



■ Talking money.... Michael Coates, founder and managing director of Commercial Expert, explains why you shouldn't always take the first piece of advice you're given

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KATIE LUNN

Ignoring the bank's advice was my best decision, says Michael

Michael Coates made it in the cut-throat world of finance after ditching the advice of a high street bank. JEZ DAVISON met him...

SEVEN years ago Michael Coates received some advice that was to change his life.

He was told by an unnamed banking adviser to pull the plug on the business he'd started just a few months earlier.

It took the Darlington-born entrepreneur a matter of seconds to reject the advice - and it was the best career decision he ever made.

He says: "The fact that my business is doing well shows that you shouldn't always take the first piece of advice you receive. I started out offering mortgage advice but when the financial crash came, rather than closing the business I switched the focus to commercial finance and the move paid dividends. "I won't tell you which bank the adviser worked for but needless to say he's not there any more!"

In contrast, Michael is becoming increasingly visible in the world of commercial finance. He

re-branded the company, originally called Chestnut Finance, to Commercial Expert and concentrated on building relationships with a network of accountants, lenders and investors to offer customers a wide range of alternative finance options. Now he can point clients in the direction of a myriad of solutions, including commercial mortgages, asset finance, secured loans and cashflow finance.

The hard work has paid off, with Commercial Expert hitting the £500,000 turnover mark in 2014 - a figure that's projected to swell to £600,000 this year. Last year the company acted on behalf of more than 250 clients and worked on a £63m pipeline of loan deals, with many resulting in firms creating jobs and additional wealth for the local economy.

Michael is now building for future growth by recruiting a new business development executive and an advisory board

Who has inspired you most?

My dad Colin is my role model. He's an all-round top bloke with a fantastic business ethic.

Biggest achievement (personal or professional)?

Providing for my family by creating a sustainable business.

What car do you drive?

Jaguar XJ.

What's your favourite restaurant?

HanaHana Japanese restaurant in Newcastle and Kyloe, a gourmet steak eaterie in Edinburgh.

Favourite tippie?

It has to be a glass of red wine.

Favourite book?

I honestly don't read novels. I prefer articles in magazines

» Questions and answers

and newspapers.

What's the last thing you listened to on your iPod?

I was listening to Cream anthems on the way here. I grew up with dance in the 1990s and it just sort of stuck.

Who or what makes you laugh?

Silly, off-the-wall humour - dogs hanging out of car windows make me laugh.

What's your ideal job, other than the one you've got?

Being a tree surgeon has always appealed. I like the outdoors.

What's your greatest fear?

Anything bad happening to my wife and kids.

Snakes are also a no-no.

What's the best piece of business advice you have ever received?

"Leave friends and family to BT" (they used to have a special friends and family package for customers). Sometimes it's a pain to employ the people who are closest to you.

And the worst?

In 2007 a bank advised me to go bust. I've proven that it would have been the wrong thing to do.

What's your business mantra?

Act with honesty and transparency and make staff feel part of the team.



How much was your first pay packet and what was it for?

£6.30 for delivering newspapers at the age of 12. (I was under age!)

What's your biggest extravagance?

My family!

How do you relax and unwind?

By going to the gym.

Where is your favourite Teesside place?

Saltburn - I love the fish and chips there.

member "with bags of banking experience". He's confident that new laws, which will impose tougher regulations on financial advisers in a bid to boost transparency in the sector, will provide opportunities rather than a threat.

"We need to embrace regulation that will help to clean up the industry," he says. "I think that quite a few lenders will fall by the wayside."

Michael has managed

to keep his own career firmly on track, although it started inauspiciously. He lost his part-time job as a paper boy after lying about his age and struggled to settle into the academic rigours of high school. He ditched the idea of becoming a graphic designer because he was "really, really bad at drawing" and eventually found work moving heavy-duty scenery in a theatre. That gave him some decent work

experience to put on his CV but, as the years went on, he decided to branch into other areas to give his young family more financial security.

In 1999 he started a property venture with a business partner and then gained Certificates in Mortgage Advice and Practice (CEMAP Levels 1, 2 & 3), which allowed him to become a qualified mortgage adviser. By 2004 he had become sick of work-

ing for other people so he flew solo and launched Chestnut Finance in Darlington.

For a while it went well before the financial crash battered the life out of the mortgage market and forced Michael to make all but one of his eight staff redundant. Then came those ingenious words from the banking adviser which triggered the switch to commercial advice and the rebranding of Chest-

nut to Commercial Expert.

Now Michael has six staff, a growing business and a balanced lifestyle which includes plenty of downtime with his wife Claire and their two children, 13-year-old Holly and Evan, 10. He has also swelled his property portfolio to 14 under the banner of Abbigate Properties.

It has taken a while but this finance entrepreneur has finally hit the jackpot.