, we were doing candelabras, barbecues and fans. If we thought we had an idea, we would do it. And the business started with no real game plan. We were two product designers straight out of university with very little experience. We did a bit of consultancy at the start. And the company just developed organically into any product we could get our hands on where we thought we could add something different to the market.

HR

Okay, so it's become a bit more pointed. Was there a moment of enlightenment where you just sat back and went, 'We can't continue like this. This is silly'?

DB

Five years ago, it was an amicable arrangement, but I bought my business partner out. He wanted to always develop unique products, which is fantastic as a designer: starting every brief and every project with a blank piece of paper and just seeing what comes. It was good fun.

But it's very hard to scale a business when you do that because if you're dealing with a large retailer, there'll be a buyer who you might get a product into one season and then the next

season, they say, 'Well, what's next for me?' And you're like, 'No, we don't work like that. Here's a completely different product'.

You'd go into a John Lewis and find one of our products sitting in one place and then you'd find a completely different product from us sitting somewhere else. So there was no brand awareness. People would know our products, but they wouldn't actually know our brand, which was a bit frustrating. So I wanted to always focus.

When I took the business over wholly from him, we had three to four main distinct categories. And I thought, 'Well, that's brilliant, I can have four brands and it would be easy'. But the truth is, managing one brand is very hard.

Two years ago, I brought in a fantastic managing director, Nick Cornwell, who's from a much larger business and so he had fantastic experience. The first thing he said to us was, 'Right, let's be known for one particular thing, let's be good at that. The world is actually quite a small place'. Even back then, when he came in two years ago, 70 per cent of our turnover was outside the UK.

So we were a small, complicated business, selling a lot of different products to a lot of different people. Making the transition to saying, 'Right, we're going to phase out all the non food and drink on-the-go products' was a challenge, because at the time it was probably representing about 50 per cent of our turnover. But it's been the best decision we've ever made.

We rebranded in terms of changing our company logo – we put everything under Black+Blum. And we made a feature of Black+Blum London, highlighting and celebrating the fact that we come from London. But we focused purely on food and drink on-the-go.

HR

So when you brought Nick in, that was a big decision to make because you were essentially demoting yourself. You felt that was the right thing to do, bringing in that external person to serve as MD – it freed you up to get back to what you enjoy doing, which was coming up with new products. But it meant you could come up with new products with a little bit of structure above saying what that should feed into. So tell us about that process of bringing someone in.

DB

It was a massive thing to bring someone in at a senior level. But the truth is, you don't know what you don't know. We were a young team: a lot of people had come up within the business, and there was no external experience. It was fantastic for someone to come into the company and say, 'There's some obvious easy low hanging fruit here'. Because of his experience, it meant that if I tried to implement some of these changes, I'd have had less confidence and maybe the team would have had less confidence in me doing it.

So for him to come in and go, 'Look, this is what we're going to do'. I think people need a leader. As I get older, I think you've got to work out what you are good at and what you're not good at and put yourself in a position where you're adding value to a business, not actually thinking, 'Well, I could do it and I could save some money here'. It's been a fantastic thing bringing him in.

The first thing he did was basically make us analyse our brand guidelines and vision. That has been just such a crucial document. So we did that at the very start: 'This is who we are, this is our...'

There's a famous TED talk by Simon Sinek that says, 'What is your why?'. We created a brand guidelines and vision that set out everything that we were going to do from there on. And it means that everyone in the company, and it doesn't matter what task you're doing, can almost refer to that brand guidelines going, 'This is how we should do it'. Whether it's product development, or sales or marketing, this is who we are.

HR

And that idea of needing to follow this thought process, that needed to come from someone outside who'd seen that done in other businesses and seen the value that it could bring.

DB

Absolutely. It's a discipline more than anything else. Once someone introduces it, you become a little bit addicted to it. And we're constantly referencing it. So one of the hardest things was coming up with actual vision. Our vision is: 'People who own Black+Blum products feel great about using them every day'. And trying to keep that short, but encompass everything that we wanted to get into it was very difficult.

