



COS

# Life's defining moments

**Dominique Lyone** is a man of principle. The Complete Office Supplies (COS) founder and CEO has been through the highs and lows of business, but through it all he has remained loyal to key partners and dedicated to ethical business practice.

Often the history of a man defines who he is and the destination he is likely to reach. Dominique Lyone's history is rich: it has been shaped by his father, his refugee status, impending bankruptcy and the discovery of US businessman, motivator and billionaire Robert Kyosaki.

Lyone's journey begins in the offices of Data Print – his first job beyond paper delivery in an age when work wasn't an entitlement, but a rite of passage. Data Print repaired typewriters and Lyone, following in his father's footsteps worked as a mechanic. In fact, Lyone's father had owned the same type of business in Egypt in the 1960s, so it seemed a natural fit for this entrepreneurially minded teenager.

The thing about those with a measure of entrepreneurial flair is they often find that the challenges set by other business owners fail to match their own goals. Lyone was also a natural leader and those combined qualities gnawed at his subconscious until he set out on his own path.

COS was founded in 1976 by the

22-year-old immigrant. Impressively he had been in the adult workforce for just four years, in a country (Australia) he entered as a refugee in 1967 fleeing war-torn Egypt. He taught himself the language and the culture and he applied that ethic of sacrifice that many entrepreneurs have, by selling his Mazda RX2 to fund the business.

"My father in Egypt had a very small business, with three employees. So I guess, as a little boy, I spent a little bit of time in that business with dad. And I'm sure psychologically, that had an influence on who I am and what I do today," Lyone says.

As did settling into his new environment.

"My early impression of Australia was it was a beautiful landscape, but I really hated the school. I didn't speak a word of English, so at school I was a little 'wog boy' who just arrived on a boat. I was the least popular boy in that school. However, that gave me determination.

"I think in my early days in Australia, what became very obvious very,

very quickly was that this really was a land of opportunities. Any individuals that wanted to take those opportunities could do it. So even at 14, when I first arrived, I was already selling newspapers on the street and doing various little entrepreneurial things to gather an income. And I was flabbergasted that a 13-year-old could do that – when really the only way for a 13-year-old to do that from where I came in Alexandria was to beg."

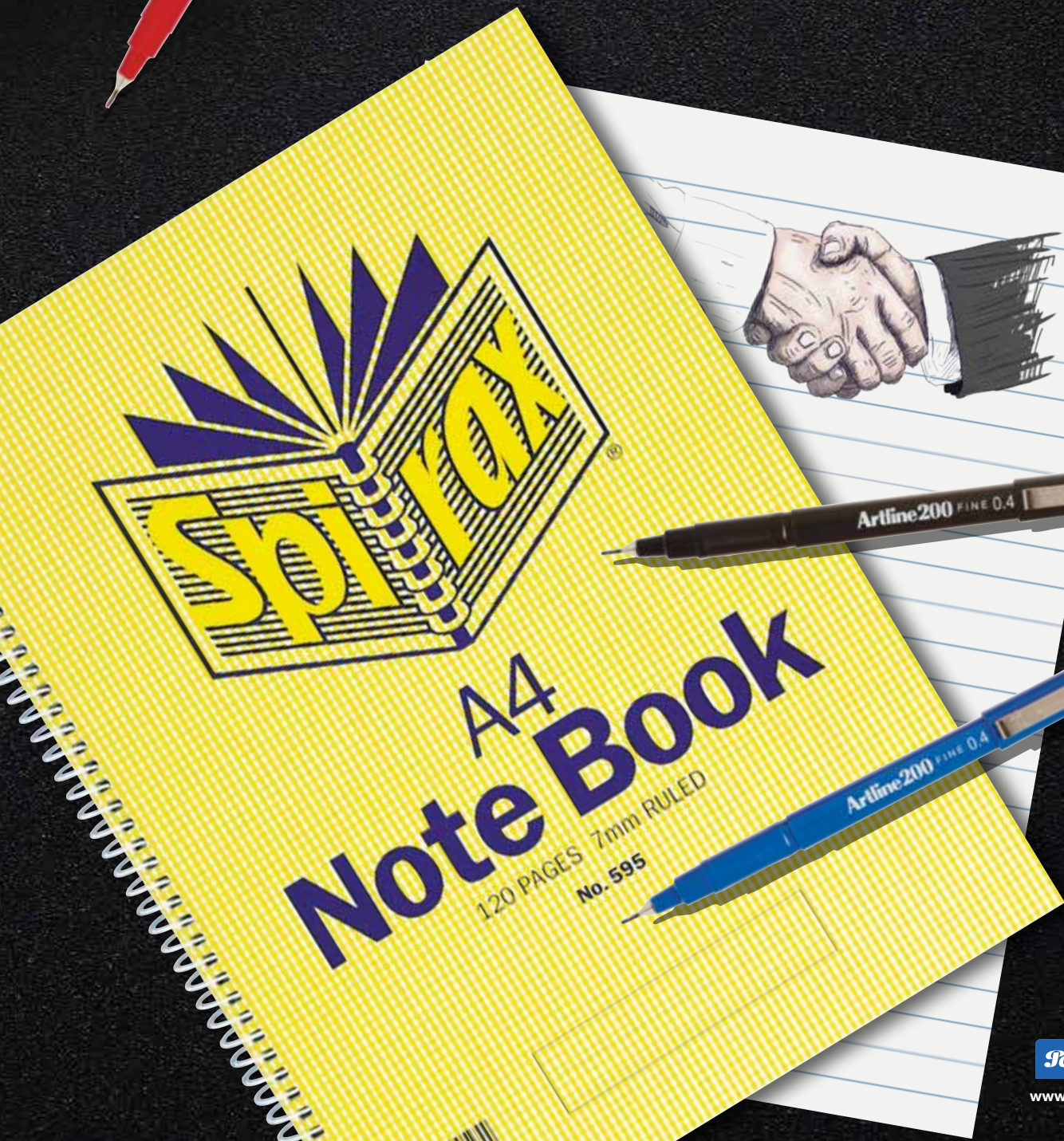
The Australian environment was vastly different to that of Egypt. The Lyone family had no money and the patriarch had lost his job with General Motors because he couldn't stand the pressure of the production line. He took his son and knocked on the door of Marcellin College. That action led to help from St Vincent de Paul and from there further support from the local community.

