

**You hate shops and shopping
but you're going to be fantastic at it.**



Sushi

Lunchtime traffic is building in Charlotte Street, London. I'm in a buzzing Japanese restaurant serving robotayaki. Look it up. I had to. I'm surrounded by trendy ad and music peeps including Mel and Sue, with whom I perceive to be their agent.

I'm unusually (for me) very early. Well, I muse, given I'm about to interview a retailer who's fast becoming a legend it would be rude not to. Then there is the fact that I'm very excited at meeting him. I'm waiting for Philip Bier, the man who recently made millions (his wife as joint partner) from selling their 50% share in Tiger back to Zebra, the Danish holding company. Tiger, if you didn't know, is packed to the brim with quirky and colourful Scandinavian designs: fun, inexpensive, irreverent and eclectic. Adored by middle-class Brits eager for the next new thing. My ringing mobile breaks through the chatter. Philip's warm tones announce he's running slightly late but that he will be with me at 1.45pm.

True to his word, Philip appears when he said he would. We exchange pleasantries and I willingly hand over the menu (well, it's confused the hell out of me). Philip replaces his glasses with another pair. Round, silver frames with strong lenses. European looking (from Tiger, £4) Philip gently peers at me, questioningly, holding the menu but being a coward, I say 'whatever you'd like Philip'. He duly orders.

Under the skin

And so on to the business of getting to know Philip. Who is this man? Who is his wife? How did they find success? In just 11 years they launched 44 shops and hired 1000 staff (including Christmas temps, normally 600 staff). In the main and certainly in the early days, without any form of marketing. What great insights could I uncover from this formidable success story?

Philip was born on the 25th November in Copenhagen. A Sagittarius, if you're into astrology. A liberal, open city with a great transport system and lots of cycle lanes. No need for helmets either. It was then a safe place and is now. And self-sufficient.

Philip's mother and father espoused a liberal philosophy, full of positivity and encouragement to be your own person. To be self-sufficient. A theme which runs through his life and focused his thinking. Making many friends including a guy called Lennart Lajboschitz who proved instrumental in Philip's later life. More of that shortly. Incidentally, Philip has a brother and a sister, both famous. One, an Oscar winning film director (who also directed *The Night Manager*). Can you guess who? OK then, Susanne Bier. His brother is Deputy Chairman of Zebra and sits on Harvard's University law school advisory board. Are you proud of them I ask? "Yes, absolutely." They are a close family and Philip speaks to his parents 4 times a week. Despite their age (80 plus) and that his mother has endured 400 hospital visits in 20 years due to a chronic illness, they are both very independent. And upbeat. They recently all met up in Cannes. And even tried their luck at a Casino or two. His parents travelled there independently. Without fuss.

A Hollywood moment

In 1985, Philip came to the UK to study photography at The London College of Printing. His aunt drives him to the halls of residence, catches the eye of a woman and remarks "isn't she great?". Philip then meets her in person moments later, as in the mayhem of moving in, their identical A0 (that's very large) portfolios get mixed up. Philip marries Emma and the rest is broadly history. Philip specialised in architectural photography and became a freelancer with success.

As is the very essence of freelancing, work tends to be feast or famine with obvious pressures; even more so when children arrive on the scene. Philip and Emma have a son and daughter. Their son, now 19 is altruistically motivated and intent on making the world a genuinely better place. He studies product design at St. Martins and loves it. Their daughter 12, is bright with a razor-sharp insight and an ability to see straight through you. Philip muses with a broad grin and hopes that she'll become a lawyer. She's very self-sufficient too.

So how do you deal with the pressures of living, running a family and working together, I ask? Philip doesn't hesitate and says it's literally a 50:50 partnership. At the beginning, Philip needed the time, energy and focus for freelancing and for Emma to be a mother. Regular contact and communication is key. As is respecting each other's contribution and knowing that neither opinion is more valued than the other. Their relationship is and always has been, equal. The true definition of partnership. Philip laughs and tells me that the only time it changed was when Emma reported into him at Tiger, but as he admits that was only a structural thing and he was a lousy boss for her!

I have an inkling that this is not entirely true as Philip and Emma left a growing business with 44 stores, a team of 1000, an adoring customer base and room for exponential growth. Interestingly, it all started through Philip's brother and his friend Lennart who I mentioned a while ago.

