

KING OF SPIN



Maverick designer and inventor James Dyson borrowed millions, risked everything – and cleaned up. He tells us how By Philip Watson



James Dyson is one of Britain's most successful inventors and manufacturers. Founder and chairman of Dyson Appliances, he is most renowned for his innovative and stylish bagless vacuum cleaner. After graduating from the Royal College of Art and developing the "Ballbarrow" wheelbarrow, Dyson first had the idea for his new cleaner in 1978. It took him 15 years, 5,127 prototypes and debts of several million pounds to manufacture the product that now corners more than half the UK market. Estimated to be worth £500 million, Dyson, 53, recently launched a two-drum washing machine that he says washes cleaner by replicating the movement of hand washing.

What did you want to be when you grew up?

I had absolutely no idea. My careers officer once suggested I should be an estate agent. So I went to see an estate agent and he told me to become an artist.

Did you think you'd be successful at whatever you decided to do?

I don't think I really thought like that. I was brought up in the backwater of north Norfolk, my father taught at the local school, and ambition, careers and making money simply wasn't ever mentioned. Neither was design. I only knew about schoolteachers and vicars.

Did you have a piggy bank?

No. And I find the idea of hoarding money slightly abhorrent. Even as a child I always tried to make money work for me and further whatever I was interested in. If it was music, I'd buy a bassoon and then a tape recorder so I could record myself.

What would you have done if design hadn't worked out for you?

I was always happy making things, so I

would have made furniture or sculpture in a workshop. I love being in workshops.

How much debt did you face while developing your vacuum cleaner?

I remortgaged my house three times.

And what kept you going?

I know it sounds trite, but I believed in it. And so did my wife, kids and friends. That actually matters an awful lot more than market research. The other reason was that, when I was rejected by the people who are now my competitors, none of them ever gave me what I felt was a good reason. That only encouraged me more.

Is failure important to success?

It's the most important thing. You learn everything from failure and nothing from success.

In a recent poll of student role models you came third behind Richard Branson and Bill Gates. Is that because Che Guevara has slipped off the list?

[Laughs] Perhaps it's because what I'm doing is slightly counter-culture. I was interested in design to the point where I was prepared to take on the big boys and make my product successful. I also hope

WHAT I'VE LEARNT

ALWAYS think long term. Of course, you can have great short-term success, but if you put down deep roots success will always be more substantial and satisfying. **NEVER** give up.

that, because I'm passionate about engineering, new technology and developing products, I make making things appear attractive. We used to admire manufacturers who passionately believed in their products – that kind of excitement seems to have been lost in today's corporate culture.

You don't believe in wearing ties. Is that symbolic of your unconventional approach to business?

I'm very keen that no-one in our business does anything like a sheep. The tie is a good symbol of that – there's no particular point to a tie, it's merely a convention. I'm not sure people make decisions about what they wear every day based on what makes them feel comfortable, relaxed and creative. They simply put on the conventional armour of a business suit and tie. My approach is just one very small way of encouraging people to think, make their own decisions, and not rely on what has worked in the past.

Does success equal sex appeal?

God knows. I don't think I've ever had time to think about that. If it does I haven't noticed. It's more likely to put people off [laughs].

What is the major achievement of your new washing machine?

It's that it produces a much more effective wash action, so that the washing gets done in half the time but to a much better level. I was shocked to discover that every other washing machine washes worse than by hand; ours actually washes better.

At £999 the Contrarotator is twice the price of an average UK washing machine. Is that justified?

Well, we've put four years, a million man hours and £25 million into its research and development, and our machine is bound to be more expensive than those with far less technology. But I hope over the years to make the price less painful.

Finally, what advice would you give to an aspiring James Dyson?

In a way, you can't tell somebody how to do anything. Life just isn't like that. Every set of circumstances is different. But I'd say: make your own decisions, don't accept other people's advice, and remember to be different. 