Primarily, we're a design company. We're different from other companies on the market. So we do start with a blank piece of paper at the moment and come up with unique products. Whereas a lot of companies in our sector, whether it's a large company doing an open label product or even a distributor, will find a product that already exists possibly in China, do it in a unique colour and put their logo on it. But that's the level of product development they do. Whereas we start from absolute beginning and develop unique products.

HR

Bringing someone in and having them essentially be your boss or now an authority figure, were there any moments, in those early days, when you were thought, 'I don't like this bit' or 'This is something a bit new to get used to'?

DB

There are some things that I feel very strongly about and some things where I don't actually want to be involved. I'm not good at the details, I have a messy desk. But, my mind is thinking about hundreds of different product ideas all the time. That's my skill. My skill is not in doing company appraisals, balance sheets, cash flow forecasts. So he was brilliant about it.

When he came in, aside from the brand guidelines and vision, he set out four main pillars: products, branding, customers and people.

What he was great at was analysing the people we had. And we really did have a good bunch of people who are passionate about our company and committed to it. It was about putting those people in the right place. So that he could go, 'This is what I want you to do and that's how I'm going to judge you against these benchmarks'. And just making sure that everyone was aligned and going in the same direction.

It becomes so much better when you've got someone who is disciplined and doing that side of a business, because then it allows me to focus on hopefully what I'm better at, which is the ideas.

HR

Do you think in general, people like you in businesses which they've set up, do you think they persevere for too long in this CEO/MD role that they just might not be best suited to do? They might be someone like you who wants to be in the creative side of it a bit more. Or they might want to be in the social impact side of it a bit more. Do you think they stay in that very top-level position because they just think it's the job they should be doing?

DB

Yes. The short answer is yes. Often when you see entrepreneurs who've started companies, they're often of similar character. To start a company and to take a product from concept through to the market, it takes a certain personality, a certain type of energy. That is a shared trait.

But often when you look at a company which is successful, there are two parties, two people in the marriage. There's one person who's that person at the start with the ideas and the drive, then there's got to be someone who's backing them up. Apple is a classic example. There's always the partnership. If you can get that yin and yang right then that's great.

HR

And getting your yin and yang right has worked? If we look at it as before buyout and after buyout, before Nick after Nick, whatever you want to call it, you guys have unlocked some hidden untapped growth. You've gone from £2 million revenue, which was where you got to

from year one to 15, you've pretty much doubled that in the space thereafter. Not an easy thing to do. That's quite an uplift in such a short space of time.

DB

Considering that when Nick came in, we were doing £2.2 million and 50 per cent of it was coming from non food and drink on-the-go products. And this year, we're going to do over £4 million, so healthy growth and good profit.

By focusing purely on one category, it makes it much easier for our international distributors and even our homegrown retailers to get what we do. If you walk past our trade fair stand, go on our website, or look at our brochure, you see what the business does.

There's been luck. We did our first lunchbox and water bottle ten years ago. We were ahead of the market. We helped start a lunchbox revolution. We did the first natural filter water bottle. It's taken 10 years for the market to catch up with us, but it's a good category to be in at the moment. It plays into so many strengths in relation to health, food and certainly sustainability is one of the biggest things in terms of saving on food waste and food packaging waste.

But having that focus of wanting to be known as the premium food and drink on-the-go business in the world. It's a simple aim.

HR

It's hard to generalise. But is it the same amount of people buying more from you? Is it more people coming in going, 'I get you, I want the products'? What's the balance between who was buying from you before as to who is buying from you now?

DB

It's a mixture. A lot of the time, it's the same customer. But the difference is now our products get displayed together on the same shelf. So there's better brand awareness. Our distributors have changed, which allows us to pinpoint which is the best distributor for food and drink on-the-go. Whereas before, if we had candelabras, we needed to do housewares as well. So it just makes everything easier in terms of product development.

So bizarrely, this growth has come in the last two years but not from a new product, because it generally takes two years to develop a new product. So we had three new ranges that have just launched because they take two years to develop. So we've seen this growth purely from focusing our brand, sorting out our packaging, sorting out our brochure, making our offering much cleaner. So it's been low hanging fruit with actually no new product really.

