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CASE STUDY: GANDYS BROTHERS

Spurred by tragedy to build flip-flop empire that gives something back

At Work with the FT
Rob & Paul Forkan
Founders, Gandys

Brothers pledge 10 per cent of profits to children's homes, writes *Alison Maitland*

It would be easy to miss the small sign beside a brick archway in southwest London marking the entrance to the headquarters of Gandys. Yet this office-cum-design studio where brothers Rob and Paul Forkan are building a flip-flop phenomenon is very firmly on the map.

A stream of visitors arrives for meetings, some talking on a sofa on the first-floor landing, others in the studio or the large room on the floor above. The atmosphere is one of controlled frenzy.

"There are so many meetings, I lose track of time," says Rob, 27, emerging from the top room to greet me.

Paul, 25, passes on the stairs with a group of men and goes into the studio.

It is just under three years since the brothers set up Gandys in their one-bedroom flat in Brixton as a way to rebuild their lives after their parents died trying to save them and their two younger siblings in the 2004 tsunami that engulfed the Sri Lankan hotel they were staying in.

Branding their idea as "Orphans for Orphans", they vowed to put 10 per cent of the profits towards children's homes in countries hit by the disaster. Their mission and flair have won the support of high-profile entrepreneurs, including Sir Richard Branson.

They have collaborated with design brands such as Liberty and Serge DeNimes, won big orders from US and Australian retailers, pushed sales over £1m in this, their second year of trading, and expect that figure to treble to £3m-£4m next year.

They have been feted at Buckingham Palace and Downing Street and have published a book, *Tsunami Kids: Our Journey from Survival to Success*.

Today, they feature in the *Timewise Power Part Time List* for a different reason – their unconventional work style. The brothers take a flexible approach to running the business, each working three to four days a week. "We didn't want a typical Monday to Friday 9-5 type job," Rob explains. "To be creative, you need to be out and about. You can't get inspiration sat in an office 24/7."

How do they spend the week days they are not "at work"? "It can be anything, just going down to Portobello Market, Camden Market, Brixton Village. A lot of it is inspiration stuff and

Career Clips

Have you had a conventional job?

"No," says Rob. "When we got back to England, I was a lifeguard, then I became the first employee of CV-Library, a big online job board."

How did you learn business skills?

"Our parents ran a social enterprise and fashion company, so I learnt work ethic and attitude, which are the fundamentals."

"I know how to work with our manufacturers and build a strong partnership, because I've spent years travelling in southeast Asia."

Do you have any mentors?

"It's quite good working with my brother. You've got somebody you can trust. We've been through so much together."

"Our parents mentored us for so many years, travelling and educating us."

How do you relax?

"On Thursday nights, Paul and I try to play five-a-side football with our mates. We also go to the cinema. They are two situations when you cannot get your phone out."



Orphans for orphans: brothers Rob (right) and Paul Forkan

clearing your head. We don't have a fixed routine because of all the different things we're doing, but we're permanently on call."

Talk of working hours and days, and even the concept of work/life balance, seems rather alien to Rob. It is not just that the brothers are part of the "millennial generation" – who tend to have different expectations about work. They also spent their teenage years in a highly unusual way, travelling with their family in India.

Rob says they are going to Sri Lanka for a fortnight to build a children's home. A planned visit to Australia, where their flip-flops have launched, will include some time to travel with their sister.

"It all blends in," he says. "If I'm in China I'll take two days to go and visit the Great Wall and the temples, not just check the factories."

"I went to Croatia with my old boss for our birthdays on the bank holiday, but I came back with a million ideas. You never switch off."

"It's not a short-term thing we're building. We want a brand that lasts generation after generation. We want to become a big brand, but we want children's homes all around the world, and that's the focus."