

THE SOUND OF SUCCESS

Alexander Amosu's early money-making schemes included football and table-tennis tournaments, but his ambition – and a degree in sound engineering – helped him build a much bigger business empire, as he tells Ann Morgan

From an early age, Alexander Amosu knew he wanted to make money. 'We lived on a council estate,' says the 35-year-old multi-millionaire, who came to the UK from Nigeria at the age of five to live with his grandmother. 'My brother and I slept in the sitting room. We never had the best looking gear. We had trainers that looked like Adidas but had four stripes instead of three – that sort of thing. I was always teased at school. So I had to think of a way to try and fit in.'

For 12-year-old Amosu, the answer was to get a part-time job delivering newspapers. With the money he earned from this, he saved up for a pair of real Nike Air trainers and the chance to impress the cool kids at Hampstead School in Kilburn, north London.

'I remember walking into class that day,' he says. 'Everybody noticed my new trainers and they were talking to me. That was the catalyst for changing my ideology of how to make money.'

It wasn't long before Amosu's ambitions outgrew his £10-a-week paper round. 'I did that for a while,' he

says, 'Working the whole week for £10. Then I thought there must be a better way to earn money and get £10 every day or even £10 an hour. So I started to think a bit bigger.'

Football presented the next opportunity. Once again, Amosu's desire to fit in spawned a money-making plan. 'I never got picked to play on the school football pitch,' he says. 'So I thought the easiest way to do it would be to organise my own five-a-side tournament. That turned out to be a business idea.'

Having got the headteacher to agree to let him use the pitch, Amosu set about publicising his tournament. He persuaded his local library to let him print flyers and set a £5 entry fee. He employed more innovative marketing tactics too. 'I went to all the guys who were really good at football and said "look, this guy over here says he's going to kick your ass". I had to spread a bit of propaganda, you know,' he says.

With a 'white lie' to the canteen staff that the headteacher wanted them to give him their leftover food, Amosu secured refreshments. Everything was ready, but there was one thing the

tycoon-in-the-making had forgotten.

'The day came and I realised I'd organised all this and I didn't actually have my own team,' he says. 'So I decided to be the referee instead.'

By the end of the tournament, it was clear who the real winner was. While the successful team walked away with a trophy that Amosu had bought for £2.50, the 15-year-old schoolboy pocketed a profit of £1,200. It was to be the start of big things.

'I thought, ooh, that's a nice bit of money that I just earned,' says Amosu. So, as any entrepreneur would do, I did basketball and table-tennis tournaments and made another £1,200.'

But while many teenagers would be content with running a successful sports events business alongside their studies, Amosu had no intention of stopping there. Spotting an opportunity in the large hall at St Alban's College, he got six of his cousins to put up £100 each so he could buy turntables and mixing decks. He then persuaded the headmaster to let him host a Valentine's Day party, netting £2,500. As with the tournament, it led to many others.

By the time he went to study sound engineering at the University of North London (now part of London Metropolitan University), Amosu was head of a thriving events management firm, as well as running a cleaning business that turned over more than £4,000 a month.

'I was juggling business with studying,' he says. 'It was difficult but I enjoyed it because it gave me insight into the educational world but also allowed me to understand business. My passion has always been business, but because of my strong African background – you know, your parents tell you you have to do this and that – education was important too. It was a great experience. I wouldn't change it for the world.'



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The first million

As it turned out, sound engineering would give Amosu a grounding in the field that would make him his first million. 'When I bought my first mobile phone, I remember looking through the functionality and finding that pressing the numbers 123 on the keypad made the noise do re mi,' he says. 'I spent an hour playing around with the keypad and listening to some music in the background to try to recreate it. I was creating ringtones, although at that time I wasn't even aware of it.'

Before long, Amosu had launched RNB Ringtones. Soon the money was rolling in. 'It worked because ringtones weren't really known then,' he says. 'When I started there were only two companies in the whole world. One was in America and one was in Ireland. And they were focusing on rock and pop. The beauty for me was that I was able to take advantage of the urban context. I started doing R&B, hip hop and then I went on to Bhangra and other genres.'

Amosu's marketing techniques were also crucial. Still heavily involved in events organisation, he used the back of a flyer for one of his Christmas parties to advertise his new firm.

'I remember doing the Christmas party and rushing home to get to the phone to see if anybody had called,' he said. 'I got loads of feedback. I made £96 on that night from people phoning who wanted to order ringtones. When you think of an idea and you see the

reaction from people and then you go home and the phone's actually ringing and it's someone wanting to buy what you've been promoting, that first time you pick up the phone and say "RNB Ringtones" – that's a very exciting moment.'

Keeping things in perspective

Since making his first million aged just 25, Alexander Amosu has gone on to producing luxury mobile phones and launching a motivational consultancy. As well as featuring in a BBC2 documentary – *Mind of a Millionaire* – he has been included in *The Times*' 'Top 40 Under 40' list and named as one of the 100 Most Influential Black Britons. He is determined to keep these accolades in perspective, though.

'Everybody needs their ego massaged now and then,' he says. 'But life is not always about other people appreciating what you do. You appreciating what you do and knowing that you're doing everything in your power to be better than what you set out to be is what matters. That's the thing for me about recognition like this. It's great, but I feel I have to put more pressure on myself to do more.'

This drive has brought Amosu success in eclectic fields. Among the more unusual is his unintentional entry in the *Guinness Book of World Records*

for creating the world's most expensive suit: a fusion of the finest wools with 22-carat gold pinstripes. It even comes with a 24-hour concierge service.

'I wanted it to be the Rolls-Royce of the suit industry,' he says. 'My team thought I must be barking mad. Still, I created this suit, we launched it, and two weeks later I got a letter from Guinness

World Records saying "congratulations, we'd like to confirm that you are officially the creator of the world's most expensive suit". I wasn't going to complain.'

Amosu's success has also drawn attention in Nigeria where, two years ago, he was invited back to do *Dragon's Den*. 'It was brilliant,' he says. 'It gave me a really good insight into the real Nigeria. And it has made me want to do more in Africa. It was a phenomenal experience.' With another series and numerous business ventures planned, Amosu looks set to continue building his empire. He is keen to see young Nigerians do the same.

'One thing about Nigerians is that they are very, very clever people,' he says. 'They know how to study and they study well. But Nigeria is a difficult market to break into. If you can go out and study in the UK and get a little bit of education under your belt, then you'll be open to more opportunity going back to Nigeria to get a job.' ■



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