The market itself is also changing. We're all aware of the trials and tribulations of the high street. I think people are fed up with gadgets and gifts where you are given it, you laugh, but then you put it in a drawer and you forget about it.

So we've always wanted to do non-fad products, non fashion-led products. We want products to last and we want people to use our products every day. That's starting to resonate with the high street and the consumer. We're actually seeing the biggest growth from people like Whole Foods or Planet Organics and organic supermarkets, which are thriving on the high street.

HR

And they have customers who are going to want your products?

DB

Exactly, yeah. Also, even just the whole aspect of social media. If you go on something like Instagram, some of the three biggest things that people share are food, sustainability and health. And we play into all three of those.

HR

Fantastic. Coming back to this branding guidelines document, what went into producing that? And I'd like to find out about what it looks like. How does it factor into the day to day? Is that something which people have printed out? Is it plastered across the walls? How does it not get forgotten? How does it keep being that guiding light?

DB

Everyone has access to it on their computers. We're in a new office, we've only been here a few months, so the vision should be blasted everywhere. But it's not just graphic. It's not just the phrase of words, it's the aesthetic details. It's our colour palette, it's our materials of choice.

It hopefully has a reference for everything that we do, so if we're giving a presentation of new products to a store, we know what it should look like. If our digital marketing agency is talking about our product, they know words to use and words not to use. If we're designing a product, we have a material reference guide to go to. We have a certain aesthetic. So every time we design a new product, it actually becomes easier. It makes the whole process easy. You're not having to reinvent the wheel every time you do something new whether it's an Instagram post or a brochure or a new product.

HR

So it should, in theory, speed up decisions and actions. There's no excuse for going off course because it's all there. If you're going off course, you almost make your life harder because you're having to make decisions that you shouldn't actually have to make.

DB

Absolutely. So as an example, when we first started the company, there were two brothers who have a kitchenware business called Joseph Joseph, they're friends of ours. They basically set out very early on, 'This is what we're going to do'. And we were like, 'Well, don't worry about them, we're going to do lots of unique products and we're going to find the hot cookie'. And it doesn't work like that if you're building lots of different molehills.

I think if you're building one big molehill, every time you do something, it just adds to your value, your brand, your brand awareness in the marketplace. Whereas if you're dotting around and adding a different detail here, or a different category here, or a different product here, it's just diluting everything.

HR

And that Joseph Joseph molehill's pretty big these days.

DB

They've done brilliantly, yeah. It's fantastic to see.

HR

So what other structure has Nick helped to bring to the business? I know there's a little bit around what he's done at the boardroom table. How you guys use that time. Because I know a lot of business leaders out there will either dread the boardroom situation or sit there feeling like, 'Are we really using this time very well?'.

DB

We've always had structured board meetings. And we're also very lucky that we've got a fantastic finance director. She's been with us for a very long time and came up through business. So when Nick came in, he was actually pleasantly surprised about the level of detail we went to. It's more about framing that board meeting in terms of having a discipline about what you tick off in what order. So that it becomes almost like a rhythm, you get to know what you're going to be talking about next, what you have to prepare for. And obviously with growth, it's hugely important in terms of cash flow and stock projections and sales targets. And it just brings everything together.

It's bizarre, isn't it? We're a small company with 16 people, but even with 16 people, you'd be amazed about the level of communication. People are busy, they're busy at their desk and they're not aware of what's going on. So it's about having the discipline of weekly meetings, which are minuted and shared about, so if they're not there, they still find out what happens at the meeting.

Everyone has an opportunity to say what they've done that week. The sales guys who run their own territories will say what figures they've achieved, what their target is. The design guys will say what they're working on and what they're trying to achieve. Everyone has a very good picture. Also Nick has introduced targets. So this year, we're on track to smash the target he set us. So we're going to take the whole team to Bruges if we do that. We've got another month and a half to go. So hopefully, we're all going to Bruges.

