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How I made it: Paul Luen Founder of Martek Marine

WHEN Paul Luen started up his business with two former colleagues he initially envisaged it as a lifestyle business that he would keep fairly small. With the benefit of hindsight, he believes that was a mistake.

“The original plan was for a more short-term business that we would build up to a reasonable size,” he said. “But when we started employing people we realised that to limit it to, say, 12 people would be a waste. We underestimated the potential of the business and perhaps of ourselves, but we soon realised that we could take it a long way.”

The company now employs 38 people and, with turnover expected to be £7m this year, both the business and Luen have come far.



Luen was brought up in a bedsit in Hull. His mother had given birth to him at the age of 17 and money was tight. His 21-year-old father had to work in Germany as a pipefitter to support the family.

Luen showed his first signs of entrepreneurial spirit at the age of seven, when he would go blackberry picking in the holidays and sell the fruit in bags outside his local Spar shop. He said: “I would sell them at 7p a bag when Spar was selling them at 30p a bag. So people were buying them from me. It felt really good.”

At the age of 18 he faced the choice of getting a job or staying on in education. “It was a real crossroads in my life – it was one of the toughest decisions.”

He decided on education and went to Newcastle polytechnic, as it was then, to study chemistry. On graduation he got a job in process development with a plastics firm and then after two years joined a start-up company selling industrial gas detectors to industry.

While he was there he discovered what he thought was a fantastic opportunity to sell gas detectors to the marine sector. However, the firm he was working for was not interested in pursuing the idea. So at the age of 30, Luen left to start his own business providing safety and environmental monitoring equipment to commercial ships.

“I felt that there were huge opportunities. The more I learnt, the more opportunity I saw both in the short term but also in the medium to long term,” he said.

He persuaded two colleagues, Mike Pringle and Steve Coulson, to join him and they put in £2,000 each from savings to start up Martek, short for marine technology. Then they bought a database of users of gas monitors and approached them offering to service their equipment. Initially they all worked from home and it took two months to secure their first client.

Luen said: “There is always that fear of the unknown but while it was daunting it was thrilling, too, to be in control of your own destiny.”

The list of clients at the Rotherham firm grew and it was not long before Luen was able to create his own branded products. The first, in 2002, was called Bulksafe and detects the presence of water in solid cargoes on ships, giving an early warning that there is a problem on board.

Bulksafe was inspired by pending legislation that would require equipment of this kind to be fitted. Luen said his product was the first on the market to comply with the legislation, giving it a significant advantage. The product has since won a Queen’s Award for Enterprise Innovation, and Martek has been awarded a Queen’s Award for International Trade.

Now aged 40 and married, Luen is proud that the business has never had to borrow beyond the £6,000 it started out with. “We have never been at the behest of the banks – and in the current climate that is more significant than ever,” he said.

He thinks his success is due to a couple of factors. “I have a lot of energy and I dare to be a bit different. And over the past two years I have begun to invest a lot more in my own personal development – particularly in leadership and business acumen. If I had done that earlier in my career I could have benefited from it sooner.”

Luen, who has a 42.5% stake in Martek, has this advice for other budding entrepreneurs: “Before you go into business, be sure that you are prepared to make huge sacrifices to get your venture off the ground. It is no place for the fainthearted. You must have a passion for it and you need to recognise that your work-life balance is going to be in the gutter for some time.”

However, he also thinks it is vital for everyone starting a business to think big– something he and his colleagues did not do. “From the start, create a compelling vision for your future,” he said. “We didn’t have a great picture of where we wanted to go. But if you set off on a journey, how are you going to get there if you don’t know where you are going? Dare to dream.”