



My conversation with the Dalai Lama

John Lynch talks promotional apparel with His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet...

On September 16, I had the distinct honour of meeting and speaking with His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet in a private audience in Prague, Czech Republic. The meeting was an intimate, closed setting with a few dozen business leaders and their families in attendance, so we had a very rare opportunity to spend a few hours up close and personal with this living legend.

I guess most people would have a hard time finding a connection between 'Buddhism', 'Changing the World' and 'Promotional Apparel'. For me, the three came together in perfect harmony as I sat and listened to the kind and powerful words that the Dalai Lama used when he responded to my question.

Divine timing

Let me digress for a moment. In last month's article (Does Compliance Really Matter? *Images* September 2013), I suggested that running a clean, safe and compliant company is more than just the right thing to do – it's also good for business. I argued that running an ethically and morally sound business can actually be profitable.

So the timing was almost 'divine' when the Dalai Lama argued the same thesis in his remarks to this group of entrepreneurs and business owners.

The crowd of executives peppered His Holiness with a wide range of challenging questions. One business leader asked bluntly, "Is there a contradiction between using ethical business practices and delivering results to owners and shareholders?"

The Dalai Lama gently and convincingly made the case that business owners, in particular – whether big firms or small family enterprises – have a huge capacity to do good in the world via their businesses. And it doesn't even have to cost much. He argued that if you treat your employees, including those of your subcontractors, well, the benefits are real, and they are huge. You end up with dedicated, quality-minded employees who work harder, work better, make better products, and make fewer mistakes. If, as a result of their job, they can take good care of their families, have food on the table, and live happier lives, then they will work happier too. It all seems so obvious doesn't it?

The discussion was moderated by one of the greatest and most famous entrepreneurs and philanthropists from the USA, Bobby Sager. Bobby made his fortune years ago, and stays active in business as chairman of Polaroid among other board seats. But his true passion and purpose in life now is literally 'helping others.' Bobby does amazing things for people all over the world – Africa, Asia and elsewhere. He doesn't just donate money; he donates his time, and most importantly, his mind. He is an amazing human being, and I'm proud to know him.

When it was my turn to ask a question, I was standing a few feet away in the front row. I asked: "Your Holiness, we saw a video earlier of some of the amazing activities Bobby Sager is doing for the Tibetan Monks, and for the world. And I'm wondering, we are all business peo-



The Dalai Lama (left) imparts words of wisdom (and demonstrates his best squeegee technique) to John Lynch (right).

ple here, we work in businesses or run our companies, and we have our busy lives. So if we are not so ambitious as to go out there and change the whole world, say on the other side of the world, what advice do you have for those of us living in our small towns, with our families, about how we can change the world in a smaller way much closer to home?"

Answering the sceptics

Let me be clear for you sceptics: I am not your classic, left-leaning 'save the whales'/'no nukes'/'anti-vivisection' radical. I am quite conservative (I adored Ronald Reagan!), and for a long, long time, I was annoyed with the concept of corporate social responsibility. I felt, as *The Economist* has argued on its pages for many years, that the entrepreneur's most important contribution to society and 'the greater good' is to run our business well, and create more jobs. I still personally believe that is my most important function in

business. My favourite Scotsman, Adam Smith had it right in my book.

But as time goes on, and perhaps as we grow older, one can't help but start thinking about more than just, "how can I make more money?" Priority number one is, and will always be financial security for my family, but after that has been achieved, what more is there? Well, raising your kids to become happy, well-balanced adults is certainly at the top of the list. After they are all grown up, then it's just a matter of time before the topic of 'giving back' to society crops up. For the Bill Gates and Richard Bransons of the world, they do it in big, very public ways.

But for Mary and John Doe Screen Printers, who perhaps haven't amassed quite the same fortune as Sir Richard, the urge to help out is just as strong. As I look back at what we've done at Lynka over the years, I now realise that I was a CSR advocate, not via words but through deeds. When a region in Southern Poland was tragically flooded a few years back, and thousands of people lost everything, we immediately packed up hundreds of shirts and sweats and shipped them to the local Red Cross. We didn't get any tax deductions (there were none in Poland) and we didn't get any public relations out of it at all. We just did it because we felt awful for those poor people.

When the American Chamber of Commerce decided to 'adopt' an orphanage and support the children with clothes and toys, we chipped in, again without the public glory. We've printed free T-shirts for dozens of charity events and organisations over the years, including Amnesty International, Junior Achievement and others. Now trust me, we were not a rich company, and we couldn't afford much – but if we felt we could help in some way and it wasn't too much of a financial strain, we were there. I also donated my personal time by sitting on boards of schools, a local youth Philharmonic and a few charities.

The other thing we do often – and I mean, all the time – is to allow groups of students into our company so they can see and learn how business can be such a great force for good. We have students of all ages – from 5 year olds to MBAs – come through and we donate our

employees to spend time with them, and teach them what we do. It is tremendously fulfilling for everyone involved. Our hallways are lined with thank-you letters from schools and groups from around the world.

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A Holy conclusion

So getting back to the Dalai Lama, his Holiness's conclusion to my question, 'what can us little guys do to change the world' was this:

"Our aim, our goal within this century, should be a peaceful world and a world where no one goes hungry. We humans have the ability today more than ever to achieve this. We have the ability to transform society, to create a more compassionate society. In our lifetimes. How? We will create real peace in the world through our own inner peace.

"So every single one of us has this opportunity to make a contribution for a better world. To change society, first we need to change the individual. One individual changes himself, and then he affects ten people around him. Then those ten influence 100, then one thousand, then a million. That is the only way to change the world. So the initiative must come from the individual. So each of us, you see, has the opportunity to make a contribution for a better world. That is what I

fundamentally believe."

After the meeting, I went up to Bobby Sager and asked him to sign a copy of his beautiful book, *Beyond the Robe*, which outlines the programme he created with the Dalai Lama to fund the science education of Tibetan Monks. All the proceeds of the book sales go to the programme. This is what he wrote:

"May you find the way to help as many people as possible in the world. I am sure you will succeed! Bobby."

May you, dear Reader, find 'inner peace' in whatever it is that you do. **■**

Postscript: OK, enough of this 'soft stuff'. I am on a plane right now, flying to America's largest screen printing exhibition, the SGIA in Orlando Florida, to find out what new and exciting developments are happening across the pond in our industry. Next month, I promise a hardcore piece on inks, screens, off-contact, and DTG printing for all you printing freaks!



John Lynch, is CEO of Lynka in Cracow Poland, which he founded in 1992 and grew to become one of the leading apparel distributors in Europe. Lynka's success is largely attributed to its 'one-stop-shop' full-service business model. The company has received more than 40 international awards for the quality of its printing and embroidery. John has an MBA from The Wharton School, and is a past American Chamber of Commerce Entrepreneur of the Year, in Poland. jlynch@lynka.eu, www.lynka.eu.

Do you like what you read here or do you think John is 'full of bunk?' Email him with your comments and feedback: lynka@images.com.uk.

