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CUCKOO ABOUT 2015

The Drum Network's Richard Draycott meets Justine Wright, owner and managing director of Cuckoo, the Salford-based creative digital agency, and finds out why this summer marks a very special milestone for her and her agency business.

This July you reach a major milestone in paying off the 10-year £1m loan you used to buy the agency in 2005. What will that mean to you personally?

Huge change. Beyond the practical advantages of having paid off the loan and no longer having to service that debt, it just feels like there are suddenly more options. Not that I want to stop doing what I'm doing. I love it. The difference is that, three or four years ago I couldn't have stopped even if I'd wanted to. Paying the loan off brings a psychological freedom and the knowledge that I'm working in the industry because I want to rather than need to.

It was one of the agency's original founders, Steve Walsh, who financed the loan for you. How did that situation come about?

Steve Walsh and John Simmonds started out in the late 1980s as a freelance creative team and built their business up on the back of their work with Greenall's Pubs and Restaurants. By the time I joined in 1996, Walsh Simmonds was a successful agency.

When I first met Steve I was at JWT, looking after Greenall's advertising. It was a joint meeting and we just clicked. I think he liked my no-nonsense, down-to-earth approach.

Not long after that he rang me up and said "Look, I need someone to come and run the agency for me. I've got lots of things I want to explore. Are you interested?" The conversation lasted about five minutes.

By that stage, the agency had Greenall's Pubs and Restaurants and Bass Leisure Retail as large accounts, so I came in to manage all that for him.

Steve and his brother Paul were also serial entrepreneurs and had developed a few of their own dotcoms. Most of those failed but they also had great success with Laterooms, which they ultimately sold around 2004. Steve then decided he wanted to retire and offered me the chance to buy the agency.

Was it a big decision for you? What made you say yes?

It's strange because it had never been my ambition to run my own business, but I don't actually

remember thinking too long and hard about the decision.

I don't remember asking anyone's opinion. I think I said OK because I didn't want to go and work anywhere else and I knew that there was the potential to make it a success. So yes, over a fairly quick period Steve exited and I took over the reins at the age of 35.

I'm still close to Steve and he said to me recently that he can't believe I've managed to pay the loan off. I'm not sure whether that's a compliment or not.

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There were tonnes of sleepless nights along the way but over the years you learn not to let your worries cloud your focus on getting the basics right. If you work hard, you deliver on service and creatively you're working to meet the brief, you'll always be presented with opportunities to grow.

Did you create the Cuckoo brand at the time of the takeover?

No, I waited about 18 months to do that. There was quite a lot of work to do when I first bought the agency, in terms of restructuring and changing teams a little bit, investing in some new hardware and software and really looking at which clients we wanted to keep and develop.

We went through about six months of trying to come up with the right name with the right URL and the right message behind it. Then one day we were having a discussion about the industry, comparing it to One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest, and the brand idea sparked from that.



As a business person, what are you better at today than you were 10 years ago?

The numbers. I'd always been able to develop and retain client relationships, but it was actually making the numbers stack up, running a commercially focused business, that I found challenging initially. In a creative agency environment, it's easy to run away with time and spend days and days on things. Making sure that everything's accurate in terms of costing and quoting, timesheets, capacity, the interplay between finance and operations, these are things I had to quickly get up to speed with. These days, of course, we know exactly where we're at.

Another key lesson is that it's tougher to win new clients than it is to develop and retain existing ones. It's a real feather in our cap to have been working with clients like GE Capital and the Co-operative for more than a decade. A big part of our strategy is to retain and develop the potential of our clients and, this year, we've generated a lot of revenue from existing clients by extending our service offering into different areas



or, in several cases, by them recommending us to other parts of the business.

So it's fair to say that you're looking forward to 2015?

Absolutely. Beyond being clear of the debt, our financials are getting stronger and stronger with net profits increasing year-on-year. The value and profile of the Cuckoo brand is growing and we're doing great work for a really broad range of clients, from GE Capital to Crowne Plaza, Holiday Inn, Cooksmill and Freedom Renewables. It's an exciting time for us.

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