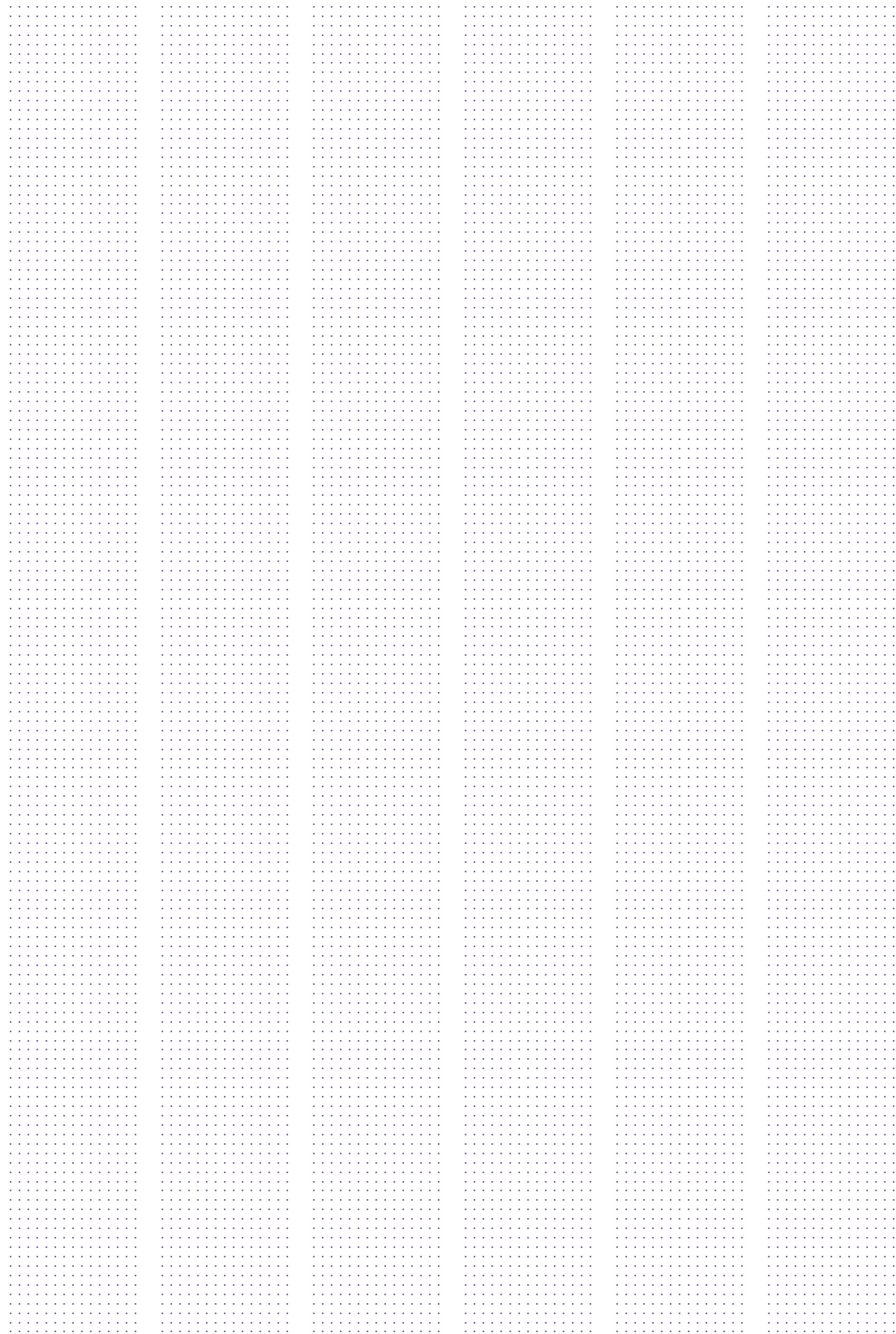




Interview: Paul Smith, founder of the Paul Smith clothing empire

Paul has turned a two-day-week love of creating fashion designs into a massive British export of fashion to nearly 200 of his own stores worldwide. He was an early pioneer in Japan and has been an influencer for thousands of designers over the years.



