



a journey worth toasting

Driven by a love of language, **James Crampton's** career has spanned cultures, continents and industries. He talks to **Rebecca Pardon** about his journey to becoming corporate affairs director at Heineken UK

James Crampton approaches language with an almost scientific, analytical eye. The art of crafting messaging to appeal to different audiences, across disciplines or cultures, fascinates him. It is this intrigue which has been a driving force in much of his career. Now corporate affairs director at Heineken UK, Crampton has held a variety of positions across corporate communications. “The reality is that I perhaps still view language and writing in a bit more of a formal way. So, when I started working in investor relations, it was because I was a storyteller, not because I was an accountant.” This is perhaps unsurprising given Crampton’s father was a journalist, which inspired a keen interest in the industry. “It was really the work experience at newspapers that my father introduced me to which brought my attention to communication skills.”

Crampton’s love for languages started early. Born in Somerset, UK, he chose to study Italian and

French at university in Swansea. This involved spending a term in Bologna, the quintessential city for Italophiles, where the romantic arches of medieval porticoes guide you through the weaving streets of Italy's culinary capital. "I really enjoyed the whole Italian experience, not just the language but the way of life." While there, Crampton hosted his own student radio show. "Sadly, I think it had my playlist, which was quite eclectic at that time."

When it came to securing work experience, Crampton seemed set to follow in his father's footsteps and took up a role at the Bristol Evening Post. Crampton's father, however, was wary. "My dad told me that if you're after a job in communications, and your soul really wants you to go for journalism, then go for it, but bear in mind that there are other opportunities – probably better paid – out there."

"I felt that I had a real privilege to be there, so, if that came with hard work, then that was no problem at all. In those types of experiences, you need to throw your all in to get the max out, so that's what I did"

Indeed, it wasn't long before Crampton swapped his position at the Post for the allure of London, beginning a new position at Brunswick. "When I joined, around 2000, I was writing and supporting a lot of the deals that were being done in London at the time. I got first-hand exposure to many of the transactions that were going on."

When Crampton recalls "burning the candle at both ends" during this period, it is without a trace of regret. "I was in the centre of London, sitting in meetings with the captains of the industry, listening to very private conversations about strategy and business growth, investment, messaging and positioning. I felt that I had a real privilege to be there, so, if that came with hard work, then that was no problem at all."

During lengthy work hours and technical meetings, an eager tenacity spurred Crampton on, as he describes an innate "curiosity and inquisitiveness" which was nurtured by his time at Brunswick. When asked whether he ever regretted taking his father's

guidance too much to heart, he is resolute. "I feel no calling to journalism, if that's what you're inferring," he laughs.

It was while at Brunswick that Crampton developed an interest in the consumer goods sector. In 2005, he joined the media relations department at South African brewing company SAB Miller. Crampton knows the region well: his father is South African and much of his childhood was spent in the country. "I was very much relied upon to build the reputation of this global organisation in quite a competitive financial market."

Crampton's interest in the South African market continued as, when looking for a fresh learning curve two years later, Crampton pursued a financial angle as head of media relations at Old Mutual Limited, a South African insurance company. He soon realised this was a bad fit, however. "The life insurance and financial sector wasn't for me. I had decided that consumer goods, particularly the drinks industry, was where I wanted to be."

Luckily, a year later, Crampton found his feet at beverage company Diageo, where he would remain for the next eight years. He describes joining at a pivotal point in 2008, where he worked to position the company as a "great British champion" in his initial role as head of financial communications. "I felt I had come home a little bit, back into the drinks industry. I spent a good three years in that role; you very much learn about how a full-pedigree FTSE 100 goes to market."

While at Diageo, Crampton maintained his specialisation in Africa. In 2010, he took up responsibility as Diageo's head of communications in the region. The breadth of the role gave Crampton a fascinating taste of working in sustainability which he hadn't yet been exposed to. One initiative, Diageo's Water of Life programme, established mini water works across Africa to improve access to clean water. "It gave me a real visceral experience of how communities operate and how much they rely on economic activity in these areas to live and prosper. That lit a bit of a fire in me in terms of understanding the impact organisations can make." Soon, however, a restructuring ultimately saw Crampton move into an entirely new role as investor relations director.

Settling into the new position felt a little like learning an entirely new language. "I don't have that accountancy background, which I think you need in order to be excellent at investor relations," he concedes. "But it was an eye-opener, at a time when emerging markets were probably going to come off the boil a little bit. You certainly got to see behind-the-scenes while working in investor relations, probably more so than in a communications function." But Crampton was feeling restless. When a role popped up at Merlin Entertainments,



Photography by: Leo Wilkinson

March 2020 – present: Corporate affairs director, Heineken UK

March 2016 – March 2020: Corporate affairs director, Merlin Entertainments plc

November 2014 – August 2015: Investor relations director, Diageo

March 2014 – November 2014: Global external communications director, Diageo

July 2013 – February 2014: Director of communications and sustainability, Africa, Diageo

December 2010 – June 2013: Head of communications, Africa, Diageo

a theme park operator that owns over 140 tourist attractions globally, the family-owned company appealed to him. When he joined as corporate affairs director in 2016, however, Merlin was still grappling with the fallout of a disaster at one of its theme parks. In June 2015, a collision on its popular 'Smiler' ride at its Alton Towers site left four people seriously injured. The event was branded a "catastrophic safety failure" in news headlines.

It was the first such accident in Merlin's history. "This absolutely traumatised the organisation," Crampton recalls. "Merlin had a great track record in health and safety, so it really rocked the very core of the organisation. This became a tabloid field day."

Crampton remembers painful months where Merlin employees would awake each morning to see their employer lambasted in media headlines. Throughout this period, he had frequent meetings with the company's chief executive at the time, Nick Varney, on how to react to a crisis in a way that felt most "human". "As chief executive, he really led with his personal response which has helped to support the reputation rebuild. Part of my role was helping to

build the reputation back up, and to instil a bit more trust and courage within the organisation, but these things take time.

"It was quite difficult waking up each day and seeing yourself in the front pages of the media, but it certainly did build within me a huge amount of resilience and understanding of how these types of things can really impact a person."

In March 2020, Crampton landed his current position as corporate affairs director at Heineken UK. When asked whether his role at the brand has been made more challenging by the health-consciousness of younger consumers, who are, statistically, drinking less than their parents, Crampton says that this would be to misunderstand the brand today. "I'm very aware of the changing consumer landscape and the changing regulatory landscape as well. I fundamentally believe, otherwise I wouldn't be in this job, that we have a positive role to play in society through promoting moderate consumption, but also bringing people together: bringing people away from looking at their phones or away from their desks.

"There will always be a requirement for people to come together in some form or another," Crampton continues. "When you look at loneliness in our society, that's something that I feel that we have a right to help address. We've always been focused on our role in community."

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"Now we want to be physically supporting a nation that needs to get together on an occasion and share how they feel with each other. We want to be able to share a moment together and be able to sit across the table and look into somebody's face and have a conversation because, quite frequently in this society, we don't do that."

Today, Crampton relishes the few moments between back-to-back meetings that he can spend writing. "I still really enjoy writing. It's almost a sacred time of the week, where you can sit back and have a moment to put words on a piece of paper. It's a real privilege for me to be able to do that. So, I cherish those small opportunities that come along to be able to just put pen to paper." ■