

Business brains help put food on charities' tables

PROFILE

Tony Lowe is using his entrepreneurial acumen to feed thousands of people in need.
Martin Baker reports

IT SEEMS so simple, such an encapsulation of old-fashioned, self-evidently worthwhile Victorian virtues. Just as "Every Good Boy Deserves Favour", so "No Good Food Should Be Wasted".

But, of course, it's much more complicated than that, as Tony Lowe, chief executive of the charity FareShare, whose mission is to avoid food wastage, is at pains to explain. This direct, stocky Stockport boy, with a passion for rugby and rarefied modern music (how many third-sector chief executives list Mancunian trio I Am Kloot amongst their favourite bands?) has had to build a commercial business, wholly

owned by his charity, for what seems such a simple, obviously beneficial task.

FareShare does "food banking" – one of the few types of banking unlikely to make lips curl at the mention of the word. The charity takes surplus "fit-for-purpose" product from the food and drink industry and distributes it to organisations working with disadvantaged people in the community.

"At first, the big corporations were understandably uncertain about what was going to happen to their products, their reputation and their brand. Now they've got the concept, and the solution we provide," says Lowe, who was

hired at the bigger charity Crisis to spin out its subsidiary, FareShare, into an independent organisation. FareShare went its own way, with Lowe at the helm, in 2004.

"Food banking is something that's been done for decades in the US and

Europe. But we do it in a unique way. We're a charity that's really a commercial business. We do take food from the food industry and distribute it. But the distribution costs money. That's where we have to generate money to cover our costs," says Lowe.

The need to generate money set the commercial

side of Lowe's brain to work – he has had successful spells in food retailing and store development at Marks & Spencer, and as a distribution and project manager at Alliance Unichem.

Lowe quickly identified a big problem. The management of major food corporations, while often well disposed towards the idea of helping the disadvantaged with food that couldn't be sold, was typically concerned about the commercial difficulties: potential lawsuits, branding issues were to the fore.

So Lowe fought commercial fire with commercial FareShare. He set up a



business, FareShare 1st, that provides a commercial solution to a commercial problem: "It costs businesses money to dispose of surplus food. We go to them and say we'll take the costs out of disposal," says Lowe, with a zeal verging on the evangelical.

"We created FareShare 1st. It's a unique solution, a waste management company that tries to ensure that surplus food is eaten. If it isn't eaten, the service we provide sees the food recycled; it goes to non-land-fill disposal. It's cheaper for companies to come to us than it is for them to take the food away themselves.

"Our first customer was Nestle – a huge corporate, but so supportive. They were dealing with a small social business, and they went out of their way to make sure their systems and so on could deal with us. We helped them move from 100pc of their surplus food in some divisions going to landfill, and got that figure down to just 5pc. And we reduced their disposal costs by 20pc."

So would Lowe describe himself as an entrepreneur in the third sector? A kind of charitable small businessman? "Frankly, you've got to be entrepreneurial to survive in this space," he affirms. "It's a hugely competitive sector that's dominated by the big brands. Corporate sponsorship, donations, and so on are dominated by the big names – Oxfam, Save The Children, Shelter."

FareShare isn't on a par with the "charity blue chips" yet, but Lowe has grown his

organisation from a turnover of £300,000 and five employees to £1.7m in income from the combined business and charity, with the business providing some 50pc of that, and 25 employees.

But what about FareShare's

social impact? Lowe's ambition is impressive: "We started with six depots, 180 charities, and feeding 8,000 people per day. Now it's 12 depots, 500 charities and feeding 25,000 people per day. Within three years, the target is to get 30 depots, dealing with 2,500 charities and organisations, feeding 100,000 people per day."

Lowe's route to his present position was somewhat tortuous. He chopped and changed in his early years,

doing an engineering apprenticeship rather than A-levels. He then decided to become a teacher, did A-levels late, but opted for a career in food retailing with Marks & Spencer during his degree. A spell at Alliance Unichem led Lowe to look closely at the pattern of his life: "It was well paid, but very high-pressure. I liked that challenge, but I realised my younger son had gone from three years old to six, and I'd hardly seen him."

He made the move into the charity sector in 1995, and ran the marketing for Oxfam's shops – still very hard work, but "with a better balance".

A stint back in the private sector as an internet entrepreneur and briefly back

in food retail with Waitrose took him back to charity and Crisis in 2003.

Lowe's enthusiasm for the work is outstripped only by his passion for the volunteer workers (many of whom are former recipients of the charity's food and training services): "They have a level of skill, passion and commitment that you just can't buy. They can – and do – do everything. They run the retail outlets, the finances, the lot."

The management skills required to deal with volunteers and commercial-sector employees are almost exactly the same, says Lowe.

"Basically, everyone wants

the same thing: caring, compassionate clear management. People want to

be managed well. They want direction and to be treated as individuals and respected. There is one difference. You can, in theory, demand that an employee does something he or she doesn't want to do. You can demand that of a volunteer, but they can say they don't want to do it."

You have to fancy that Lowe will use his skills to get the unpopular jobs done. He is, very definitely, a man with a mission he expects to become, if anything, more challenging.

"Some four million people in this country don't have access to quality food every day, and that figure is steadily rising in these troubled times."

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OLISCARFF



Tony Lowe

1963 Born
Status Married with two sons
Education 1972-79 Stockport School; 1985-87 Kingston University, Bachelor of Education (Hons) degree

WORK

1980-84 Simon Engineering Limited; engineering apprenticeship
1987-92 Marks & Spencer; student trainee rising to department manager
1992-95 Alliance Unichem; general manager, distribution
1995-2001 Oxfam Trading; rising to director of marketing for the charity's retail division
2001-02 Founder of The Alternative Auction Company; sold in 2002
2002-03 Waitrose; department manager
2003 Crisis; managing director, Crisis FareShare.
2004 - FareShare; chief executive

PLAY

Rugby fanatic as player and coach; supports Wasps and England
Music - a former punk, listens to current music, including Elbow, I Am Kloot and David Ford

Plenty to go round:
Tony Lowe at FareShare's warehouse in Bermondsey, south London