Thanks very much for allowing me to talk to you.
No problem at all, hopefully I will be helpful.

I'm sure you will. Did you come to Tokyo?
I missed you ...
Yes, but right at the end of the designersblock.

Did you come to the spiral building?
No, I arrived on the Sunday night, so I unfortunately missed it and I know the gallery were a bit upset with me for not managing to get to the final thing, but there was some sort of mix-up. I think they changed the venue right at the very end to a club or something and I never quite made it, which was a shame.

I was with Mr Kurasaki at the time and got an invite to go to your party and we were going to go, but never got the chance, I was going to ask you then if you would like to do an interview for this book.
So, what are you doing? A book?

Yes, it's a book ... I graduated myself in 1997, and since then I've always done my own thing and that's taken me all over the world ... had successes and failures, one thing or another. But all my colleagues and friends have kind of come to the conclusion that the hardest step is that first step when you leave university.
Yeah ... absolutely!

Because you are just thrown out into the unknown, you never really know what to do, unless you just want to fall into the normal format of trying to get a job and it's not always satisfying.

Yes, sometimes you just have to do that, unfortunately, as a stepping-stone to the next thing. It is really hard, because if you try to start your own thing right from the beginning, that can be disastrous as well. You make all your mistakes with your money and with your time and you haven't got the experience. Sometimes it can actually be a sensible thing to try to work with somebody who is willing to give you a chance and try to tap into his or her experience. You give your energy and unison and almost give them your naivety, which often can be quite exciting.

Yeah ... definitely! I didn't do that, unfortunately, and as you just said, it was difficult and I did learn through experience. A lot of time, it's very hard.

But it's case by case – you know, some people just manage to make it work and others don't, and unfortunately a lot of people blame other things, but in fact it can be so many things. It is so hard to know what it is. It could be the fact that you've got great ideas but you don't know how to put them across or communicate them, or you've got too much money and you do things, and you're not hungry enough ... it can just be so much stuff. Unfortunately, there is not a formula for the way it should be.

Can I just ask you what your hardest lessons were that you've had to learn in business?

The hardest lessons, I suppose, were just learning how it all works, really ... 'it' being anything you want it to be. Learning how it works – 'I want to be a product designer, so what is the route?' If you've got an idea, that's fair enough, but if you've got nobody to show the ideas to or the people you show them to are not organised, both of those things are a problem.

Right, so it's understanding where you're lacking?

Yeah ... I think what it is, is trying to have an understanding of what you want to do for the qualification you're trying to get, early on. If you are training to be a graphic designer or a product designer or even something a lot more or less creative in many terms like ...

Artwork?

Yeah, just something like that ... something else where you've got to say: 'Well, what do I mean by this word?' 'What does this word mean?' 'What does "graphic designer" mean?'

I think that's a good point, because I think a lot of students aren't actually clear what it is that they're really getting into ...

You look at fashion, for instance. Fashion is misinterpreting what being a fashion designer is. But a lot of the publicity that fashion gets, especially in this country, is quite flippant. Young designers and young students think that they've got to do very silly things – to design very stupid and outrageous and attention-seeking things to do well! In a way that's true and in a big other way it's absolutely not true at all, because how many people do you see walking around in jackets with three arms, or bare breasts?

Pierre Cardin all over again, maybe?

Yes. In fact the balance is that you have to do attention-seeking things. But they still have to be so that people can actually still wear them and then they're okay as well. I want to be a product designer, okay, well why do I want to be a product designer? Because I enjoy designing products. What are my products going to offer that other designers don't offer? What's my point? I always keep trying to say to everybody, 'What's my point?' 'What's your point?' 'Why should anyone buy?' Even now as an established clothes designer, I still say, 'What have I got to offer?' 'What's Paul Smith got to offer that isn't already there?' 'Why are we doing this?' We always try to make sure there is that little certain something to everything we do.