HR

So, take us into the boardroom, just hypothetically. How much of the time spent is looking back on what's happened, the numbers that have already come in versus what you're going to be doing in the future. I imagine lots of people get to the end of board meetings and think, 'All we did was look at things which have already happened before and we can't change that. It might be interesting to look at, or painful or whatever. But it hasn't actually helped us in terms of anything that's going to come in the future'.

DB

It's definitely a bit of both, isn't it? You can only learn from your own mistakes and we're always continually learning. So it's trying to reflect on what good or bad happened and learn from that and use that to make decisions in the future.

It is the challenge with growth, isn't it? When we're busy, you go into the office and can see everyone's got a lot of stuff to do. But it's exciting as well – when the company's growing, there is a real buzz to what you do. So the board meetings are a discipline for opportunities to... whether it's HR or people.... to discuss it amongst senior board directors. We're only running a company of 16, but you need to think then how to communicate things discussed at the board meeting back to the different areas in the business.

HR

You mentioned this year being a big one for product launches, having had a few years of consolidation and repositioning bits. A big part of that was you learning how to say no to stuff, wasn't it? Which is as a very small word, doesn't take a long to say, but your thoughts are that it's actually quite hard to say sometimes and you've had to become a lot better at it.

DB

It's a lot harder saying no to a product, especially when I'm the guy who came up with the idea and I lie awake at night and not even sleeping. At night, I'll dream about this product which could be fantastic. In the morning, it's probably not so good. Then I present it at a board meeting and it's definitely not good.

One of the biggest things that Nick has introduced is NPD, New Product Development. The lovely thing about having these brand guidelines and this path of where we want to go is that it makes product development so much easier. You're in a category, you look at the category and you can see very clearly, 'This is what we're missing from our range'.

Now we've got a product pipeline for the next three years. And it means that we spend longer on the products, we get to focus more time on them. Because we're in a category, we get to know more about the types of product we're going to be making. The products get better. It's a win-win situation.

HR

Explain this product development, pipeline document process? How does it work? And what do you think about other businesses who aren't necessarily in the product development space? What do you think they can learn from the rigour that you're applying to these kinds of things?

DB

It's an Excel document. But it's a very big Excel document that basically sets out the journey from start to finish of a product. We've got a fantastic design manager, Adam, who is, unlike most designers, actually organised as well.

Every step in the process is done so that we've got this much time to develop the idea. So the first step is we basically set down 100 different ideas. Then we interview all the sales team and everyone in the company in relation to these ideas. We then whittle it down to say, maybe ten ideas or 20 ideas from that initial 100.

That all feeds into, what does our company look like in two years time? What will the company look like in three, four, five years? You can see what your product offering to retail is going to look like. Or are we going horizontal in terms of coming up with lots of different concepts in the same category? Are we going vertical doing high value, but also low value? It gives you a much better framework.

This document is just a benchmark for going, 'Have we hit that target by this date? Have we done our marketing images? Have we done our instructions for that product? Have we done the packaging? Have we done the drop safe test? Have we done trial tooling?'

One of the biggest things is it allows us to introduce a test production run, where we produce 300 items. Then we'll use those for two to three months. And it's amazing how you think you've

got a product finished because you've got a few samples and they work perfectly. When you put it into production, you've got 10,000 on your hands and there's just one thing that's not quite as good as it could be.

So bringing in this element of a trial production run, it probably adds four months to the whole development process. But it's worth its weight in gold, because the end product that reaches the market is what it should be.

HR

And that's not something you were doing a few years ago? You were going straight from prototype to thousands in production?

DB

Yes. And most of the time it worked. But sometimes it didn't. And when you're wanting to improve it afterwards, or retake photography or redo packaging, it's just painful, it's wasted energy. So it just makes you more efficient. The process takes longer but the end result is more efficient.

HR

Who owns that document? Who's making sure that everything is going the route it should do? Is that Nick's job?

DB

It's the design manager's job. Nick sits down with the design team every two weeks and we get an update. So we can update him as to the recent phone call we've had with the factory, where things are with progress and when products are coming. That's fed back to the sales team. So again, it's just better preparation. The sales team can communicate to their long leads, going, 'Here's a fantastic rendering of the product that's coming' or 'Let me visit you and show you the new products which are coming'.

