

the press conference with JOHN CAUDWELL

Four years ago, I sat on the quayside at Barcelona's yacht-cluttered port and interviewed mobile phones tycoon John Caudwell. We got on famously and later knocked back bottles of San Miguel and Rioja on his Sunseeker before I boarded an Easyjet flight back to more familiar altitudes.

Today, I am sitting across his basic mahogany-veneered desk at the Phones4U HQ, a converted mill in Stoke-on-Trent, and I am a total stranger to him. Our previous meeting is as dead in his memory as a mobile on the bed of the Med. Nada. Well, I feel it's always important to make a big impression.

To be fair, Caudwell is generally bad on remembering faces and it's hardly surprising given the break-neck pace at which he charges through life. Since 1987, he has been frenetically building his fortune and is Britain's fastest billionaire with, apparently, £1.6 billion and the No. 29 slot on *The Sunday Times Rich List*. And when he's not expanding the business — currently up for sale — he cycles across countries for his children's charity.

Now 53, Caudwell has all the trimmings that come with the tycoon tag: the sprawling mansion, transport machines for all surfaces and an expectedly complicated family structure: five children with three women.

A one-time Michelin repair man, Caudwell has a tough image in the press, born from being a straight-talking and highly competitive go-getter who pushes himself and his staff to the limits. The last time we met, his powerful frame was bare-chested, so he clamped the vice-like crocodile clip of my mic to his right nipple. Today he is in a sober black suit and I sense he has deliberately clicked himself into a low gear for our chat — and he can barely wait to get back to full throttle.

There seems to be a recurring theme in your press that gives the impression you are a bit of a hard nut. How do you feel about that?
Perhaps historically I have been seen as too abrasive in some of my approaches and the papers can only feed off what I allow to be created. With my employees, I have always tried to create a meritocracy where good people are properly rewarded and poor people are let go. I can be hard driving, but if I am paying a top manager, say £500,000 a year, then I am going to expect value. Sometimes I am a bit too fast to criticise but I like to see people being successful and the retention of my employees — especially at the senior level — over the long term is



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tremendous. It is very much a team effort where everyone is winning.

I think people are probably a bit confused about me from my press. Everybody knows I do a huge amount of charity work, so they see that soft, benevolent side.

Then there is the harsher side of the press when they accuse me of being a bully. I was even called a Victorian mill owner by some union leader, which gets repeated.

I admit I was a bit annoyed when I read that, although I'm not sure what they mean. It is probably a negative connotation — but I am sure there were some very good mill owners!

There are often a number of minor inaccuracies in stories but most of the stuff I get is fair enough. Any negative press can be disappointing, but you get hardened to it. Besides, on balance, most articles are 80 per cent good, especially in recent years. I am pragmatic with everything in life and the same goes with my press.

Portrait
Paul Pickard

You hit the headlines when you banned your workers using email. How do you feel about the way that was handled by the papers?

That was fascinating. I was very happy with that, because it ended up being quite controversial. I got so many chief executives ringing up asking me how could they do the same thing.

The story was a bit misunderstood. I am not never was completely against personal email. What I was against was the cancerous misuse of email — all the chat and distribution lists in particular — which led to inefficiency. This was mainly about business emails where we were not focused or efficient. We cut that out and have consistently performed better and the savings in terms of time saved is probably in tens of millions.

For me, the net result from that story was that some people thought I was a crackpot and assumed I was completely anti-email. On the other side, I had people saying, "What a great thing to do, I wish I had the balls to do it."

JOHN'S NEWS SCHEDULE

Newspapers

'We live out in the sticks and can't get a paper delivered, but I am not in the habit of reading a paper each day. I am always up at 5.30am and mostly cycle to work (14 miles and 45 mins each way) and my day is so full I rarely have a spare minute. I might flick through some headlines and my PR department will draw my attention to anything I should read. I scan the FT a few times a week and I read *The Sentinel*. I usually get *The Sunday Times* and dip into whatever section takes my interest. Even then, I have to be very selective because of time. I virtually never have a minute to waste.