"That really gave us a major leg-up at that point. The result today is the Lyone Foundation, which helps organisations to support Australian's in need."

This experience also informs the

Strong  
quality  
brands,

*supporting quality  
partnerships*



way Lyone runs COS and how he treats his partners and suppliers. His time at Data Print also influenced his leadership mentality.

“The biggest lesson I learnt was how to deal with staff. Data Print was very authoritarian and my decision to leave was due to the way that they treated their people. I felt, as one of their more successful people in sales, that I was not treated very well. So that was the catalyst for me to move on and I was determined to treat my staff better than I was treated.”

Today, Lyone spends an hour inducting new staff members (there are 350 staff members in the organisation) where he shows them a letter that he wrote to vendors in 1977 imploring them to agree to a deal that would help the ability to compete in this market. The letter is designed to illustrate to staff the importance of vendor relationships.

And so COS was born; a B2B office supply company in which Lyone was salesman, storeman and delivery driver. He went door-to-door asking people to buy his products. He spent his day in a potential client's building seeking work. And in the evening, after securing the work he would bundle product for delivery the following day. He worked 16 hours a day with no real business plan, but a determination to never have to work for anyone other than himself ever again.

It took 10 years to implement a business plan, however despite the lack of one in those formative years, the business grew quickly and many of the early suppliers are still with Lyone today.

“We always took a smaller margin because that's the only way you can compete,” says Lyone of the way he went about getting suppliers on board. “The bigger players tend to get better pricing, but we worked our way through and found vendors who aligned with our business goals. We tend to work with vendors who are not supplying big global firms because they just have a different alignment to us.”

Suppliers were excited by COS's values and potential for growth. And they have grown together. There are 15 key suppliers now including Pelikan Artline – all critical partners to the business. And all are ethical. Those who aren't are cut from the chain.

Mark Johnson the Executive Director of Jackaroo is a long time supporter of Lyone and COS. To iterate the point of Lyone's stance on ethics he relays the story of one long standing vendor, an Indonesian paper supplier, that



due to the lack of sustainable practices within their mills and 'plantations' was dropped by COS.

He explains succinctly, that many companies and corporations unfortunately do not care about sustainable practice and when even a cent per ream is saved in costs they will continue business.

“Dominique was different. On the basis of this revelation concerning irresponsible and environmentally damaging practices, he changed his course and severed this long standing relationship.” It was difficult but necessary and this is what, according to Mr Johnson, shows him to be a fine leader. And thus Jackaroo's relationship with COS began and responsible environmental practice was reinforced.