It's also everything in relation to our distributors. So we've now got a fantastic bunch of distributors. We had our first distributed conference where we invited them to our office and we gave them a sneak preview of new products which are coming. We can share success stories and show them examples of distributors or retailers that are doing very well. It becomes almost like they're all the same... they're not part of our company, but they're part of our family and they can all learn from each other.

HR

You mentioned a lot about getting the feedback of staff internally from retailers. Do you do anything with getting existing customers or people who have no idea who your brand is in to hold field testings?

DB

Yes. So we do market research when we get a trial production run or product which we can actually use. In the building where we're situated, there's another company and we give the products out to them and just get feedback. We don't tell them anything about a product.

Then we obviously all use the products ourselves. Different people have different needs, different size hands, different foods that they take. There isn't a lunch box or a water bottle that suits everyone. So you're trying to move an egg. My job is basically going, 'It's not always the person who shouts loudest'.

So when someone goes, 'I just don't like that or I'd never buy that', I'm the one who has to go, 'Well, that's fine, but actually, we're still going to do it'. Or not. It's about when to listen.

HR

And that prototyping is important, because you guys have physical products which might sound good in your heads, but you have to get to a point where you're able to hold it in front of people. And I think it even explains the temptations to go from idea to design to making loads of them.

Tell us about some of the bits you put in between. You mentioned the smaller manufacturing runs. But before that, what are you doing to get close to that point where you're going, 'This is a good investment, I'm confident in this, we're doing this the right way'?

DB

When I was a student, I used CAD which was two dimensional. You do something two dimensional and then spend a long time making lots of cardboard models and foam models and car body filler and all that kind of thing. Then CAD suddenly became very good and suddenly you're getting this 3D visualisation where you can create a product in 3D on the computer, you can spin it and that's fantastic. That's great. But modelmaking was still quite expensive.

Suddenly, 3D printing has come along. It's almost going back to the beginning where you're making your model, but it's just quicker and better. Now the processes where we come up with concepts, you make hand drawn sketches very quickly, put it into the computer and spin it. The next morning, if we fed it into a printer overnight, we can actually have a physical product. And that's just fantastic.

It's a big investment, but it's just brilliant. Because you can actually physically pick up a product and you can spray paint it to visually make it look real. People can hold it, they can try it out.

You get instantaneous feedback, which you can then feed in. It makes the whole product development process so much quicker and better.

HR

That sounds very cool. Should we go have a closer look at that?

It was really cool to see how you guys are getting that much closer to your products that much earlier. A 3D printer is something that most people will know about, but not that many people have a direct need for. It's for a product based business. It's for design, that kind of thing. But it is something that gives you greater confidence that the investment is worth it. And I think that's something which all businesses or business leaders can feel – people want to do something different.

DB

It's a classic example. Nick comes in and goes, 'Look, we can afford this'. Whereas as a business owner, you're going, 'I'm going to reuse my teabag' – obviously not to that extent. But you see where every bit of money is spent. He's going, 'Actually we can't afford this, but it's going to make the right difference. And it's a big decision, but let's get it'.

I think that's the same in every business where it's almost easier for someone who's not counting the pennies to make that bigger decision, whether it's a 3D printer or something else. You can go, 'This is worth the investment'.

HR

And it makes you think about the nice-to-have versus needs-to-have. But in this case, you might have thought before that it would be a nice-to-have thing and Nick's come in and gone, 'No, no, we need that. And I've looked at this close enough. And after a year down the road, it's going to pay off its investment'.

DB

Bizarrely, it's almost similar to our own company. It's a nice saying, 'I'm not rich enough to buy cheap products'. Buy once, buy well. It's making that big decision and not saving money where you shouldn't be saving money.

We've only just moved to this new office. It's a lovely space and people have nice big desks, so it's a good place to come to work. Previously, we were in a nice location next to the River Thames, but it was very small. We probably didn't actually have room for a 3D printer.

