

# The Victoria Masterson Interview: Back in the driving seat

Sir Tom Farmer sold his Kwik-Fit empire for £1 billion in 1999. Now he's back with a plan to help a host of budding car repair entrepreneurs

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“I feel like I’ve been neglected,” he winks. “People said, there’s Tom Farmer coming out of Kwik-Fit, he must be going to retire. But retire for me is re-tyre. There are four of them and they go on a car.”

The diminutive Scot has never made any secret of his faith and describes a recent trip to Rome with Cardinal Keith O’Brien, the leader of Scotland’s Roman Catholics, as something like an epiphany.

“When we came back he said, you know, Tom, I went to Rome as a 65-year-old archbishop and came back as a 25-year-old cardinal. That’s great, because it’s about how old you feel. I feel 27, but I’m actually 63.”

Farmer, who is currently hacking through the Malaysian jungle on a four-week expedition combining business and good deeds, attributes his success to “high energy” from the genes of his parents and a touch of divine intervention.

“God gave people different things. Some people have great intellect. But what thing has He given me? A good dose of common sense.”

He has lost none of his patter since parking Kwik-Fit and wastes no time embarking on a detailed sales pitch for his new venture, Farmer Autocare.

It works like a franchise but he prefers to call it a “co-ownership scheme”,

designed to encourage budding entrepreneurs to start their own car repair business by providing capital, expertise and administrative backup. This model will allow Farmer to capitalise on his knowledge, while satisfying an altruistic desire to clone new wealth creators.

“I don’t want to be involved in operations,” he says. “If I wanted to do that I would go out and buy a company that’s got 100 branches rather than assisting people in running their own businesses. It’s all very well for people to say we need to be a more entrepreneurial country. Unless you’ve been there and done it you don’t know how difficult it is. If you’re going to say that to people you’ve also got to say, ‘this is what we’ll do for you’.”

Prospective co-owners put up a percentage of the start-up costs and can buy themselves out after four years. Farmer’s team will provide everything from fully-equipped garages to three-monthly profit and loss accounts and will endeavour every year to pay out “as much as possible” in a dividend.

“This is a cash business,” he says. “By doing all this it gives the owner the freedom and ability to concentrate on the three things that really make the business: your team, your suppliers and your customers.”

The scheme has a key condition; owners can only open a maximum of three garages.

“That’s the ideal number for someone to manage in the automotive repair industry without giving them unbelievable stress. I’m not looking for somebody who thinks being in business is about living to work. I want people to work to live.”

Farmer admits he too often let Kwik-Fit take over his life. “I’ve no regrets about anything but one thing I do wish I’d done is spent more time smelling the flowers. There were times I was in the office working when I should have taken time off for personal things.”

He claims the best thing he ever did was “marry the girl next door”. He started courting his wife Anne when he was 15 and running his first business, Kookers Kleaned. She helped him in his first shop and when Kwik-Fit started to grow

Farmer says she never made demands on his time. “She just gave me time and space to do it. People have got to be aware that if there are outside pressures and they can’t handle it, they will definitely fail in their business or their personal life.”

Farmer’s two children, John, 35, and Sally, 36, both live in London but he is protective of their privacy and prefers not to talk about them. His office is full of pictures of his three grandchildren. He says the highlights of his year included taking Sally’s seven-year-old boy to Parkhead for the Celtic-Hibs league game and his granddaughter to see the Abba tribute band Bjorn Again, twice.

As the youngest of seven children growing up in Leith, Farmer felt a “tremendous security” because he was always surrounded by people and believed his mother never slept. “When I went to bed she was there. When I got up in the morning she was there, when I came home from school she was there, she was always there. That was an important part of my upbringing.”

Respect and discipline were impressed on him time and again. “There are principles you should try to adhere to,” he says. “The principles of Christianity are the same as running a business. In business you’ve got to love your neighbour too. It doesn’t mean you have to like them but you have to respect people and not cheat them.”

Farmer doesn’t always inspire as much adulation as he’d like. He rescued Hibernian Football Club with £300,000 in 1990 but the fans have complained that he hasn’t invested enough and shows no interest in football, something he has never denied. The club’s £14.5m debt is a black hole he has attempted to subsidise through his investment and property companies. One of these was behind Hibs’ unpopular and subsequently shelved plan last year to move to new-build land at Straiton outside Edinburgh. The move would have helped pay off some of Hibs’ debts by selling the Easter Road stadium for about £10m but prompted deep suspicion among fans.

“The board have said they’ve got to secure Hibs’ position and they’re trying to make sure that staying at Easter Road is part of the plan,” says Farmer.

He is characteristically defensive when asked about the links between his companies and his 20 directorships, including troubled tour operator MyTravel, which is chaired by the former head of Farmer's Kwik-Fit insurance operation, Eric Sanderson.

"I lead a very busy life," says Farmer. "That's what keeps me so young."

He points out that while he was growing Kwik-Fit he was developing numerous other businesses. He had Budget Rentacar franchises across four countries with 2,600 cars. There were 127 photo development shops under the Superphoto brand. His property businesses continue to be involved in all sorts of deals. Eighteen months ago one of them took over Regalion, a 40-year-old company that was listed on the London Stock Exchange. Another deal involved a £350m investment in 20 office properties with Lehman, the investment bank.

Farmer has also made a bundle of private investments in Scottish entrepreneurs including restaurateur Liz McAreavey and is now looking forward to putting something back in a more controlled way. "If you're brought up in a society where people shared it does rub off on you. When things work out well for you as they've worked out well for me part of the pleasure is doing things for other people."

Farmer advises would-be entrepreneurs to "just do it" provided their plan is achievable, they have adequate finance and a product that somebody wants to buy. "You've got to have a can-do and will-do attitude. But there's no point going into business unless it's going to improve the quality of your life. If it's going to be a drudge, don't do it."

Surveying the traffic on Queensferry Road from his office window, Farmer postulates on the "exciting period" ahead and admits he's glad to feel back in the driving seat.

"What I want with my life now is to be in total control of my own time. Am I getting there? Yes."

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