

INTERVIEW

Journey to the sauce

After slaying them on *Dragons' Den*, Levi Roots' business empire keeps on growing. By **Anne Giacomantonio**

Levi Roots and his Reggae Reggae Sauce claimed national fame when he sang his way to success on the BBC's *Dragons' Den* in 2007. Make no mistake though, Roots, 50, was already finding his own success before the dragons Peter Jones and Richard Farleigh chose to invest £50,000 for a 40 per cent stake in Roots' company. Reggae Reggae Sauce was already well-known to South London's Brixton Market and had been sold at the massive Caribbean street party that is the Notting Hill Carnival.

He has achieved modest success as a musician – in 1998 he was nominated as best reggae performer at the Mobo awards, and he has performed with some of the greats of pop music. But launching Reggae Reggae Sauce gave him a way of combining music and enterprise. “In

2006 I said, ‘OK, I’ve met James Brown, I played football with Bob Marley, I’ve met Nelson Mandela I’ve done most things that I could have ever dreamed of when I was 16, now I feel like doing something new,’” says Roots.

“I was quite confident with the sauce. It was something that I had done for a long time and I had managed to get this unique selling point where I had managed to link the music and the food together,” says Roots.

He even had positive feedback from Sainsbury's after sending them a sample. “I was on my way,” he says.

It is now stocked in supermarkets, sandwich chain Subway have the sauce as an option and pub chains Slug & Lettuce and Hungry Horse have Reggae Reggae items on their menus. He hopes to increase the popularity of Caribbean

cuisine in Britain, so it is on a par with Indian food, and spreads the word by speaking at events across the country in addition to keeping the business ticking over and singing at any opportunity.

Roots says that the current financial climate should not stop entrepreneurs from dreaming. The hardest part of finding success, according to Roots, is the ability to focus. You need to be able to concentrate on a single thing and follow it though. For Roots, music was always the distraction from previous career prospects. With Reggae Reggae Sauce he found a way to combine a good business plan and his love of music.

“Once you have your idea you will know whether or not you will be comfortable with it. Then you have just got to persevere and focus on it.”



Dawn of the dread: Roots' Reggae Reggae Sauce has been a huge hit

Levi Roots' '10 Commandments' for marketing success

1 Know your market. Investigate the territory, know what you are talking about.

2 Know your strengths, your weakness and your opportunities and threats.

3 Think about advertising and promotion. Focus your attention on a particular media group.

4 Target a niche market. Choose something that you know about and can control.

5 Try to increase sales to existing customers.

I used to go to Brixton Market and try to sell more to them because they knew and trusted me.

6 Make targets and challenges. When *Dragons' Den* came up I saw that as a challenge. I have always tried to face challenges in my life.

7 Get referrals from existing customers. If something is good about my product, tell me about it and tell others. If you find something bad about it don't tell others, just tell me, so I

can fix it. It's important to have that relationship with your customers.

8 Get financial support. This can sometimes be the hardest of all. It's very difficult to get banks involved – I had to rely upon family. My mother helped me out and my kids have worked with me right up through the whole thing. That doesn't work for everybody but I would recommend it.

9 Never get complacent and rest on your laurels. Even now, I am up in the morning.

I still run my restaurant. I am still in the market buying my peppers for my restaurant from the same people in Brixton Market I have always bought from.

10 Most important of all is to get good advice. For me, I had been in the music business for a long time so I knew music lawyers. I went to one after *Dragons' Den* and said I have just been chosen by the BBC, can you recommend a good corporate lawyer. You really need good advice.

YOUNG STARTER

'Small business is the lifeblood of this country'

Laith Al-Kaisy meets the woman who wants to take the sexism out of beer



A lot of bottle: Harriet Easton has launched her beer brand in tough economic times

There is never a perfect time to start a business: even an economic boom cannot guarantee fortuity and success. Back in 2007, when finance was still fluffy and business brazen, 19-year-old Harriet Easton had an idea.

Dissatisfied with the testosterone-driven beer market, she saw a gap in the market for a beer that was modest in percentage, but high in quality. The Newcastle University student set out to discover the perfect synthesis of malt and hops, and after teaming up with a local brewery, Harriet finally found her antidote to brawn and binge. Harry's Beer was born. Well, almost. There was still the problem of getting it to her high-heeled punters.

Like everything in the business

world, the quest was far from smooth. Banks refused to lend her money, not because of iffy facts and figures or a flawed business plan, but because faith had abated from the market. “Up until the recent seismic shift, if you wanted to borrow eight times your salary for a mortgage it was no problem. But £5,000 against a detailed business plan with high potential and I was told there was no chance,” she says.

Instead, she had to take the less desirable route of buying skills for equity. This involved finding suitable investors, who not only shared her passion and vision, but also had the expertise and intrepidity to take an essentially male product and give it an aesthetic makeover. It was a straight swap:

equity for professional services. After realising that serious sales would be best achieved through the retail market, Harriet continued her product and brand develop-

'A recession is a good time to start a business. When the good times arrive, the product is established'

ment through 2008 and launched the bottled version of Harry's Beer this autumn. It seems as though Harriet has finally found her feet.

“A recession is a good time to

start a business,” she argues. “When the good times finally arrive, the business and product is already established and can therefore reap sales as the economy rises. Small business is the lifeblood of this country and the future of the economy.”

Hers is proof that a start-up business can thrive regardless of the financial climate, providing you are aware of the fundamental tenet of consumerism: give consumers what they want at the right price. Harriet's advice is to remain tenacious. “The finance freeze is effectively giving entrepreneurship hypothermia – unless there is an injection of warmth it will lead to total shutdown. I feel this is the moment for entrepreneurs.”