So you're saving money in terms of your rent, but it's also going, 'That's holding you back, you're not going to grow'. You can't take on more people and you can't have that 3D printer

because you haven't got that space. It's probably because we've been going for so long, we were in that place for so long, that you get in a mindset where you're going, 'This is the way we do it'. That's a nice thing about bringing in someone new who can see this with fresh eyes and go, 'Now's the time to move. We're not going to grow if we don't move and I will make that investment'.

HR

And they're a little less emotionally attached to stuff and can be more decisive on those big decisions.

We've talked a lot about products. So let's move on to the people in the business because you guys are a design company, but people are pretty important for every single business. They're an expensive asset, but they're the asset that helps you do things. You've told us there are 16 in the business now. How has the shape and dynamics of the team changed since bringing in Nick and that period five years ago?

DB

What Nick has done is made sure that everyone is fully aware of what their role is, what their targets are and where they will add value. As a structure, we have four people on the creative side, two on the finance and office side, and the rest is sales.

With small businesses, one person can have a massive influence. We've had examples in the past where someone's come in and they're just not a right fit. We've got a lovely bunch of people, everyone gets on and we have quarterly lunches. I'm not sure everyone can say the same thing back to me, but I'd be happy sitting next to any single one of the people who work for me. They're all nice people.

We're a small team. Everyone talks about big companies wanting to act like small companies, but there's such a strong atmosphere in our office. I want to know more about what people do when they go home and what their family life is. You want to make it a lovely place to work.

People are crucial – we think, 'Who is a Black+Blum person?'. We want to make sure that we maintain that aspect of the company.

HR

And the effort you put in now, in making that more established and people knowing their roles more and just having a structure in there. Does that give you the confidence that the business is set up well to, if you wanted to, go to 20 people, go to 30 people, go to 40 people?

DB

It relates back to almost the brand guidelines. The more you know who you are, the easier it is to scale that. I don't live in London, I work from home Mondays and Fridays. I think they have doubts about what I get up to at home. But I have no doubts what everyone else is getting up to. And that's because we've got a great bunch.

HR

If you look at the people who've been here for a while, versus the people who have come in more recently, people who have come in with that new structure, with that new brand and vision guidelines document – how do you see their ability to get up to speed and get up to being as effective as they possibly can? Have you drawn any comparison between what that experience has been like for new people coming in?

DB

It depends on whether they're coming in to replace someone else, or whether they're coming in as a new position. We do have quite extensive aspects of me taking every single person who joins the company through every single product and the reason in the history of the company, and why we developed that product.

Ultimately, we're a product company. So they've got to know about the products, whether they're in sales or not. Design plays a large part in the fact that everyone is involved in the design process. It's not just us four designers who create the products. Everyone is part of this product development process and can give feedback to the design team.

In terms of getting people up to speed, trade shows are a great opportunity for people to suddenly understand what we do. It's nice when they see the whole process. Whether you're in design or not, the salespeople understand the product development cycle. And then a design person also has to go to a trade show, so they understand the aspect of what salespeople do.

The more we can make it feel transparent in terms of what the roles are that people do. So in the weekly meeting, the design person knows whether the salesperson has a great win. Or the salesperson knows whether the design person has come up with a great concept.

HR

It's interesting, you mentioned that you spend a lot of time with people when they come in. You personally tell them about the brand and the importance of different products. Have you always done that? Or is that something you've done more recently, where you think it's actually more important to not drum this information home, but be really clear with someone at the beginning as to how we sit as a brand right now?

DB

Nick has brought more discipline to this process. As I've said before, I'm not the most organised or disciplined person. When I'm thinking about an idea, I'm pretty much in that zone. I'm not aware of what else is going on. Nick is very good at having coffees with people and being aware of what their frustrations are, what their aims are, what their wins are. The discipline of a weekly meeting is a big thing. It's all about communication, isn't it? Everyone's got to be aware of what else everyone else is doing.

HR

And it's tempting for a business like you, in an environment where you have 15-16 people in an open plan office, you think that communication happens naturally because of the space you're in, because of the size you are. But that's not always the case.

