

# IN THE FIRING LINE

Sir Alan Sugar is far from sweetness and light when he meets Jane Cameron.

What's new with Sir Alan Sugar? Well, certainly not his manners. When I meet him, briefly, at a charity event in Leeds, I foolishly think his renowned Apprentice persona might be a bit of an act. Not a bit of it.

When I hold out my hand to introduce myself, it's like I've linked arms with the Queen. With a look of utter disdain and half-hearted hand, he just about manages to return the courtesy.

My opening question doesn't exactly break the ice either: "Do people in the North do business any differently from those down South?"

"I shouldn't think so," he says, "the principles are exactly the same. It's a strange question. Have you got an inferiority complex?"

No, Sir Alan, it was just an opportunity for a joke, really. So I try something less flippant: "Do you think people have a point when they say you may have spawned a culture of bullying in the workplace?"

Sir Alan is affronted: "The Apprentice gets lots of comments. It wouldn't be England if not. I still doubt it, because 90 per cent of the comments are very positive. You will always get a few idiots who can't go along with the flow, particularly a few journalists who want to write a few things different."

I wasn't the first to raise the issue of Sir Alan's belligerent style of people management – back in 2007, former CBI director, Sir Digby Jones, said: "Businessmen do not turn up in a Bentley and scream 'You're fired!' at people."

"It portrays business in a nasty light; prehistoric in its treatment of people and utterly brutal in its pursuit of the bottom line at all costs.

"Alan Sugar does everyone a



great disservice by doing it. Young people will be turned off because they think that they will be shouted at by a horrible, fat, old, rich bloke."

But enough of his manners – journalists clearly aren't his favourite breed, which is not surprising considering that the Daily Mail labelled him a miser during his tumultuous ownership of Tottenham Hotspur football club in the nineties – for which he won £100,000 damages, which he gave to charity.

But what does the famous entrepreneur, who began by boiling and selling beetroot, say about business in these difficult economic times? Surprisingly, the man renowned for shouting "You're fired" more than "You're hired" is urging firms to do their best to hold onto staff: "I want you to steer away from getting rid of people, that's not a nice thing to do... If you try to keep your people and think about the future, not looking for profit but keeping the business going in some way or another. Prepare yourself for two or three years time, when you're coming back. You have to cut your costs down and if it's possible, don't get rid of people."

"I cannot sit here saying it's all going to be wonderful and rosy. Looking around and understanding that you may have allowed some luxuries in the boom years and may need to start cutting down on those."

He likes to stick up for the common working man (as long as they're not working as journalists). In a

Radio 5 live radio interview recently, he berated the financial industry for its irresponsibility and mourned the job losses caused by the resultant credit crunch.

"I'm more sympathetic to someone losing their job in a factory than towards bankers quite frankly, let's not worry too much about them. Let's worry about the people they harmed."

But with a net worth of £800million he's unlikely to need to cut down on his luxuries. The 61-year-old last year sold his electronics company Amstrad (Alan Michael Sugar Trading) to BSkyB for £125million – actually a fraction of its 1980s £1.2billion worth. He confesses his "one" luxury – a private plane with the registration G-SIRA – is part of a promise to himself to "never stand again in a queue".

Is Sir Alan a man of the people or an unwilling celebrity who'd rather hide himself away? I ask how useful PR is to business – thinking his appearances on the Apprentice and several TV chat-shows must have boosted sales back at his stable of property, aviation and electronics businesses (Amscreen, Amsair, Amsprop, Amshold and Viglen). He answers as if his high personal profile is irrelevant.

"It depends on what the business is I suppose... PR has always been important in the electronics industry, we have a relationship with the trade and national press. PR is very useful for new product promotion."

This man of contradictions and few pleasantries is said by those who know him to be funny and generous – something that doesn't always come across. Steve Barnes, former marketing director of electrical goods store, Comet, interviewed by Northside last year, said: "Amstrad was one of our favourite suppliers because he was so funny. You had to take four boxes of tissues because of the laughter. He's also a quiet giver to charity, both Jewish and non-Jewish."

Indeed the event at which I met Sir Alan, a gala dinner for Make a Dream children's charity, saw him donate his fee – worth an unspecified number of thousands – to London's Great Ormond Street Hospital.

And as guest speaker, he also helped to raise £100,000 for Make a Dream.

Founder Stuart Levin said it was the first time a speaker at the annual event had donated all fees to charity. He added: "The man is a total enigma. I was surprised to find he is in real life exactly the same as he is on TV." Maybe it's not just journalists, financiers and apprentices he's rude to...

And finally, although he declines our request for his Favourite Facts, he does name Harrogate as his favourite Yorkshire town. "It seems like quite a nice place," he says in his usual effusive manner.



## BUSINESSNEWS



### Driving forward

Following a growing demand in the automotive and roadside sector, the Leeds office of award winning property agent Colliers CRE has appointed Angela Calow as associate director of its new automotive and roadside department.

With over 13 years' experience in the property industry, Angela was previously at Lambert Smith Hampton in the motor trade department, and has spent the last few years in residential valuations.

Angela will be responsible for setting up the new automotive and roadside department in Leeds, complementing the equivalent departments currently located in London, Birmingham and Bristol as well as working closely with the Leeds based valuation and retail teams.

### Confident firm come to Leeds

Leading inter-disciplinary consultancy McBains Cooper has announced the opening of a new office in Leeds as part of its continued strategy to expand further into the regional markets, extending their reach based on regional opportunities and client demand.

While the general market conditions remain unstable, the expanding firm is confident that there are opportunities within the regional markets worth capitalising on.

David Dodd, newly appointed director, will head up the Leeds office and will continue to develop McBains Cooper's regional operations and focus on opportunities in and around northern cities such as Bradford, Sheffield and Hull.

### Three is the magic number

Three Yorkshire media companies have merged to form a new media and technology company, Kohd.

Leeds-based design company Mediant has come together with Skipton-based website business Thorpe Enterprises Ltd and software firm Idealogic in a deal that will see all three businesses operate move to a shared 7,000 sq ft office and studio base in Embsay, outside Skipton.

The merger has created a group that boasts an annual turnover of over £2million and more than 20 staff. Overnight Kohd has become one of the leading marketing agencies outside London by turnover, and anticipates leaping straight into Design Week's annual Top 100 list of media agencies.

