



Eric Wilson watched with pride as his son, Steve, walked across the stage to shake hands with the Chancellor of the University and formally gain his Business Studies Degree. Eric realized that his dream of his son following in his footsteps in running the home appliance repair shop that had been in the family for two generations was not going to happen; and that was quite right. Steve needed to make use of the skills and knowledge gained in his undergraduate studies. Having said that, Steve had always shown a great interest in the business side of the shop and had enjoyed working there out of term time. But to be honest, the business was not doing too well. The number of repairs had gone down significantly over the past few years although he had noticed that more people were asking him about spare parts so that they could do the repairs themselves.

### Expansion into spares

Eric should have had faith in his son. He realized that the spare parts operation of the business had potential. The shop 'Wilson's Appliance Repairs' was rebranded as SpareBitz. Eric had an important job to play in the shop – he was the expert you could trust. Customers were confident in Eric's ability to undertake the repair if necessary, but were also happy to receive his advice on how to perform the repair themselves. Stock was a problem. With so many different appliances, each with potentially hundreds of parts, SpareBitz often did not have what was needed. However, over the years Eric had built up excellent relations with the various suppliers. It was the boast of SpareBitz that if they didn't have the part they would get it within a week. Steve used his business acumen to formalize these relationships to make sure that SpareBitz thrived. In a few years there were branches in the High Streets of more than a dozen towns in the North East. Steve had made sure that each shop was managed by someone who was capable of undertaking the repair if need be so that they could give the best possible advice to the customer who wanted to buy

the spare part and do the work for themselves. SpareBitz had built up a reputation as the place you could trust. In addition the shops conducted a bit of trade in appliance sales when a repair was not possible or uneconomical. Soon Eric felt able to retire, happy in the knowledge that the business was in good hands.

### Useful contacts

'I'm not sure I'm a reunions sort of person', Steve told his wife as they got ready for the journey down south. 'Stick in the mud', Helen retorted, with a smirk. 'It's always interesting seeing what people have done with their lives – and you might make a few useful contacts.'



Later that evening Steve had to admit that, as usual, his wife was right. It was fascinating to see the wide range of business and industry that his peers had found themselves in. One of the most interesting was Carl Dobson. He had shared a few modules with Carl in his time at University although they were not on the same course. Carl had studied Internet Business Development and had done well for himself. He ran a company that helped small business to make the most of the Internet. 'So, has SpareBitz got a web presence?' asked Carl. 'Well, I've got a website that I put together myself', replied Steve proudly. 'Nothing flashy, but it at least tells anyone who looks at it where my shops are and how to get in contact.' Carl frowned. 'So really just a not-very-high-tech entry in the yellow pages!' Steve opened his mouth to protest but realized that Carl spoke the truth. As proud as he was of his few Internet pages, built using Dreamweaver learned from a book, it probably didn't bring in much trade. He didn't even know how many people visited his site. 'But surely', insisted Steve, 'my little business isn't suitable for the World Wide Web. All of my customers come from the North East, a matter of miles from my shops.' 'A common misconception, mate', replied Carl. 'Just because a website can be viewed by someone the other side of the world doesn't mean that it's inappropriate for someone just a few miles away. Look at one of the big players in E-commerce for example: Tesco's. They do lots of business on their online store but you can bet most of those customers are only a few miles from their local

store. I think it's not possible to be more than a few miles from your nearest Tesco's, unless you live in the Scottish Highlands!' 'Are you suggesting I try to emulate Tesco's?' Carl spluttered his drink. 'Don't be daft. Of course your little enterprise is not in the same league, but it doesn't mean you can't dabble in using the Web to your advantage, more than you have with your little website.'

### An idea forms

The next day, as they returned from the Midlands to the North East, Steve had to confess that Helen had been right about the useful contacts. The more he thought about it the more he realized that his business was living in a pre-web age. It was his get-up-and-go that had shaken his father's old-fashioned business into a thriving enterprise, but he was now in danger of missing out on the next big thing – perhaps. Being a level-headed businessman, he realized that decisions like this should not be taken without proper consideration. As they turned into their drive he made his mind up. Fishing out the business card that Carl had given him he pushed the buttons on his mobile. 'Hi Carl. Steve Wilson here . . . Yes it was a great evening. Good to see what people have done with their lives.' Helen suppressed a laugh. 'I've been thinking about some of the things you were saying. How do you feel about conducting a feasibility study for me about turning SpareBitz into a web-enabled enterprise?'