Is that so you don't go off and lose the plot and forget?

As soon as you become complacent in any creative industry, then there is somebody in the fast lane overtaking you, and design of any sort is about today and tomorrow. It's not about yesterday. It's about today and tomorrow. Yes, you can rest on your laurels for two or three years, but after that, you'll soon be out.

You were 24 when you opened your first clothing store. What do you remember about that time – not necessarily the clothing store, but just what you were doing around that time that made that energy work?

Well, I think it was mostly my girlfriend who gave me the confidence to be able to do something on my own, because she kept saying, 'You've got so much enthusiasm and so much natural energy and so many ideas, you could actually do something yourself.' I was actually working for somebody else at the time when we met. She kept saying, 'I'm sure you could do something on your own because that way you can express yourself more naturally.' The interesting thing is, it was never to do with money or opportunity or a career move. In a way what's so sad about today's world is that it's so formulaic. It's so career-motivated and financially driven. In fact that can be quite a killer in creativity and in down-to-earth-ness. And it's all about getting a good CV together, networking, being a certain way. You have to be a hard, false person, which is horrendous

So, you didn't experience it like that when you were starting out?

Not at all, no. I saved up a little bit of money and opened up a tiny shop that was only open a few days a week, supplemented my income through working like hell doing anything Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. And then my two days of purity were on Friday and Saturday!

Fantastic! Was that in Nottingham?

Yeah. I tried to get the balance right between earning a living and doing things that I loved. That was really down to somebody called Edward de Bono. He's an American guy who writes about lateral thinking and he also says the job always changes you and you never change the job.

That's interesting, I will look him up.

Yeah. Basically if you, if I'd have tried to earn a living from my little shop, then the job would have changed me. All the things I was selling or offering for sale in my shop, nobody really wanted because they were a bit different and a bit new and a bit odd and slightly self-indulgent. I knew that if I was to try and earn a living from that shop, then the job would change me, because what I'd have to do would be to change the products I offered in the shop to ones that people would readily think were great and would accept. By doing that I was watering down what I was actually trying to do and I would not actually make a statement. What I wanted to do was work out how to do something special. By thinking, 'OK, I'm not going to let the job change me, so I'll earn a living doing anything that comes along from Monday to Thursday and then on Fridays and Saturdays just do these two days where it's just down to what I want to do,' things slowly came good because the shop was so unusual and so different that people then came to it and so it worked. If for instance you are a young designer starting out, don't think that you can earn a living from what you are going to try to do straight away, try to supplement it by consultancy, by even working in a bar or just doing anything just to earn a living to pay the rent and to eat. Then try to keep your purity, because by keeping your purity, if – and it's a big 'if' – you are offering something that is different, it might not get accepted straight away. But eventually it might mean that you are the one that's different and people will be attracted to it and eventually you can start to progress.

Fantastic!

It's true too.

What character traits do you think best enabled you to turn what you loved doing into the business?

I think the ability to communicate, and I think that was something I was fortunate enough to get from my father's character. He was a very nice man who could communicate very easily and talk to people and make people feel at ease and work out the whole thing about making people relax and starting conversation in a very natural way, not a false way. I think that was helpful for me, especially with my business in Japan, which has become quite big. In the early days, in '82 when very few foreigners were there and hardly anybody spoke English, if you can imagine having to communicate through gesture or humour or visual things or some sort of camaraderie, but in a very natural way. I think that was very helpful.

So understanding people really helps?

Yeah, and working on the philosophy of 'you win, I win', although 'win' is the wrong word. We're hoping in this interview now that you'll get a good clear picture and nice information for your book and I'll get the same. I'll get a nice representation in your book. It's a proper situation where both people come out with a very nice, equal part.

