

Client: Hamilton Bradshaw
Source: South East Business (MAIN)
Date: 01 May 2011
Page: 15
Reach: 13231
Size: 415cm2
Value: 1249.15



THE BOSS

This month: ROBERT ENEFER

NAME: Robert Enefer **COMPANY:** The Conference People

POSITION: Managing director **AGE:** 60 **DRIVES:** Subaru Forester **LIVES:** Eastbourne, East Sussex **STATUS:** Married

FAVOURITE MEAL: Cold salmon, asparagus, Jersey Royal potatoes and mayonnaise

FAVOURITE BOOK: "Sons and Lovers" by D.H. Lawrence

Putting on a show

"We are seeing it almost daily," said Robert Enefer, managing director of The Conference People based in Eastbourne, West Sussex, talking about the coalition government's much discussed economic recovery. "It is absolutely correct to say the economy is growing. A lot of this is to do with talking and thinking positively: we almost got into this mess with a lot of negativity by talking things down. In hotels, venues and people's offices, we are getting a very good vibe coming through."

Mr Enefer is well placed to make a judgement. His company, which turned over £1.5 million in its last financial year, manages delegates, runs events and finds venues for clients across the world. He has just finished the world social marketing conference in Dublin, which is owned by The Conference People and ran over three nights with 800 delegates. Ogilvy Public Relations World-wide sponsored the event, and Mr Enefer has just signed the contract for the next one, which will be in Toronto, Canada, in 2013. "We have some very exciting things happening and set great store by our high standards."

In 1986, when The Conference

People started, its first event was for Matchbox, "They had a giant pantechnicon which looked like a Matchbox toy, and they wanted to attach this lorry to country house hotels around the country, each of which had to accommodate 200 people," Mr Enefer recalled. "They were very specific about catering, access times and other issues. Even by today's standards, it would be very challenging." In 1996, The Conference People organised Euro 96, the European football competition in London, and did everything except the fans' side of the event. "That is the third largest sporting event in the world, and was the most extraordinary thing I have done in my business life."

Mr Enefer was born in Eastbourne and was educated at Eastbourne College. "When I left school I had the hospitality industry in mind."

He spent two years in Germany working for the United States army in non military roles, which helped to focus his mind on the hotel industry. In 1968, he returned to England and started a correspondence course

for membership of the Hotel and Catering Management Institute. Beginning as a trainee manager at the Grand Hotel in Eastbourne – which included a year in the kitchens – Mr Enefer took his first assistant manager's job at Brighton's Grand Hotel before moving to London and joining Grand Metropolitan Hotels. The London Marriott was his last London job before returning to Eastbourne where he was deputy general manager at the Cavendish Hotel. He joined the De Vere hotel group, but after it was taken over by northern brewers Greenall Whitley, Mr Enefer had another change of focus and set up The Conference People in 1986.

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Today, The Conference People employs 20 people working on four floors of a Victorian villa in Eastbourne. As well as complete management and venue finding, the delegate management side of business is called U Book. Mr Enefer started the business

with Maggie Doyle, who had a similar experience of the hotel industry. "Very sadly, Maggie died of motor neurone disease ten years ago." Before she died, The Conference People became a limited company. Today, Maggie's niece Jacqui is the company's business manager and Matt Wilson is events director. "I would always want to expand, but we fill the four floors and the name of our company says it all – people are the most important thing. And 20 people is a lovely number to work with in the way we focus on delegates, guests and everyone else we meet."

Inevitably, the company – which has 1,000 clients – works with celebrities, and has recently been involved with James Caan, the entrepreneur and "Dragons' Den" star, who has been a speaker at events; and Jamie Oliver, the chef, who is a key author for Penguin Books, who Mr Enefer has worked with for 22 years. He put on an event for Penguin in Brighton this year, and is planning another for next year.

In all this, Mr Enefer is a stickler for high standards and was a founder member of the Meetings Industry Association more than ten years ago. "My main passion is maintaining and developing standards in



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the industry, because they can be very variable." Below par performance can include poor response times, organisers of events and conferences not understanding what they are about, and not being open to negotiation when it could offer benefits which are not immediately obvious.

During the recession, Mr Enefer's clients still held events and conferences, but at more budget conscious destinations. "Last year, we had fewer events outside the UK. This year we have seen a dramatic turn around, and budgets are being released – although perhaps not so much in the public sector as in the private sector. But there, the world is looking more rosy."

