



The Business Doctor

Entrepreneur and 'Make Me a Million' star
Ivan Massow's monthly surgery



Barça boys: Stijn Teeuwen and Alex Vaughan in one of their specialist properties

The estate agents' problem: *finding the right Spanish retreats*

The patient

When they met at a convention three years ago, Alex Vaughan and Stijn Teeuwen immediately recognised something in the other, and not just that they were both commercial city lawyers earning big salaries. Both men had the same feeling of disillusionment; surely, they confided in one another, there must be more to life than this?

"I was getting up at six and shoe-horning myself onto the Tube to get in at eight, and I only lived at Canary Wharf," says Vaughan, who then found himself chained to a desk for up to 12 hours a day. "My wife and I just thought: 'Is this the world we want for our kids?'"

Joining forces, Vaughan and Teeuwen set up Lucas Fox, an estate agent specialising in middle- to higher-end Barcelona apartments

for people who'd prefer to cycle to work beside the Mediterranean than wedge onto the Jubilee line.

"It's summer here nine months of the year," says Teeuwen, smiling, "and Barcelona is a major city: art, food, culture and architecture. Then there's the beach."

The diagnosis

There are 16,000 Brits living in and around Barcelona. They tend to be more urban and picky than your stereotypical expat. "Catalonians tend to think that renovating an apartment means ripping out the original features and sticking in PVC windows," says Vaughan. "We knew there were people looking for something a little trendier or which retained the original features."

Lucas Fox is one of the three major estate agents specialising in

CV

Alex Vaughan, 31,
and Stijn Teeuwen,
32, estate agents

- 1994 Teeuwen studies law in his native Holland, Vaughan in Southampton.
- 1998 Vaughan joins London agency Tequila as an ad executive, working on Marlboro and BBC accounts.
- 1999 Teeuwen becomes a construction project manager. Vaughan joins the Queen's solicitors, Farrer & Co.
- 2001 Teeuwen founds Careera, an online job-seeker site for graduates.
- 2002 Teeuwen becomes a co-owner of a property consultancy specialising in developments in Andalucia.
- 2003 Vaughan begins private property development in London.
- 2004 Both move to Barcelona and form Lucas Fox.

the market. Increasing commissions isn't an option because of market competition, so Vaughan and Teeuwen have sought to expand into villas. This has worked less well than expected as they don't have such an intimate understanding of the market and its customers.

The cure

Vaughan and Teeuwen spend a lot of time helping new purchasers find mortgages and lawyers, sort utilities, bank accounts and tax advisers, for which they don't charge a Euro. As most customers would happily pay a fixed fee for this, a separate service could be offered to all clients – whether they end up buying with them or not. They could even employ a mortgage and home-insurance broker to do the conveyancing and look to establish a simple property-management service. As well as extra income, this would develop an ongoing customer relationship.

As far as expansion goes, they should stop targeting a client group they don't identify with and focus on the demographic that has served them so well. Villas are fine as long as they're of the type this sector will appreciate: classic fincas or architect-designed Bond pads.

Vaughan and Teeuwen would be better off concentrating on their brand values and expanding Lucas Fox to similar locations in Spain such as Valencia and Ibiza, and even other countries such as Portugal and France. As most business is generated from their internet site – www.lucasfox.com – replication wouldn't be excessively expensive. Once people know the USP – that the company won't have property on its books that the owners wouldn't live in themselves – it can become the first point of call for this type of buyer in every cosmopolitan centre in the Mediterranean. ☎

Make an appointment
If you need help with your business or are in the process of starting a new one, then email Ivan Massow at businessdoc@esquire.co.uk