That's interesting ...

Learning about 'you win, I win' has been a really enormous part of my well-balanced, continued success.

What do you think about designers who graduate from higher education now, in terms of their attitude and employability and their general approach?

I think generally speaking, what's happened is unfortunately that there's really a lot of short-termism now. People don't think about their long-term future and are not willing to build up their career gently. They want to fast-track it and short-circuit it very quickly because of peer pressure, because of what they read in the papers, because of their mates etc. Therefore, they are not willing to pace themselves. I was actually quite a long time before I started to do well. At 24 I started my little shop, but then I did about 50 different jobs a week. I started my little shop in '70, I think, and it was not really until '82 that I started to make a little bit of progress.

A lot of dedication?

Yeah. I think also trying to be pleased with life and not being hooked on the idea of wealth and materialistic gain. That's so boring and basically life's short. It's not just about earning money; it's about just having a great day every day.

What do you think about the approach of higher education to the crucial 'what happens next?' for graduates? And what if anything, would you recommend they change or develop?

One of the most difficult things with education of any sort, and this is not being rude to teachers at all, but it is definitely in more creative fields, that the people who are teaching are people that haven't quite sorted it out for themselves as a career outside of teaching. Them that does, does and them that don't, teach – you know that old-fashioned saying?

What could they do about that?

Well, you can't do anything about it, but the only reason I'm bringing it up is that sometimes, not always, they miss the point. I'm absolutely not being disrespectful to teachers. The reason they don't get the point is the very reason they've ended up teaching. If people want to teach as a career and that is what they want to do then that's fantastic and admirable. But then others are teaching because in fact they'd love to be important designers or creators, but they've not understood the full picture ... Obviously if they're trying to educate somebody then there isn't that rounded thought in their head of knowing how to pass that on. That's just something that you can never ever solve and that's inevitable really. But, the other thing, and again it's not a criticism, it's just that somehow or other with every aspect of life you have to understand the balance between creativity and down-to-earth-ness and knowledge of your industry. It's not good enough just to be a designer. In today's world, you have to understand the industry you want to enter into: the marketing and financial aspects of your industry, the competition out there. You've got to love the industry, because if you love it then maybe you'll be so *au fait* with it that you'll manage to find a way through the reeds to the sea.

That makes sense ... so it would be possible maybe for universities to take on that approach?

Unfortunately, it's not something you can actually write down for the teachers to follow. It's something that is quite instinctive: you've just got to balance it somehow.

I remember when we had visiting lecturers who were actually in the industry – not anyone as prestigious as yourself, but they actually had real knowledge of how it works in industry and they'd come in as teachers.

One of the key points could or should be the fact that they have a core of full-time lecturers. In fact, they have a lot of visiting lecturers, because that way you are always bringing a different point of view. You always bring a bit more worldliness. When you first start teaching, you can probably have a lot of awareness and a lot of energy and understanding. But based on Edward de Bono, if the job always changes you, eventually you get really cosy in your job and you love the long summer holidays and the Christmas holidays and you settle in and you're not as edgy as you were and not really on the ball as much. You start to miss the point, but if somebody, like myself, were to teach one day a week ... which unfortunately I don't have time for, but if I did you could be like a bloody whirlwind coming in!

It'd be fantastic ... maybe you'll change your mind one day?

It's nothing to do with changing my mind, I'd love to do it.

Maybe we'll clone you, then?

That would be nice.

How have you adapted yourself over the years to your own successes and international business?

By keeping down-to-earth and by not letting it go to my head. I think the main thing is, as you become better known and more popular, more established or more successful, you absolutely haven't made it. It's just part of the process, you've got to keep moving. Therefore, if you keep down-to-earth you will have a longer life. Keep modest, keep safe and keep alert ... that's what you've got to do!

That's good advice!

It's vital!

