

# Board Stiff

**Ed Robinson gets some unexpected help with the development of a new sawmill product. This is market research with a difference.**

It has been suggested that diversification is the solution to rural malaise. Nothing is forever, we are told. "Be flexible," and, "Adapt to meet the challenges of the future," say the experts. It is easy for them to say, but is it easy for us to do?

The answer is a short, but very emphatic, no. Business advisers will point out the stages in the development of a new product or service, and list the many pitfalls. Alas, this is alien territory to most people who try to scrape a living in the countryside.

First, we need to identify a demand and then create a product to meet it. It must serve its purpose well, and leave a profit when all costs have been deducted from the selling price. Marketing is the most important element in the chain. Get that wrong and the best product in the world will fail. It certainly is complicated, and there are many traps to ensnare the unwary.

I do believe that diversification could hold the solution to the problems of High Warden's woodlands. Hence the sawmill, the first element in the production line that will eventually lead to a range of saleable products, but where do the ideas come from?

To sit down with a blank sheet of paper and wait for a new product to miraculously appear is not an option. A number of years ago I attended a gathering and, while there, I was given the idea for a

possible product; not exactly a new one, but a variation on the existing.

With the seeds sown I tossed the idea into the back of my mind and forgot about it for some time. The idea remained dormant until Phase One of the sawmill was completed – and then it was awakened. At last I had time, not only to think about it, but to take action.

My regular pub is old and full of character. I visit it in the evenings to enjoy the company of the locals who have even more character than the building, although most claim to be younger. They are a wonderful, diverse and friendly bunch who patiently wait for the slightest opportunity to trade witty insults, unmatched in quality anywhere. It is rumoured that a passing rhinoceros once called in for a pint, and needed counselling afterwards.

I entered the bar to the usual chorus of mixed greetings, and ordered my drink while the others continued their conversations. Then my friend Malcolm, who had assisted with the sawmill roof, turned to me and asked: "Done anything interesting today, Ed?"

That was a perfectly normal question, often asked at the beginning of a conversation. However, the reply I was about to give was not to be expected by the company, all of whom, by then, were listening.

"As a matter of fact, I have," I announced. "I've finally managed to cut the boards to make my own coffin."

The responses ranged from raucous laughter to a silence of disbelief, punctuated with words like "Really?", "You're kidding!" and "Bugger off."

"No. I'm serious," I assured, and went on to explain that the idea came when I was at a funeral. The deceased was buried in a cardboard coffin, and that is exactly what it looked like – cardboard. I understood why it was chosen, but it would not do for me. I agree it is pointless to bury or burn good-quality timber, but as there is a plentiful supply of sustainable conifer, why should I settle for less? All of my working life has been spent with



*"Long enough, but should there be bark on the outside?" Ed sizes up his final resting place.*

trees and timber, so how could I do anything else? A box made of virgin conifer was my only way out – and I would make it myself.

Originally, I only thought of making a coffin for myself. However, as time passed I began to wonder if there could be a bigger demand. Now I think there is. On price, it should at least compare favourably with the cheapest alternative.

"So that was the thinking behind the plan," I continued, "but it was not until yesterday that I was able to get the timber I wanted. Sheila came with me to the sawmill and we cut the boards this afternoon."

There was a pause, and then a question.

"Are you seriously telling me that you got your wife to help you to make your coffin?"

"Of course I did. Working the sawmill single-handed isn't on," I insisted. "Anyway, I promised I'd give her a discount on the price of

the coffin if she gave me a hand with the boards."

For some peculiar reason, this example of my generosity was received with mirth and derision.


One of the kinder suggestions was that it could have been one of the most pleasurable experiences of Sheila's married life – adding, after further thought: "Come to think about it, I bet a lot of women would like to help make their husband's coffin!"

"I know, Ed," said an eager new contributor, "you could offer a Make-Your-Own-Coffin service, and charge them extra for doing it."

"But there could be problems of safety," observed a doubter. "What would the HSE say if someone killed themselves before they finished their coffin? Maybe we'd better forget that idea," he concluded, to knowing nods of agreement.

The last question of this particular session was about to be asked by a

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member who could not disguise the hope on his countenance: "Yer coffin, Ed... Planning to use it soon?"

The laughter and banter ceased, as grey cells engaged in a frenzy of electrical activity. At the time I was not aware that we were about to enter the next stage of product development: marketing.

"You know it isn't such a daft idea," conceded one member after some thought.

"Maybe not," agreed another, "and more people are complaining about the cost of funerals."

"What kind of wood are you going to use, Ed?"

"Mine will be made of *Abies grandis*," I said. "Its commonly called the giant silver fir, but neither name will mean much to you. It isn't often grown and you've probably never seen one."

At that point, memories of felling some of those magnificent trees took me away on a nostalgic tangent. I remembered the abundant blisters in the bark that would squirt or ooze their sticky, highly perfumed rosin at the slightest provocation. I also recalled the discomfort of trying to work in clothes that stuck to

you because they were saturated with it. At the end of the day, you peeled off your trousers and stood them up for the night. It was a truly unforgettable experience – and that stimulated further mental activity.

I often stand accused of being an awkward old git, and as I have no wish to disappoint anyone – even when I am dead – I quickly hatched a plan. I could make my coffin using boards with bark on – the more bark the better. And the coffin could be made with the bark on the outside. If I was to do that, imagine the faces of the underbearers, as they tried to pick up the coffin to take me on that final journey. Yes, that would have been hilarious, but, as I cannot bear the thought of missing the fun, I will probably abandon the idea. Back to reality...

"However, customers will have a choice of timbers," I continued: "Sitka, pine, larch, or anything else that's relatively cheap. I've even got some *Leylandii*, if you want to annoy your neighbours."

By now thoughts had been fully gathered and everyone had their own ideas.

"I've been thinking, Ed. You were

only planning to make coffins, but we could offer a full service. George here runs a taxi business, so he could supply the vehicles; and Ron works in a care home so he could be head salesman."

Both were the suggestions of a solicitor among us who was immediately engaged as the writer of wills. A retired journalist was then given the obituary department, and the two present who owned mechanical diggers agreed to share the earthworks.

The pub would cater for the wake, and a funeral director, absent florist and an insurance adviser were all appointed. One of our number was a surgeon, who had been overlooked for employment. Fortunately, that oversight was soon spotted, and promptly rectified, when he was rebranded as a procurer and transferred from theatre to the Department of Medical Mistakes.

At the end of the night, a new business had been formed. It had grown from concept to maturity during two hilarious hours in the local hostelry. The details had been thrashed out; the appointees knew their responsibilities, but – and most

importantly – the specification for the product had been finalised.

A choice of locally-grown timbers, from sustainable forests, would be available to make hand-crafted coffins. Appropriately, all boards would be secured using rigor mortis and tenon joints; and a tongue 'n' groove option will be available for women who prefer it.

And, the name of this new enterprise? 'Exit with Ed'.

In the beginning, the idea had simply been to add value to cheap timber, but with the help of agile minds in my local, other spin-off benefits had become evident. As the night passed, and the discussion progressed, it had an astonishing effect on the participants' wellbeing. An unusual lustiness prevailed, which decreased proportionately as members left. To a man they bade a hearty farewell, adamantly declaring that they had never felt better in their lives.

Now I open the pub door to a barrage of assertions as to just how well everyone is. I no longer have to ask.

*Ed Robinson*

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