DB

It just does not happen. It's amazing how much you don't know what's going on. It's a discipline of me training the people which is so crucial. It's a discipline of Nick having coffees or us all doing regular company appraisals. Big companies do that better than small companies, but we're in that stage at the moment where we're growing and taking new people on.

It's fine when you're up to sort of five people, it's a lot easier to be transparent. But as soon as you get above five, you've suddenly got the dangers of a big company. But the big companies have disciplines in place, which small companies don't. So we're in that transition period at the moment. And hopefully, because Nick came from a larger company, he's almost bringing some of the skill sets in that the large company had.

HR

I don't know if you have these roles here, but it's the time you start thinking, 'Do we have a dedicated HR person? Do we have another person doing this?' They're the roles you look at and go, 'Oh, they don't bring in any money directly. They're not coming up with design ideas'. But if you get to a size where if you don't have them, everything else starts falling apart doesn't it?

DB

Absolutely. That's the advantage of having someone who's been at a big company and done that. Nick will guide us as to when we need to have those roles.

HR

How much of the communication piece is down to creating the forums for it to happen, versus people actually taking an active interest in what's going on in other parts of the business? I

suppose, that's having the right kind of people. But it can sometimes come down to people just getting a bit lost in what they're doing.

DB

It's a discipline. It's basically, 'This day, every week at this time'. We have music that plays when we have our weekly meeting. So it was Rocky music at one point. I think it's changed now. But basically, everyone knows. Some people, when they first join, aren't comfortable about speaking in front of everyone else and saying what they're doing. But the more they do it, the better they get at it. These meetings aren't long. It's just so people can sum up what they've done, the wins, the good bits, the bad bits. It's done very quickly, but it's so useful for the whole company.

HR

I suppose the more that people are exposed to it and see the value of it, the more likely they are to run with it themselves and be the person going, 'Guys, we haven't caught up this week or anything like that. I don't know what's going on'. They become the ones leading it.

DB

Absolutely. It's lovely to see that when someone has the initiative, because they've seen it from the process, they instigate something else. It all feeds into the common direction of where you're wanting to go.

HR

And the people that you have brought in, in recent years, what places have they come from? Are they coming from bigger companies? Have you seen them come in and go, 'Oh, you guys don't do this, this has always worked for me in my last job'.

DB

The design process used to be me coming up with an idea and saying to the sales guys, 'This is what we're doing' and going ahead with it. Adam, our design manager, came from a much larger company. In terms of how we now write product briefs, it's so much more disciplined so that you are thinking, how is the factory going to assemble it? How is it going to be recycled? What are the instructions? How many languages did you put the instructions in? Have you done a drop safe test? Have you done a food safe test? It's just a thorough document.

The old way would be that we'd come up with an idea, we'd send off the concept to a factory, and they go, 'This is the price'. And then basically, you'd go, 'Dammit, I forgot that one little detail'. And then suddenly, the factory's got you over a barrel because you've already developed a product.

It's about actually doing the brief and really analysing a brief going, what haven't we thought about? It just means that you're going to the factory and saying, 'This is what we want and it's not changing'. And it allows you to basically have a much cleaner relationship and a better form of negotiation as a result.

HR

Let's round things off by coming back to you and the evolution that you've been on. I think it's a really interesting one, as we spoke about, of realising that you weren't necessarily the right person to be at the very top of this business. It wasn't going to go where you wanted to if you stayed there.

But if you look at this period of five years, where you have been able to take a step back and do the things you enjoy more? What are you spending your time doing that you weren't before, because you're not so much in the day-to-day of the management and that kind of thing? What are you doing to use that time wisely? How are you doing that?

DB

Well, as I said, I work two days a week from home. That timeout allows me to do school drop off and pick ups. But it also allows me to have a fresh pair of eyes. As a designer, it's very hard when you are coming up with an original idea but then seeing the end result develop – it's very difficult sometimes to judge that product in relation to, 'Is it really what we set out to do at the very beginning?'