Magazines

I usually read those when I am travelling and read any yachting, flying or cycling magazines, whatever I can get my hands on. And, of course, our industry trade mags like *Mobile News* and *Mobile*. I subscribe to *Time* — that is brilliant and always has fascinating articles.

What do you think of the *Sunday Times Rich List* and the validity of its estimations?

When I was first on the *List* — about seven, eight years ago — it was like, "Wow, you have made it. I had come from nothing, I had been penniless, so it was quite a significant landmark, but it is actually not that important to me any more. As I have become more wealthy, then wealth has been less important. Much more important is what good can I do, what can I contribute to society. If I die tomorrow and my epitaph says: "Here lies John Caudwell, one of Britain's billionaires" — well, that would be dreadful. If it says: "Here lies one of the greatest British entrepreneurs, who then used his skills to help society" — great. So, that is my sole objective for the remaining part of my life. I am not going to be so concerned with making money — that's not to say I will not be making money, it is in my blood, a natural instinctive thing for me to do — but it is far more important that I feel I am contributing something. You don't want to die with a few more billion and feel you have done nothing because making money is hollow.

Erm, so making £1,600 million is hollow? It might save some people a lot of bother if you would explain that...
Actually, no, it is not hollow! It is quite exciting and if I were broke now, then making money would drive me — but I haven't got that much anyway.

So, is the *Sunday Times* list just guesswork?
Well, I won't be worth £1,600 million, so it is wrong about me. Given that they don't know all the detail, they are never going to get it spot on, but it was not a totally unrealistic assessment. Generally, they base wealth on share prices, but I am not public, so even I don't know what my shares are worth.

John Caudwell's FANTASY FLIERS

What would be the Fantasy Headline of the story you'd most like to read?
"Britain is crime free and prisons close due to lack of inmates". Or, "England Beat Argentina 5-0 to win the World Cup".

What would be the Fantasy Headline involving yourself?
"The Caudwell Charity Institute finds a cure for all diseases affecting children throughout the world".

What would be the headline you most dread?
"Cycling, yachting and flying to be banned alongside fox hunting". Or, "Sorry, John can't take your call right now".

Who would you most like to interview and what question would you ask?

I have no ambition to interview anyone famous but I do enjoy listening to friends, colleagues and acquaintances that have interesting opinions and stories. Some of the best interviewees are the people around us.

What question would you never answer?
In principle I answer most things upfront, but sometimes you can't...

What would you like the headline to be on your obituary?
"He used his life to improve his wealth and his wealth to improve lives". Or, "Sorry, John can't take your call right now".

Television

I quite like ITV news, or CNN, but I am not particularly loyal to any news station. I channel-hop until I find something fascinating. My favourite recent programme was *Planet Earth* and I watch *Coronation Street* when I get a chance.

Radio

On my own in the car I enjoy the *Today* programme but when I am with the children it's either Radio 1 or our local *Signal* Radio.

Web

The net is fantastic, but I avoid doing it myself because it is too time-consuming waiting for websites to come up, so I get my PA to search for me — she is my brain. When the pages are ready, I will quickly look, then ask her to get another site while I make some calls. There is always someone I need to speak to so I let her get on with it. I look at the weather on bbc.co.uk for when I am flying and easyjet.com if I am organising a family holiday.

So do you know what you are worth?
I know I have a few million in assets, which is not a huge amount, but I won't know what the company is worth until I sell it.

Alan Sugar says he can tell who is really rich by how big a cheque they can write. He can sign one for £100 million without breaking sweat.

How about you?
Lucky Alan. But no way could I write a cheque for £20, £10 or even £5 million, because all the value is in the company.

So, what is the biggest cheque you could write?
I would be embarrassed to say, so I am not going to tell you. It varies and sometimes it is not very much. The reality is, I live a pretty good life, I am not short of money ever, but it is irrelevant because I don't want to write those cheques!

Sticking with money, there are always inconsistent details in articles about your luxury toys. What is the accurate line up?

