

training I received in both fields was invaluable. Particularly in the United Kingdom, many CEOs and FTSE 100 board members start as CPAs; we all benefit from a firm grounding in finance. Indeed, in addition to serving as CEO, I led the finance function at Cobra for its first 10 years. My time at Ernst & Young also provided an excellent professional foundation. I learned how to operate in a global firm and was exposed to a variety of businesses from the inside; this gave me insight into how I might run my own. As a law student who debated in the Cambridge Union and stood for university union elections, I learned how to build relationships, make a case with passion and reason, and get people behind me.

But entrepreneurship was always calling to me in the background. My great-grandfather had pursued this path: He built his own business (and lost it three times) before eventually amassing the family fortune. He then became a noted philanthropist and a member of the House of Lords in India. I was just three years old when he passed away, but one of his daughters, my great-aunt, told many stories about him, so he remained an important influence.

When the idea for Cobra struck me in that Cambridge pub, I couldn't let it go. I was a beer lover but often found lagers to be gassy, bland, and bloating; ales, meanwhile, were too heavy and bitter to drink with food. I wanted something in between—cold and refreshing but also smooth. Each night I found myself experimenting, mixing brews that were then on the market to find the right blend. At the same time,

I knew that launching a beer brand was too ambitious for a first venture. I needed to acquire some business experience first. When my polo team at Cambridge did a tour of India, I saw an opportunity: selling Indian-made polo sticks in the UK. That was a way to open lines of commerce between the country where I'd been raised and the one to which I'd emigrated as a student. Although India was then a closed economy with a socialist model, I anticipated liberalization.

So in 1989 I teamed up with Arjun Reddy, a friend from Hyderabad, and we launched our polo-stick-importing business. I knew from my days running for office at Cambridge that when it comes to selling, there's no shortcut. You have to go door-to-door with your pitch. Soon Harrods and Lillywhites were clients, and we'd expanded into other traditional Indian goods, including leather, silks, and garments.

Within nine months, however, we'd been introduced by chance to India's largest independent brewer, in Bangalore. It employed the country's finest brewmaster, an Indian biochemist who had studied in Prague, but it had never exported its product. I seized the opening and explained my idea. The company first suggested that we import two of its brands to the UK: Pals and Knock Out. But the former shared the name of a British dog food, and the latter—suggesting a boxer's punch—wasn't what we had in mind. Amazingly, the company agreed to let us develop our own brand. I already had the taste in my mind; the brewmaster and I just needed to sit in the laboratory and come up with the recipe.

I parked myself in India for several months while my partner held down the fort in London. We knew we had to get the product right. This was well before the craft beer boom, but we still had to make ours different from and better than the hundreds of brands already out there.

Once I thought we had it right, I returned to the UK and began driving around—in a battered old Citroën—in all the top Indian restaurants so that I could introduce the proprietors to our beer. I knew that if they placed an order, other curry houses would too, and then distributors would pile in to serve this growing segment of the industry—up from a handful of establishments serving mostly expats in the 1950s to about 6,000 restaurants that drew all types of British consumers in the early 1990s. (Today curry restaurants in the UK number more than 12,000.) In that first sales push we managed to presell one shipping container's worth of bottles—half to restaurants and half to a distributor in Newcastle.

The Cobra name was what sealed the distribution deal. After lots of brainstorming sessions, we had decided to call our beer Panther. We'd already designed the labels; the beer was waiting to be bottled and sent to the UK. But potential distributors complained to Arjun that they didn't like the name Panther—they couldn't say why, they just didn't. So we thought back to our runner-up choice. "Ask if they'll buy something called Cobra," I told my partner. The distributors said yes, so I asked my brother, who was in advertising, to design us a new label. Adapt or die.