So having stepped out a little bit in terms of the actual detail, I am in a very lucky position. It's a lovely position to be in. I get to have an overview of a product and see a product with fresh eyes. So I'm going actually, 'It's gone a little bit further down this direction than we should do. Let's bring it back to where.... What are your brand guidelines again? Does it feed into that? Is it correct?'

It's hard when you've been the one who always used to do everything, whether it was choosing the colour palette or designing the packaging. And now we have a great graphic packaging designer. It's going, well, 'That idea wasn't mine. I didn't come up with that idea, but it's a lot better than what I would have come up with'.

Sometimes, it's a hard position to be in when you've presented something and you're very passionate about it, but it's not quite right. It's not always easy going, 'Yes, everything's perfect. It wasn't my idea, but it's better than what I would come up with'. Sometimes I'm the one who has to go, 'Actually, let's go back to the drawing board', or 'Actually, it's got to be better' or, 'This is an idea I think we have to go down'.

So it's not always easy, but it's a lucky position in relation to the size we've now got to, the key good people we've got in the company, that I have that overview in terms of everything creative, and the sign-off on everything.

HR

And the time you have given yourself away from the day-to-day franticness of an office, has it given you greater exposure to be able to realise what competitors are doing? Where the general market is going? How consumers are behaving? Is there stuff which you are now picking on which you wouldn't have before?

DB

Yes, in terms of materials. In terms of being able to research new materials and potential markets or things we haven't considered. Absolutely. I am a designer but I am also an entrepreneur in terms of suggesting things that haven't been tried yet. Have we tried that marketing? Have we tried that sales channel? In terms of other things to consider, it has given me the opportunity to focus on things that I might not have had time to before.

HR

That are important for someone like you to be looking at?

DB

Absolutely, yeah. As a designer, you are trained to be an instant expert, so when you get given a brief what you do is research the market. I would like to say I'm good at Google in terms of finding things that other people won't find on Google. We also look at historical things. It's a lovely part of the design process, because you come up with a new idea and often you go back to Victorian times and find that they had something similar. I love that side of design.

In terms of going back, going to an antique shop and finding a mechanism on something or a way that somebody did something that can influence what we do today. That's a lovely part of it. You go to a place other people wouldn't go to to get their inspiration.

HR

Finally, do you feel that the changes you made, large and small, in these recent years have set you up to have that renewed appetite for business ownership, for being involved with this business for another 20 years? Running your own business, as you know, is pretty full on. There's not much time for rest and recuperation. But do you feel like you're in a better position now having made all these changes to go, 'I've done 21 years, bring on the next 21'?

DB

I'm in a transition point at the moment. There's that midlife crisis aspect to that. I've got to make sure that I am adding value. But at the same time it's very enjoyable. I'm always coming up with ideas. I'm always going to be creative. I'm always going to want to work. It's not like I ever have this ambition to go, 'I want to stop and do gardening'. I like gardening and I like painting. But at the same time I know that I couldn't do it full time and I've got no desire to do it now.

We're in a transition period at the moment and I think my role is developing and I've got to learn how to do that. But it's good. I'm really enjoying it.

HR

A really interesting thing to finish off. Often the business owner, the MD, the CEO or whatever you want to call it, spends very little time thinking about how their role develops and spends all their time thinking about how other people's roles develop, whether it's existing or new. But it's really refreshing to hear the effort paid to thinking about how your role develops is paying off so much.

DB

It's a really good point you've made, isn't it? Because you're reacting all the time, you don't plan. You think about everyone else's department apart from your own. Again, there's a bit of a stepladder in terms of scalability. Now, we have a digital marketing agency. We didn't have that before. It was me on my lunch break posting Instagram photographs.

HR

And you are not the best person for that are you?

DB

I am definitely not the best person for that. I'm having to ask all the younger people in the office how to use Instagram but I was the one doing it. As you grow and have a budget, you can get the best people for those roles. There are still aspects of what I do that I shouldn't be doing. But the more we grow, the more you can afford these things.

HR

You can't do it all at once so give yourself a chance. It sounds like you've got all the right ingredients to get the business in its best possible state. So thank you very much for sharing that, Dan.

DB

Thank you.