British designers are being recognised internationally in many different areas. What do you think British industry can do, if anything, to nurture and co-operate more with young talent rather than the young people feeling like they might have to go abroad?

Unfortunately one of the key points about that, I think, started really in the '70s when a lot of things weren't happening for manufacturers, like tax relief on new investments, machinery, market research. The government of the time was more interested in the service industry rather than manufacturing industries. The service industry is more important, but you know what nobody really got at the time was that if you're a service industry you've got to service something, and the only area you could service was manufacturing. Sadly the decline of the British manufacturing industry started in the late '60s and early '70s and has accelerated and never really stopped. Some of that was through what I've just described, but a lot of it was to do with complacency, the fact that after the war people started to do well and then by the early '60s everyone was a bit complacent. That goes back to some of the things I said earlier, about putting your back in a chair and thinking you're brilliant and then finding that Yamaha was overtaking you. We used to have DSA, AGS, Norton, Triumph, that were all brilliant motorbikes and then top of their trade, and then by the late '60s Yamaha and Honda and all the others were doing better. We lost a lot of our manufacturing and also we just seemed to have a mental block with captains of industry, who understand how to work with designers. It's just not a formulaic roll-out, it's actually that you've got to duck and dive more with designers and flow with the rhythm more and understand the market. It's always changing and it's never a formula. That's why in many ways in terms of fashion, Britain is dominated by high-street chains, because there are formulas and that's something that the Brits seem to understand. Whereas the Italians, the French and many other countries understand about design being important, which I think the Brits do, the Brits don't really know how to handle quirkiness and the ever-changing world of design and

'designers'. I think British designers should think it doesn't matter if they work abroad. The main thing is to think, 'I'm quite a lateral thinker, I'm quirky because I'm British, I'm not uniform because I'm British, I've got a sense of humour, I've got inventiveness and I'll get my job wherever I want to.' Don't worry about it.

Do you think it's too late for the manufacturers in this country, then?

Definitely.

No reprieve, no chance of younger manufacturers taking up where the old ones have left off?

Maybe, in certain small pockets, you've got examples like James Dyson. James Dyson happened to have a very good idea, but also along with that good idea, he had a tremendous business talent and a massive determination to do well. He's good, but quite serious.

How can young designers help business really recognise the advantages of nurturing young talent?

It's just to do with state of mind. The captain of industry or the manager of a business has to ask why, what's the point of my business? If I'm a nut and bolt manufacturer, is the point about my business the fact that I have very reasonably priced nuts and bolts, or that they are very strong, or that I can deliver them the next day? Is the point of my business the fact that I want to design a brand new nut and bolt or that I want to have a new point of view, which is not to do with delivery price or quality, but to do with something else? If that's the case then, yes, I need a designer.

And do you think it's possible for young designers maybe to take that challenge to the business? Maybe if those businesses hadn't thought of it first?

If you're entrepreneurial enough to be able to know how to present the idea in a way which is not just flippant and design-led, you have a sort of business side to it as well. You've got to say, 'You know a lot of people aren't using screwdrivers any more, they are only using this new electric drill, and I've designed this bolt that works really brilliantly with this drill and a lot of people are showing the nuts and bolts in their interior design, so I'm suggesting that we do nuts and bolts in bright colours.'

Right, I see where you're coming from.

Then suddenly you've got this different angle on it, that a businessman could think could turn into money for him.

So it's understanding how to communicate and understanding the needs of the industry?

Absolutely, and also not just saying, 'I am a designer, and that is enough.' It's about knowing what's out there.

How can young designers better prepare themselves, do you think, before leaving university and entering the commercial world?

If possible try to work in some way, part-time or through the holidays, in the industry they are aiming to go into, where they can be gaining experience.

And last question, what do you like best about designers?

Providing they don't have big egos, which unfortunately a lot of them do, the fact that they've normally got quite lateral conversation that darts all over the place, and I find that quite appealing.