



Entrepreneur and sometime helicopter pilot Denys Shortt at Wellesbourne aerodrome

Picture, NEIL PUGH

Shortt En-livened by work

The Business Profile



Martin Faint meets Denys Shortt, founder of DCS Europe, whose En-prefixed products (En-liven, En-etc) spans some 124 products and sells in 45 countries

And it was with a stick in his hand that Denys first learnt the value of taking calculated risks. He only got to play at such high levels because he decided to work his way around school hockey coaches.

"They were a nightmare," he says, his voice cracked with laughter. "So I sneaked off to play for local clubs with men. It was very much frowned upon." Naturally for a man who has made a career out of darting around the dictates of convention, Denys paid little attention to such frowns.

He hoped that no one would find out, but as the centre forward his goal-scoring proclivity eventually got the better of him.

"I was eventually caught out," he admits with a rueful grin. "A story in the local paper tripped me up."

"My forte was that I was incredibly quick and unpredictable against world class opposition. You can be good in Stratford or Warwickshire but are you any good against the Australians or Germans?"

It was only due to a rare failure that Denys now finds himself asking the same questions in his business career.

"I got into the last 40 for the squad for the Seoul Olympics but unfortunately not the last 16. I basically thought, can I carry on doing this? Can I carry on busting a gut to get into the national team or should I give up and concentrate on business?"

No doubt to the relief of En-Brands fans, Denys decided to enter the family business, Shakespeare Products.

In 1982 he got paid £500 for the summer and developed an overwhelming taste for earning money, prompting him to drop a place at Loughborough University before he started.

With his core distribution business now approaching the £100 million turnover mark, it clearly hasn't held him back. Denys is critical of the failings of the education system in its provision for aspirational entrepreneurs.

The clouds are low and a cold grey mist has enveloped the hills around Wellesbourne aerodrome.

Damp tendrils work their way around trees as a thin splatter of rain marks the helicopter with tiny baubles.

It is, says entrepreneur and sometime helicopter pilot, Denys Shortt, a bad, dangerous, day for flying.

He gives the helicopter a last, gentle pat on the tail and we head into the steady safe ground of the Heli-Air hut, where we are kindly lent an office.

With plans duly abandoned for an inflight interview, the founder of DCS Europe sits down and tells me about how he set up what has become one of the most successful Midlands start-ups of recent years.

Since getting his first business, DCS Europe, off the ground in 1994, Denys has developed something of an empire in health and beauty products that spans the globe.

From toothpaste to hair gel, his own brand of En-prefixed products (En-liven, En-etc) spans some 124 products and sells in 45 countries.

His branded range exceeds 1,000 products and together with En-they are sold in convenience stores throughout the UK.

As is so often the case, 39-year old Denys' later success came after a high-achieving childhood.

His ventures into business were overshadowed by an intensely competitive drive on the hockey pitches of his youth. He first played for England in the under-16 squad and notched up over 100 international caps.

"There are big connections between business and getting to play at that level," he says with a steady gaze. "It takes discipline and you're only going to achieve it through hard work. I'm convinced those characteristics are carried forward into business success."

Worst and best

Naughtiest thing you did at school/uni?

Probably skipping a school hockey match (with flu) to then go to play for my local club. Scored 4 goals for the club and ended up in the local newspaper headlines – the school was unimpressed.

Dream job as a child?

Military helicopter pilot.

Favourite holiday retreat?

"Running your own business is not a career choice at school. The current system doesn't encourage you to go it alone."

Denys finds greater inspiration from his twice-yearly trips to the US, with his two children and American wife – whom he hooked by demonstrating typical decisiveness in proposing to her three days after they met in Jamaica.

He is a big fan of her country. "America gets a lot of criticism in the press but I would challenge anyone to look at it and think it isn't a fantastic country. Business is thriving there."

"Over here we're almost seem to be in the mould where we criticise people who do well and people like to see failure. I like to go over there and get my injection of positivity, to get my fix of true amazement."

Denys has never been afraid of positive thinking. After a busy week running his many businesses, without even a

Bangaram Island – off coast of India.

Greatest weakness?

Cannot leave work early.

The best thing about your job?

And the worst?

Best: Being able to make things happen

Worst: the responsibility of making enough profit to keep more than 100 people employed.

personal assistant for back up, he spends his weekends deep in thought, coming up with new business ideas.

