

Shades of Gray

Brothers **Ben** and **Simon Gray** from CYE, the venue and event finding group, talk Americana, Walnut Whips and building an online events business from a converted stable

Ben and Simon Gray are regular fixtures on the trade show circuit, not to mention the digital space, with their burgeoning CYE portfolio.

The venue-finding and events business, the Grays say, is set for 20% growth y-on-y for the next five years.

The brothers were born in Kettering, Northamptonshire, four years apart, and business clearly runs in their veins. Their great-grandfather's bakery was a fixture in the town (see image overleaf, circa 1900). "I remember it as a working bakery and stealing Walnut Whips from the tray," says Simon.

The Grays moved to New York and then Chicago for four years when Simon and Ben were 14 and 10 respectively. It was 1991 and fond memories included, FAO Swartz, "the largest toy shop we'd ever seen, deep dish Chicago town pizza and yellow cabs," says Simon, who still has the skateboard he got on his first trip to NYC. "I was a shy British lad in baggy trousers and it took me until the age of 17 until I realised the powers of a British accent when surrounded by American girls. I learned quickly after that!"

Both boys cut their business teeth in the gardening game. "When I was 15 I used to cut a number of our neighbours' lawns in the States. My father reminded me I was using his mowers and petrol, so the profit margin was excellent!" notes Simon.

Both Grays are sporty, graduating from skateboards, to kickboxing and running. Ben has completed the London Marathon, while Simon has raced quad bikes in the South West and won a Novice Championship.

Customer is king

The brothers say their experiences Stateside played a big part in forming their business ethos. "Word of mouth is everything and the customer is king," says Ben.

Chooseyourevent.com (CYE) was started by Ben in 2000 and Simon joined in 2005. They now have a team of 11.

Simon had been working in sales recruitment and in print before deciding to throw in his lot with his brother. So, what convinced him to join Ben?

"The industry, Ben's passions and work ethic convinced me it was the right thing to do," Simon says, but admits to reservations. "I had a new company car, we had moved to our dream house and just had our son, so it was a little scary. I worked from home for six months, but soon moved my family to the south west, which is now very much home."

Simon now manages the sales teams and Ben looks after the day-to-day running and management of the website portfolio.

"My passion is sales and business development, where Ben is creative," says Simon. "As brothers, there's no hidden agenda. We both want the best for our clients and the business. This makes decisions easy."

The business has come a long way since Ben started it as an 18-year-old. "It was the time of lastminute.com and Friends Reunited, along with the Dot-com bubble which burst," he says. "I studied business at Milton Keynes college and was keen to get stuck into the business world. Growing up we were immersed in business, dinners revolved around our father, a successful entrepreneur, updating us on his own business affairs."

"I created chooseyourevent.com, a website that started with activities promoting paintball sites, karting tracks and local events."

Venue, wedding and Christmas sites followed, all evolving into a one-stop marketing platform for clients.

"We charge an annual fee for venues and suppliers to advertise on our various brands, with all enquiries sent directly to them. There is no commission charged," says Ben, explaining the business model.

When did they feel CYE was really taking off?

"When people knew the company but not me - I'd come a long way from working on my own into the early hours within a converted stable

in Northamptonshire," says Ben, who identifies his best piece of business being when Hilton became the first major group to sign up. "It allowed us to truly demonstrate our websites across the whole of the UK." Simon's early highlight was winning Mercure Hotel Group as a client.

The brothers describe CYE as "a retention model business" and believe a strong service ethos helped them survive hard challenges, including the dot-com fallout and recession, which they say was actually a perfect opportunity to get to know their customers. "Being flexible and adapting allowed us to survive those turbulent times."

Asked what they'd do differently with hindsight, Ben says he would have focused on venues from the offset and invested sooner to build the database faster.

"While 90% of our advertisers are venues, we still have a strong and loyal business promoting local events and activities. We also own three other sites, tankdriving.co.uk, rallydriving.co.uk and kartingtracks.com."

Their business is founded, Ben says, on "the absolute belief that online was the future of searching. In 2000 the shift away from paper directories had begun. The hospitality industry is a personal business and, as a lead generator, we never intended to replace that connection, but instead supplemented it by creating opportunities, bookings and contacts for the future."

"What has surprised us is the rapid shift from desktop to tablets and smartphones. You can understand why the hospitality industry is constantly on the move - being online is part of everyday life, from checking emails, searching, buying, reviewing and updating whether on the train, an airport lounge or at home."

Simon adds: "We are seeing the trend shift from online marketing and justification for renewal based on numbers of leads/stats to cold ROI decisions on renewal. While ROI is an important tool to review any advertising spend it's not always a clear indicator of the success



Ben Gray
Place of birth: Kettering
Education: Milton Keynes College
Current role: Managing director, CYE

Simon Gray
Place of birth: Kettering
Education: Barrington HS/MK College
Current role: Sales director, CYE



of lead generation.”

They are both convinced that market confidence is back and, for Simon, the biggest challenge today is recruitment: “While we have an amazing team here in Somerset, it’s taken us time to grow and build.”

Chooseyourevent.com has an office in Barrington, Illinois, so the brothers clearly have not forgotten their US roots and are looking to ramp up Stateside and in Europe, as well as looking “to conquer Asia,” says Ben.

How do they decide differences of opinion?

“We used to go kickboxing together and sort out any differences, but we felt a more structured and cosmetically pleasing conversation was required, so now it’s just going for a walk in the beautiful Somerset countryside.”

What do they think is the most positive industry development in recent times?

“The recession helped our industry. It was a

massive concern at the time, but what has emerged is a more resilient, focused and united industry,” is Ben’s opinion. He also believes the industry needs to sort out quickly turnaround times from enquiry to proposal.

“You only have one chance to make a first impression and, as a lead generator, we’re reliant on our suppliers responding effectively and efficiently, for mutual benefit.”

Simon stresses the importance of venues’ quality of replies to enquiries.

“Our business and renewal is only as good as the replies that venues give to the enquirer. It’s the first impression a corporate client has of that business and if it is not given the right level of senior attention, booking can suffer.

What is the CYE elevator pitch?

“We are unique in having four distinct websites providing venues with the opportunity to promote all aspects of their business for conferences, corporate and private events, weddings and Christmas

parties all manageable by a dedicated account manager. We’re 100% transparent with no commission charged and a free venue-finding service to buyers,” says Ben, who adds that, with 45% of CYE’s audience now viewing the sites on tablets and smartphones, the team is redeveloping all sub-brands to be fully responsive and compatible with different devices and easy to access.

“Chooseyourvenue.com is our focus brand, with a new site launch imminent and our hub is in final stages of development which will provide our venues with an enhanced platform for recording enquiries, conversions and updating listings and offers.”

Final word of brotherly advice for others building an entrepreneurial business?

“Plan and manage cash flow, it’s the lifeblood of a business. Embrace competition as a great opportunity to work out how to stand out from the crowd. Work with your clients as you’ll need them for the long-term,” says Ben.

Simon adds: “Set objectives and a clear understanding of what you are looking to deliver and make sure you achieve them. Think big and, above all, communicate with your team and don’t forget your customers!” **CN**

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