



SIR JAMES DYSON
1947

Reinventor

CHAPTER 18

SIR JAMES DYSON

“Cleaning Up”

With Sir James Dyson we stay in the hard, cold world of the electronics business, a world we have already visited when we explored the success of Akio Morita of Sony fame. Dyson however is a very rare species indeed; a successful inventor / designer who took the Dyson cyclone vacuum cleaner, his own product, to the market and succeeded spectacularly in his 50s.

The route taken by Dyson contrasts sharply with Frank Miller’s “risk-lite” approach though; while both showed belief in their vision and commitment to succeeding, Dyson was to take off on a 15 year, basically self-financed journey that brought him perilously close to bankruptcy and financial ruin. With an estimated worth of around 500 million pounds today he is now enjoying the late fruits of his creativity, risk taking and hard work.

Plain-old-James, as he was then, showed early promise as a designer and inventor. While still a student at the Royal College of Art he jointly designed the Sea Truck, an innovative working boat that has racked up around GBP500 million in sales around the world and is still being manufactured today. He also went on to design, manufacture and market the “Ballbarrow” replacing the wheel used in the conventional wheelbarrow with a ball creating a barrow that couldn’t get stuck in the

mud, a theme his vacuums have recently incorporated. While the product was a success, sales of the Ballbarrow overtook sales of conventional wheelbarrows in Britain with three years, Sir James left the company due to business rather than creative differences with his partners.

Dyson yet again then had freedom to develop another product to address shortcomings in a different area. Dissatisfied with the performance of high-priced vacuum cleaners he worked out that their suction simply deteriorated as the dust bag filled. Dyson set about resolving the problem and in 1993, after 15 years and 5,127 prototypes, he launched his patented Dual Cyclone™, bagless vacuum cleaner on the world. Amazingly Dyson set out on that project when he was 31 years old and didn't even have a decent product to market until he was 46!

Sir James was not locked into manufacturing and selling his own vacuums when he was developing the product but was unable to strike a deal with any of the major appliance manufacturers. The main stumbling block was reportedly the fact that the new 'bagless' machines would be endanger the very lucrative trade they enjoyed in selling replacement bags; it's even been reported that Hoover considered buying the cyclone concept so that it could be shelved, just to protect the bag selling market.

The development of the Dyson vacuum cleaner was not plain sailing; it absorbed his Ballbarrow buyout funds and saw Mrs. Dyson work as a teacher to help support the family. Dyson was later to say that the straw that almost drove him into bankruptcy was the need to pay substantial fees to renew patents every year and to fund legal actions to protect his patents from infringement. (Hoover was to pop up in the Dyson story again in a legal action for patent infringement won by Dyson).

For Dyson though, the struggle paid off. Launched in Japan in 1993, Dysons later became the fastest selling vacuums in Britain and the best-selling vacuums (in terms of sales value) in the US. Millions have now been sold vindicating and rewarding Dyson's creativity and hard work and the support of his family and fans. Dyson was so intimately involved with the success of the cleaner that he even did the voice over for TV commercials himself; urging viewers to "*say goodbye to the bag*". Yet for all that progress so far he remains a seeker for the next challenge:

Dyson on the Quest for Perfection

"Ideally it should weigh nothing, make no noise, and require no effort. There's a long way to go before it's perfect."

Dyson is a serial inventor who has continued to develop innovative products rather than sit back and enjoy his success and the wealth it has generated. A projected US\$6,000 robot vacuum cleaner was created and shelved and a new concept washing machine, the *Contrarotator*, was released into the market only to fail in commercial terms and be withdrawn. That's all part of the game of innovation though as Dyson continues to search for products to replace things that don't work as well as they should or as well as he thinks they need to. The new Dyson *Air Multiplier*, a bladeless fan, has yet again set the world talking about Dyson who is now in his 60s.

Sir James Dyson is an unmitigated late maker. Wealth, awards and public recognition, all flowing from the development of his innovative vacuum cleaner which didn't even exist until he was approaching his 50s. The takeaways from his story are as clear as the dirt in the viewing windows on his best selling machines. If you love what you're doing you'll never work another day in your life. Look for a niche, find a new or better product or way of doing things; and commit. Fight for your baby and if it really is *your* baby you'll be proud to put your name on it, just like Dyson did and so many other of our late makers have done.

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