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# THE BIG ISSUE

WEEKLY

Coming up from the streets

## Let them eat sushi

The sandwich man bringing equality to the people



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# Let them eat sushi

**Sandwich-bar chain Pret A Manger may be big business but its founder Julian Metcalfe works behind the tills, gives staff his home number and sees fast food as a means of bringing democracy to the people. By Simon Rogers**

**T**he captains of British industry don't usually give their phone numbers out to their customers. But Julian Metcalfe of sandwich bar Pret A Manger does just that. You don't like a sandwich? Pick up the phone. Want to know where the mayonnaise comes from? Give him a call, says the packaging on your baguette.

It looks like a marketing ploy, so I dial 0171-827 6323. Pretending to be a disgruntled customer with

a grudge about gherkins, I'm through to his office. Not just a receptionist but his actual office. "He will phone you back, you know," says his personal assistant. "He always does."

Besides winning an Egon Ronay star, Pret A Manger has made big money by inventing a novel way of treating its staff and customers. In the last 10 years it has also expanded from one to 40 shops (all in London, except one in ►

Oxford), 800 or so employees and an annual turnover of over £30 million.

Its philosophy – which is at the vanguard of a whole new generation of ethical businesses – is reflected in the surroundings of 36-year-old founder Metcalfe's office on Fleet Street. The walls of Pret's, as everyone who works there calls it, are covered with two words: 'Pret' and 'Passionate'. "We thought about having paintings, but that's rubbish, isn't it?" asserts Metcalfe, tanned and dressed in an expensive dark suit with Nehru collars. "What a waste of money when you've got the name of the company." Looking and sounding completely disinterested, he oscillates wildly for the rest of the interview between that and deep fascination.

**E**thical business is big business in the Nineties. Sparked by successes like the Body Shop, corporations across Europe have discovered there's gold in being, well, nice. Britons now spend around £25 billion a year with so-called 'progressive' companies – roughly 10 per cent of consumer spending. And in the UK alone, 10,000 private investors have invested some £900 million in 'ethical funds', which refuse to invest in the arms trade or tobacco companies, for example.

Metcalfe and his partner Sinclair Beecham set up the chain in 1986, in the depth of the recession, with a £17,000 loan from the bank and a name – meaning 'ready to eat' – taken from a now-defunct shop in London. Pret's philosophy is, says Metcalfe, to make good food at a fair price, because, "if you're rich you can eat really well in England, but if you're poor, that's very difficult". Specialising in continental-style sandwiches, baguettes, sushi salads, cappuccino and croissants, all its products are made with quality ingredients from small suppliers.

At the root of Pret's approach is the personality of Metcalfe, who has a much higher profile than his partner. Both regularly work behind the tills and Metcalfe's name is

on the sandwich bags so customers can write to him. He recently took some cakes round to a family party only to be teased about having his name on the box. "Their arguments were, 'nobody else does that, why should you?'" he says. "But someone has to be accountable. The buck's got to stop somewhere. The trouble is, no one's accountable nowadays. No one's guilty." He sits back behind his aluminium desk. "Well, I'm guilty. Absolutely, completely guilty."

He has an evangelical gleam in his eye about what is, after all, just a sandwich bar. It's something his staff are expected to share. Company hierarchy is minimal, with only a few levels between Metcalfe and the shop-floor staff, and Pret's recently increased its wages by 25 per cent across the board. Trained staff are currently paid around £5 an hour – soon to be topped up by commission on

## **"It's not about how much money we make this year and how big the bonus is for management... That's what destroys a company"**

whatever the shop makes. And, besides voting on whether or not to employ new staff members, they all have Metcalfe's home number.

Novel company schemes mean that after promotion staff are given cash – not for themselves but to share out among everyone else in the company who helped them get that far. Ask Metcalfe where all these ideas come from and he simply shrugs his shoulders. "It's just common sense."

"It's like when I was at school," he continues. "All I needed was someone who honestly taught me something well. But out of 10 teachers, nine were major pricks. There was only one good teacher." He sees Pret's as that good teacher, reflecting a single-minded approach to the business. And while he is on a high salary – about £100,000 a year – it's tied to company profits.

"It's not about how much money we make this year and how big the bonus is for management," he says. "That's all bullshit – that's what destroys a company."

He speaks with the upper middle-class drawl of someone whose insurance-industry father paid for him to attend several public schools from which he was expelled for being "crap at everything".

So far, Pret's has managed to avoid falling foul of the ethical approach. Unlike other ethical enterprises in the same position. Nineteen Ninety Five was the year when many ethical businesses found their reputations coming under attack with accusations that they were as exploitative as any other global corporation. In the USA, for example, Ben & Jerry's ice-cream had to change the wording on its Rainforest Crunch tub after it was revealed that 95 per cent of the brazil nuts came from

workforce is made up of transitory overseas tourists or students in their year out. The Transport & General Union – the body representing many workers in the fast-food industry – says it has no knowledge of anything other than good practice from the company. Just to add to the image, Metcalfe and Beecham personally paid £26,000 for the staff party at Christmas and are planning to pay for another in the summer.

**W**hile Metcalfe claims not to market Pret's ethics as part of its brand image, the company does provide leaflets at shops detailing its work with the homeless. It is part of homeless charity Crisis' Fair Share scheme and provides vans to drop off leftover food to homeless hostels and night shelters.

"Well, it's only one paragraph out of 30 in our publicised mission statement," Metcalfe counters. "If you think that's using it to market ourselves, well, that's your conclusion."

The point is, Pret's isn't in your face with its ethics. That's because, for Metcalfe, being ethical is not based on high principles or political ideals. He says he is "just not interested" in politics and the company has as good as admitted that it can't afford to be environmentally friendly.

It almost seems a sort of lazy ethics – the attitude that it is actually easier to treat employees well and to reconcile that with your conscience than to exploit them. "The thought of profiting out of someone else's misery is just repulsive. Just repulsive," Metcalfe emphasises. At the end of the day, however far Metcalfe and Sinclair push the bounds of accepted business practice, they're not trying to change the world. It remains a commercial decision.

"The extra amount you make by exploiting people is so small it's irrelevant," says Metcalfe, leaning back in his chair. "The trouble is, if you exploit your staff, you're not profiting. Not really."