

Think differently. Be brave. Embrace change.

Keynote speaker: Ben Towers

Much learning to be had from the younger generation

As one of the youngest entrepreneurs in the UK Ben Towers found his youthfulness presented many challenges but he has resiliently battled through and today provides much inspiration to businesses and individuals with his can-do attitude.

Speaking at the K3 Retail 'Connect & Make Happy' conference in London recently he ran through his business story, which began when only 11 years old and he was asked to create a website for selling books.

The realisation that he could make money from this resulted in him immediately going freelance as a web designer, but he soon found his money-making extra-curricular activities conflicted with the school authorities.

"I did loads of websites, but the school said I had to stop the business and should instead focus on my GCSEs. I initially stopped but then thought I could prove them wrong by successfully doing both things," he recalls.

An agency is born

This decision led to the formation of Towers Design and the purchase of a large desk and a phone system along with other items that he thought every office needed. These purchases were soon deemed to be a mistake and he sent them all back without any recourse having realised that the contracts he'd signed were non-binding on an under-18-year-old.

Things then moved on apace: "I grew the business' capabilities while still at school and had to take on a freelancer from who I took a cut of the projects she worked on."

This enterprising youngster soon caught the attention of the media and a piece in the Financial Times alerted the freelancer - who he'd never actually met - that he was only a schoolboy who she thought could be taken advantage of by moonlighting for other people while he was at school. This was a tough learning experience for Towers and led to her sudden departure from the business.

Meanwhile Towers found he was in great demand for public speaking engagements, which drove more business including work for large brands such as Amazon. Work for Mallow Marsh involved raising its profile, which led him to then offer social media expertise to businesses. "I realised that social media could be a great business opportunity. My generation really understands it so I started doing social media campaigns for Amazon and others," he says.

Yet again the school raised the issue of his work as he now needed to concentrate fully on his impending GCSE exams. This was easier said than done as he was employing five people at the time. Ultimately, he says he passed the exams with "not too bad results". Sixth Form also then became possible as the school agreed he could do two rather than three A Levels to still be able to run his business alongside his school work.



Breaking new ground

To enable this dual-role to take place, Ben became the first person in the world to employ himself as an Apprentice when only 17 years old. This was a neat arrangement but more problematic was getting a bank account.

“My existing bank closed my children’s account because I was using it for business. But they would not give me an adult account. However, Metro Bank stepped in and agreed to give me a business account at 17 and so I became the first person under 18 to have a business account. It took only 30 seconds to open it and showed me how large corporates can change. I learnt a lot from Metro Bank about customer service,” says Towers.

Following his leaving school, an office was opened and larger companies then became clients. He also became a mentor on Pocket Money Pitch - the children’s equivalent of Dragon’s Den. The business grew to employ 28 people who worked on projects with the likes of Pot Noodle and long-time client Amazon. At this point the raising of funding was considered, which would have enabled the business to compete for even bigger projects but the decision was made to merge it with another marketing company Zest the Agency and for Towers to leave the business to pursue other interests.

Technology is driving the future

Having grown up surrounded by technology and social media, Towers says companies need to be aware of the demands of teenagers who are fully versed in the latest technologies and solutions.

“I was interested in developing more technology based projects since I’d grown up with it and at this time a friend had set up MiCare, which is a home technology solution that helps old people stay in their homes longer by monitoring their activities via connected devices. It brings lots of data together,” he explains.

Another project he is also working on is a social media campaign tool, Social Marley, that he says brings the various platforms together and helps organisations to keep track of the campaigns that they are running.

“Businesses need to recognise where their customers are going on social media. They need to stay ahead of this audience, see where they are, and if the platform they are on is relevant to their business then they need to move with these people,” he suggests.

But what he says is absolutely vital for companies is to always present interactions and solutions that work: “When technology is given to us then it needs to work. Chatbots needs to be working right from the start.”

To get into the mindset of this young tech-savvy group he recommends companies do research by going into schools and potentially set up committees of young people who can then be brought together and plenty of learning can be gleaned about their actions and motivations.

If Towers’ determination, focus and drive are indicative of younger people today then retailers need to start paying attention to this digitally focused generation who are quite clear about what they want.

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