The other key factors in COS's business growth are customers and staff. Lyone spends equal time with clients, nurturing relationships and understanding the changes to the market.

He relays this to staff and he nurtures them in the same way he nurtures outside elements. Lyone says the best way to engage staff is to help them understand the story and the journey the business is on.

“When staff understand your story, vision and where you're going they want to be part of something. I believe we have a great story in being the real Australian alternative in our market. We're primarily competing with global players including Staples and Office-max, but being locally grown from

*“Pelikan Artline have held a long partnership with COS that goes back to the 1980s. COS has established itself as an innovator in the Office Products Industry. They are always seeking ways to improve the customer experience and provide real value to their loyal customer base. We have been fortunate to enjoy an excellent relationship with Dom and his company and to some extent, contribute to his success.”*

**Bruce Haynes**

nothing is a great story that people want to be involved with. I personally induct everybody, so they know me and they know the vision and we continue to inform them about our vision. I want them to understand who we are as a family and who I am as an individual. I have two daughters in the business who have earned their places, so this is really becoming a long-term legacy business.”

It hasn't all been smooth sailing. In fact there was a 10-year period when the economic climate was so bad, that COS could have gone to the wall. Having accumulated huge losses, Lyone was advised by a large accounting firm to declare bankruptcy and put the business into liquidation.

“It was a terrible time. Emotionally, it was an absolute nightmare, particularly because as a result of that so many people that had supported me were going to be let down and lose a lot of money – including my father.”

With the conviction that all fathers have in their sons, Lyone's father parted with his superannuation to be



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invested back into the business. The money was lost.

“He didn’t hesitate to give me the money. He gave me every cent in the bank, his total retirement cheque that he had picked up from the Royal Australian Navy. And I lost it and accumulated much more debt on top of that. For what was a small business back then, it was a significant amount. Then Coopers & Lybrand advised me to put the white flag up and surrender.”

Feeling guilty, Lyone underwent a personal development program that made him think about his actions. The program was Money and You run by Robert Kiyosaki, author of the Rich Dad Poor Dad franchise. The program convinced him not to go into bankruptcy. It convinced him to follow his ethics and approach each of his vendors to extend terms and he convinced them that he would pay back every cent he owed them. He restructured the

business and closed down two of his three locations and refocused on what he knew best.

Meanwhile Kiyosaki was encouraging him to develop the business, to work on it not in it and to employ better people and implement systems. Seeing the vision, the vendors stayed put. They were repaid in full in just under four years and Lyone began looking at national expansion. He started in Newcastle, went to Brisbane and WA, Adelaide, Northern Territory, Melbourne, Tasmania and Canberra. He invested in technology and connectivity. He gave the right people the right tools to succeed and got out of their way. He was one of the first to adopt an online retail strategy, which was one of the factors in creating \$120 million in sales today with about 90% transacted online.

Innovation has been a key strategy in the company’s growth and its ability to compete against bigger players. But what really drives this business is Lyone’s original drive to succeed. It is this drive that has over the last 35 years built a next day delivery service to over 5,000 customers across Australia. They fulfil thousands of individual requests from distribution centres across Australia’s capital and regional cities and supply 15,000 + unique products via tailored supply solutions to Australia’s commercial market.

“I’ve always set goals,” Lyone says.

*“Environmental responsibility can’t be tacked on as an afterthought. It must be led from the front - Dominique does this. He knew our products met his uncompromising environmental requirements and changed immediately. Customers can engage COS with confidence that the tough decisions have already been made for them.”*

**Mark Johnson**  
Managing Director, Jackaroo

“Goals are part of who I am. I remember setting a goal about 12 years ago when we were doing less than \$20 million and saying, ‘Hey, let’s set a goal of doing \$100 million’. I probably didn’t really think I’d get there. But lo and behold, we arrived. Today, I have a goal of being number two in this country. I don’t know that I’ll push my number one global dominator out of the way, but I’m determined to be number two. And I’m determined that my family continue to be part of the office products landscape of this country.”

In those last comments the influence of Lyone’s history shines through. It is that history that has provided the foundations for his ability to overcome problems and build a sustainable business. **BF**

*“As a major supplier of leading brands in the Australian Office Products market, Pelikan Artline see the ability of the COS customer base as a critical part of their distribution strategy to guarantee consumers have access to the best products. Together this will ensure demand continues to grow into the future.”*

**Pelikan**