Fate lends a hand

Philip and Lennart were school acquaintances. After a prolonged gap of 15 years they kept bumping into each other when Philip would visit Copenhagen and properly reconnected. Photography at the time was fast forwarding into digital, becoming less appealing so Philip was opportunity hunting. Fate lent a hand, as it often does in life, and they started talking Tiger as Lennart headed up Zebra.

How did you know it was going to work, I ask. Philip looks at me and explains that the Danes and Brits are not so different. Both have a desire and interest in Danish design. Design which is affordable, fun and different. Zebra were advanced and knew what they were doing. The UK was the right place and the timing perfect.

Daunting though it was, they put it all on the line. £200,000 later (£50,000 re-mortgage, £50,000 from Zebra, £100,000 bank loan to JV company) Philip and Emma opened their first Tiger shop in Basingstoke in 2005. At the time they were pioneers. Desperately underfunded but in control of their own destiny. And in partnership 50:50 with Zebra; they'd started the Tiger stalking. Decisions were easy but controlled tightly; Philip and Emma would pore over store designs and layouts late at night, submitting them to Copenhagen for approval. Zebra had the experience and were practical and helpful in feedback. They didn't pressure the Biers for more store openings. They were patient. British appetite for inexpensive and fun Danish design grew noticeably and so in 2006 (1st October) with the Basingstoke store already breaking even, they opened their second shop in Hammersmith. The entrance bang opposite Primark, which was then one of their most successful London stores. Philip was amazed they got the lease. The two-year term was the challenging part but the position was too good to miss.

Tiger roars

Indeed, it was. They opened without an iota of marketing. Not even a pamphlet. They were besieged. Literally. So much so that Philip had to ask Primark Security for help, fearing customers might be crushed. I imagine Philip was elated and excited. He was but he, Emma and the team worked late into opening night just to ensure enough stock for the second day. Fast forward to 25th December, Christmas Day, after just barely 3 months open, they found their investment returned. A performance that shot the store into the top 5 of the whole group. Such was the desire for Tiger and in such a special spot. In Hammersmith, of all places too.

On the subject of finding that perfect spot which so many retailers (I still bear the scars of my own experience) spend hours, days and months drowning in often over-optimistic analytics, Philip has a unique solution. An insight into truly establishing a customer profile for an area. He visits the nearest baker. From their product range he deduces who shops in the area, forming a picture of the customer. Why a baker? Well, a baker will only produce what customers want. He/she is only going to endure one day of poor sales before adapting to meet the customers' needs. Simple eh?

The appetite for Tiger grew and continues to do so. Indeed, Tiger is re-branding to Flying Tiger, ensuring a consistent and increased global presence, avoiding naming issues in various countries. Philip and Emma built their network and team that exists today through a simple, ethical ethos championing equal opportunity and "furiously" enforcing it. Prizing the ability to drive and contribute, from a fair and level playing field. It's a very Danish thing and deep rooted within their characters and psyche. An Area Manager told Philip that "Tiger is family; no one is left behind". A legacy that any boss would be proud of.

Behind the scenes the challenges to set up and run a retail business are huge and varied. Many customers haven't got the foggiest about what goes into establishing a retail operation. Given that we were now an hour and half in (and I still wanted to know about the true Philip) I focussed on the retail property and placemaking aspect of his experience.

Prop Co.'s, listen up...

When asked how much property owners or their agents know about retailing, Philip was slightly reserved. "There are great people and not so great people. The best are those that don't bullshit, do their research and are honest. For example, if you've been to our shops you know that we operate out of small spaces, so when an agent sent me a property spec for a 40,000 sq. ft. retail store in the Outer Hebrides, I guess he hadn't done so much research." Philip does have time, however, for sharp landlords and/or estate managers who focus on customer desire and the right mix befitting the local demographic. Not going for the best deal and merely filling space. Not polarising the retail place with the usual cacophony of big boys and coffee shop chains. In this respect, property owners and agents have to do much more to understand their retail clients; their business, brand experience and their customers.

My follow up: "Are shops distribution centres, marketing channels or places where people buy products?" Philip pauses momentarily. "Probably a mix of everything. It's pure interaction with customers. It's about your brand and engaging with them, frequently." He recalls an email (one of many and all of which he reads). It was from a 10-year-old school boy in Stratford. The boy proudly told Philip that he would go into Tiger every day. Some days he would have £1 left over from his lunch money, other days nothing but he was excited to go to Tiger. Philip tells me it didn't matter if he spent money or not, he was entirely absorbed by the brand. Retail will disappear if it's not great. If the experience doesn't enflame the desire to go in, again and again. The newest generation only go in if they want to.