He first started to think really big back in 1993, when he started to dabble in buying and selling health and beauty brands in larger volumes than had ever been necessary for the local demands of Shakespeare.

"Instead of buying a couple of boxes and selling to people on the Stratford Road, I started buying in a couple of truck's worth and selling to people all over the UK."

The venture proved a huge success, prompting him to set up his own firm DCS Europe.

"Obviously what I was doing was basically seen to be risky, with lots of volume and money. But in my mind it was risk free, I had confidence in the brands. Colgate is a commodity, it's like gold, it doesn't devalue, it has an inherent value."

In what is the classic paradigm of the entrepreneur, once Denys had spotted his opportunity, he struck and wasn't going to let a lack of finance stop him.

His bank agreed to factor his debts and to their amazement acting more or less on his own, Denys turned over £5 million within ten months.

The sudden exposure to money came as something of a shock.

"It was like a drug," he says. "Buying and selling was like a drug. And from that point on turnover never stopped growing."

"Although I'm very down to earth, people reading that might think that it is a big sum but in our industry £5 million is a small figure."

From those early days in the '90s Denys has tried to increase that sum and proved determined not to lose momentum: with En Brands set up in 1998, a central distribution firm for wholesalers in 1999, a software firm in 2000, a packaging firm in 2002 and a central distribution firm to retailers in 2003.

And this year what he hopes will be a revolutionary new software firm that can provide real-time monitoring of business objectives.

He now ships a 40-foot cargo container somewhere in the world every day.

"My life is a blur, it's horrific," he says, clearly not believing it. "There are so many things going on, but they're exciting things."

Denys clearly loves the life he has forged for himself with little more than the strength of his own determination. But that is not to say that it is easy.

"To a lot of people's surprise it can be quite lonely being an entrepreneur."

Fortunately Denys now has an unlikely accomplice, a 20-year old computer whizzkid and fellow helicopter fanatic called Andrew Butt. They met in the very helicopter cabin in which we now sit.

"Andrew and I are like a couple of Tornado jets flying in combat mission role," says Denys. "He's my wingman, it's very stimulating throwing around ideas with him."

But ultimately Denys alone is responsible for steering the company and that is a load only he can carry on those hockey-hardened shoulders.

"It can be lonely often wondering what to do next," he says slowly. "With every successful business you take on a lot of extra people and cost. My primary goal in life is to keep my employees and make sure they are in safe jobs."

Across his various operations Denys employs some 130 people. It is not a responsibility he takes lightly.

"I try not to think about it, but a lot of people get up in the morning in their family home and come into work at DCS relying on the management to keep us going in the right direction. It's not always easy."

Does the heavy burden of the entrepreneur eat into Denys' sleep?

"It does keep me awake at night, regularly, but often more with excitement than worry," he admits.

With three of those people including Denys' brothers, the directors' pictures on the back of the DCS Europe promotional material resembles a truncated Shortt family photo album.

"It is an interesting scenario, especially as I'm not the oldest brother, and has not been without its challenges, but to create a business where four brothers get on is pretty miraculous."

"It makes for an interesting dynamic, we're all working for the same aim. It's good to have four family members running the show."

If it makes Christmas dinner something of a board meeting, Denys has to grab a peaceful moment where he can.

With 13-hour days at the helm of DCS, Denys hasn't been flying in a while, preferring to relax in that most Voltairean of pursuits – tending to his garden.

"I have a 55-acre farm and love doing some of the most basic farm work," he says.

"I love feeding the sheep and wood-chopping. That really is very therapeutic."

He lists farming on his CV as a hobby. Denys also has a side-line in product testing, using En-liven products on a daily basis.

"I use En-liven myself every day. It's a fantastic toothpaste," he says with a sparkling grin.

And when he got a letter from an Australian man claiming that his En-liven gel had restored hair growth to his balding head, Denys called in additional laboratory tests – hoping that he had found the greatest opportunity yet to seal his fortune.

"I've tried out the hair gel, a friend has too. Our hair didn't grow back," Denys says, laughing.

But although it is not a standard laboratory product test, Denys can now confirm it styles hair with such hold, and such durability, even the mighty blast of a low-flying helicopter cannot unsettle it.

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Denys Shortt



Denys Shortt with The Birmingham Post Business Award in 1999