

Client: Hamilton Bradshaw
Source: Evening Standard (Main)
Date: 12 November 2012
Page: 51
Reach: 700895
Size: 578cm2
Value: 36234.82



HAMILTON BRADSHAW
Investing in people with passion

Caan's secret for success: Observe the masses and do the opposite...

Lucy
Tobin



GROWTH CAPITAL **HOW LONDON'S** **ENTREPRENEURS** **ARE BUCKING THE** **ECONOMIC GLOOM**

THE smart Mayfair headquarters of James Caan's private-equity business is designed to impress. Outside, the personalised number plate on a black Ferrari shows the ex-Dragons' Den investor is enjoying the trophies of success. Inside, a silver name plate on Caan's office door leads to a room carpeted in a deep-pile purple; a large desk is dwarfed only by an imposing boardroom table, there are orchids, pot plants and statues of bears. Yet in this Mayfair office, he is not the only James Caan.

"Is it James Caan with a C or a K?" I'm asked by the secretary. Turns out that James Caan-with-a-C has hired Khan-with-a-K as a property consultant at [Hamilton Bradshaw](#). But as soon as I arrive upstairs in Caan's lair, it's clear who is in charge, and that the entrepreneur who quit Dragons' Den is still bubbling with enthusiasm at the opportunities available to start-ups.

"Now," says Caan, "is the time to take advantage, people complain there's no money out there, it's tough, the markets are challenging – but that's the time to strike. Observe the masses and do the opposite, that's my motto. Everyone else is complaining about conditions and looking the other way, but you get in there."

He is speaking from experience. After Caan – then still known as Nazim Khan

– moved from Pakistan to the UK with his family, he spent his teenage years selling some of the leather jackets made by his father's business direct to his

friends in his free time while still at school – "for a good profit", he writes in his autobiography. Afterwards, a spell working at a small recruitment agency in Holborn inspired the entrepreneur to set up his own agency, Alexander Mann, from a windowless former broom cupboard in Pall Mall because it was the only way he could afford an impressive address. By 24, Caan, who changed his name by deed poll after seeing an actor of the same name listed at the end of *The Godfather*, had his own Rolls-Royce Silver Spirit. He went on to sell Alexander Mann to a private-equity firm in a £93 million buyout.

With so much success so young, little wonder Caan was asked by the Government to head StartUp Loans, paying out

£2500 student-style loans plus training for young entrepreneurs, in an effort to tackle youth unemployment.

"To be given the opportunity to work with Government and give young people the opportunity to start a business is an honour. It's not just about the money, it's also experience, you get mentors alongside the capital. It will create thousands of businesses and jobs. It's not a handout, but a business loan, and it will reward the taxpayer too," Caan says.

He picks Prince Charles' Prince's Trust as an inspiration. "It recovers nearly 60% of its loans, there's no reason why we shouldn't see the same, or better," he says. "I passionately recom-

mend mentorships – because in business, if anything can go wrong, it does. And if you can ask someone who has

done it before how to avoid those pitfalls, then it will save you a lot of time and money."

In Dragons' Den, he saw almost 1000 entrepreneurs pitch their business ideas. Across his three decades in business, he has seen many more.

"I've learned all about the key ingredients to success and will be talking about them at the Business Connections event next week," he says (see panel, left). "Innovation and creativity are where opportunities lie for small businesses. Everyone gets worries about trying to think of something new, but they don't have to.

"It's much easier to start a business that exists and do it quicker, faster, cheaper or better. Look at easyJet – they didn't invent the idea of flying, they took an existing model and did it

better. The other day, I went to [the Mayfair restaurant with only two food options] Burger & Lobster. It was heaving. There was no booking scheme and I met the owner and asked why he had felt able to open a burger restaurant in a city filled with them.

"He made the point that he'd found a niche angle – no menu, everything at one fixed price, where you go in and pay £20 for a lobster, where everyone else was charging double that, and where everyone else had stuffy reservation systems, he had the opposite. Take something that exists and do it better."

Caan himself doesn't plan on opening any restaurants, but says he is enjoying



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being back on TV, thanks to the launch of his CNBC series The Business Class. A year after he quit his role in the Den, he says: "The experience was invaluable. At the start, doing TV was quite daunting – I'd never done it before – but by the end, I'd already spent £1 million making 14 investments in the show. I didn't want to be a deal junkie, and those 14 were taking up so much time that I didn't feel I could commit to another series."

Since then, Caan says he has sold 10 back to entrepreneurs. "Some have done better than expected, some worse," he says. "But that's business."

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YOUR CHANCE FOR DATE WITH DRAGON

HOW to make the most of entrepreneurial opportunities will be top on the agenda at the next Business Connections event, An Audience With James Caan, on November 27, when he will be grilled by members of the Standard's small business club.

The event runs from 7.30pm to

9.30pm at the Emmanuel Centre, Westminster. Doors open at 6.30pm. Tickets are free for Business Connections members, annual membership just £40. Admission £50 for non-members.

Full details at:
es-bc.co.uk



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Caan do: the former Dragons' Den star spent £1 million on 14 investments in the show