(Laughs) Yes, they say all sorts. The truth of it is that I have one old aeroplane from 1980, which has two ordinary piston engines. It's probably worth £45-50,000. That managed to become a fleet of jets! I have got a helicopter — the cheapest four-seater you can buy, probably worth a touch over £100,000. I fly myself and it doesn't actually cost me any more than commuting in an executive car. I drive a Bentley Continental. The house (Jacobean, worth around £10 million) has 17 to 18 bedrooms — not 40, which has been written. According to some stories I have a flotilla of boats, but I actually have one yacht — a 94ft Sunseeker, which is in the £2-3 million range. I have a flat by the river in London and the only other thing is an investment ski flat in France, which I get for two weeks a year.

You did an interview with the *Sunday Mirror* to offset a kiss-and-tell by an ex-girlfriend. What happened?

That was my fault. I was in a very emotional situation and said too much. That was a big regret and, if I had my time again, I would not do it. It was a failure on my part and it is very rare that I don't control my emotions. With that particular article, I was in a state, so it was not an interview I should have done. It was just wrong and I was foolish for allowing myself to be pushed into it.

You had a run-in with your local evening paper in Stoke, *The Sentinel*. Can you give me the background to that?
First of all, I must say that we have a great relationship at the moment and I have no issue with the paper. I have been getting some favourable press, but about five years ago they did something that really irritated me badly. It was an injustice and I despise injustice.

No interview would be complete without some discreet product placement. We aim to be a bit more up front, so feel free to pull *The Blatant Plug*... The Caudwell Charity helps thousands of very sick and terminally ill children throughout the UK. Help us to change families' lives. Visit www.caudwellcharity.com or call 01782 600869.

I did an interview about the difficulty I had recruiting skilled electrical engineers for our repair shop. It was a very measured, balanced article about the need for better engineering training in the Stoke area. I was completely happy with the piece, but it was the headline and the photo. They used a picture of me with my arms folded, looking really pissed off with the front-page headline: YOU ARE NOT GOOD ENOUGH. That photo had been taken ages before to do with some litigation. I had with Bentley for a bad car they had sold me. That pose was purely for that other story. And the headline meant the whole city of Stoke-on-Trent thought I had said they were not good enough to work at my company. How many people would have then read the article in depth and realised I didn't say that? The headline and picture are 95 per cent of what people remember.

What were the ramifications of that story and how did it pan out with the newspaper?

I complained bitterly and asked them to retract it, but I couldn't get any co-operation. I did go to the Press Complaints Commission, but I don't know the actual details of what went on because my PR at the time was dealing with it. All I know is that I didn't get any satisfaction. What disappointed me most was when *The Sentinel* wouldn't print a retraction I said, "All you have to do is put in an apology and say the headline was wrong". But I couldn't get them to do anything, which I thought was grossly unfair because it was crystal clear that it was blatant misrepresentation. It had been a perfectly pleasant interview, then they presented me as an ogre.

It was unfair and it had a negative effect on my family life for a while. My wife got threatened and bullied in the queue at Tesco's. Someone was cursing and swearing at her, and it really upset her. It was very unpleasant. To treat someone like that is wrong. I didn't get anyone saying anything to me — I'm a big guy and I can take care of myself — but from that story there was antagonism which showed up in different ways from people who would otherwise be on side. And it potentially served to further enhance the negative image. First you get the bully, then the Victorian mill owner, then you get me supposedly saying: "You are not good enough." It just helps to perpetuate a picture that is a completely wrong one.

Is a local paper and its readership important?

Yes, absolutely. That story marked the start of a low ebb in our relationship with *The Sentinel*, which was a bit ridiculous because we are a business that has generated many thousands of jobs in Stoke. So, we are important to the city and, equally, *The Sentinel* is important to me and my company. But we have enhanced the communications now and all is well. I won't get all things written the way I want, but that is life. They have written a lot about my charity recently, which I am grateful for.

The Sentinel is pretty crucial to me. I am well known in the area and when I go out in the city, it is probably a bit like when Richard Branson goes out in the UK. To have people relating to you in a reasonable way — not necessarily a friendly way, but at least a neutral way — is important. You don't want them to have a load of preconceived ideas based on something you did not say. I think any local newspaper can make a difference to the quality of life of an individual. It is very influential.

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