My penultimate question, [which incidentally has been the subject of an in-depth research piece we've just published with intu](#), centres around what are the biggest barriers to established and indeed, global brands from entering the UK? Philip is quick to answer. "In the main it's all about occupancy costs, business rates and a total lack of flexibility. If landlords were more engaging and less focussed on covenants, parental guarantees and so on, Tiger, for example would have opened up in more locations years ago. And would have been a major draw for footfall. Landlords really do need to wake up and open their minds. Just yesterday, I was talking to a major EU retailer with hundreds of shops but it is this attitude, coupled with business costs that simply don't stack up."

Last but not least: "If the PM could do one thing to support the retail sector, what would it be?" Philip replies "Boringly but so important, business rates!"

What makes the Tiger tick?

Time to leave dry topics of establishing retail business in the UK to dig deeper into Philip's character. I ask Philip what it was like to realise for the first time he was a millionaire. Philip's reply is fast, "We had security. We could spend without thinking through every penny although we don't spend huge amounts. It was a safety net. A secure future hopefully, for our children." Philip's character resonates as measured, warm, kind and a considered human being. Humble. Not gauche or arrogant. Self-sufficiency is a key thread running through his life. Would he do it all over again? No, not with everything on the line and the risk of exposure of losing everything. He smilingly says that he's ten years' older and time is therefore shorter to make up any short fall! Of course (silly me) Philips still shops in Tiger. His last purchase was a bottle of water (currently 2 for a £1). I know the bottle well. It has a design with a little panel cut out and

a fish appears to swim in the water. Makes me smile every time. Perhaps I should get out more, I ponder?
It is Tiger to the core.

The future of Mankind, anyone?

Philip starts each day without an alarm clock. If he's not up by 6 he considers it a lie-in. An avid reader Philip likes gritty, 'who done it' thrillers. Unsurprisingly, the FT features at the weekend along with the odd copy of Vanity fair (for the investigative journalism and great photography). Currently, Philip is immersed in Elon Musk's autobiography. Clearly Musk has had a massive impact on Philip. Philips drives a Tesla. In a rather fetching metallic brown. Musk would be the one person he would meet, if he could meet anyone in the world. He believes, Musk is a contemporary Henry Ford; a pioneer. Realising the potential of electric cars and solar energy; Philip is pretty sure he's seen the future. Interestingly too, Philip muses that mankind's survival is entirely dependent on being able to live on other planets other than Earth. Tangentially, Richard Branson enters the conversation: "I wonder when he sold his record shops, did he know at the time that digital would be the all-encompassing catalyst for change it was and is today?" I have no idea, but as I mentioned to Philip, I always loved the story of Richard running his business from a phone box. Call me romantic but it's the stuff of dreams.

What irritates him? Mobile phones. Groups of teenagers using phones to communicate with each other even though they're all in the same room. Plus, this current trend to share absolutely every detail about yourself is insane. He grins.

Who does he admire? Nelson Mandela for his incredible generosity without any desire for revenge or retribution. Instead a mantra of focussing on the future and not dwelling on the past. A man of huge generosity. Tony Blair and Gordon Brown (in the early days) when they had a genuine desire to drive change to make Great Britain a truly social and democratic country. Making the Bank of England responsible for interest rates. Wise move.

On the charity front, I read that Philip had donated masses of presents to St Mary's Hospital when some 'less than nice people' (Philip used a much stronger term!) stole presents from the children's ward. Philip had read about it in the Evening Standard and called the hospital that evening. Six nurses duly pitched up at the Oxford Street branch of Tiger. Taking baskets, they started shopping. Instead of selecting 3 or 4 presents in volume, they picked individually for the 200 children, relevant to their illness. For example, a glowing ball for a child with sensory issues. Such was their attention to detail and care for their patients. "Well, we had the stock and it was absolutely the right thing to do." Philip says, shrugging his shoulders. The lovely thing is that the hospital ending up sharing the over-supply of presents with other hospitals.

As to life lessons, Philip is adamant that you should truly believe that you can do whatever you set out to do. Don't let yourself be put off by anyone telling you different. Or listening to the negative thoughts in your head. Enjoy every minute of life. Get the best out of it even if you have a chronic illness (like his mother). Trust your instincts. If it feels wrong, it probably is.

The minutes have zoomed past since we first met. I've enjoyed every one. Philip's mother is responsible for the title of this piece. It was the first thing she said when Philip talked to her about Tiger. Mothers, god love 'em, they really do know best.