

**SIMON SAYS**

*Rapha Founder Simon Mottram is out to make cycling the best sport it can be. Beatrice Borbon travelled to his Kings Cross base to talk membership, management and mild obsession*

**PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROL SACHS**







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imon Mottram founded Rapha in 2005 – marrying a lifelong love of cycling with his smarts as a marketer. Eleven years on, the business has developed a cult-like following of men and women – much like Simon himself – with means, motivation and an unyielding belief in the nobility and romanticism of the sport. Beatrice Borbon took a controversial taxi ride to Rapha's London headquarters to learn more about a burgeoning enterprise moving through the gears.

**You've made your passion your work. Do you see it as work?** If you're lucky enough to do something you love, you don't think of it as work, and I have never felt this was work, even though it's all encompassing, and it's challenging, and it can get stressful – it's good stress not bad stress.

**What lessons have you learned along the way?** I'm sure I'm learning every day, but I don't think of the business as a kind of abstract learning project. I think that suggests it's about learning something to then do something else, whereas this is the project, this is everything. It's doing, rather than learning.

But in terms of what's mattered most, in getting to where we are, there's a few things that immediately spring to mind.

The first is confidence and clarity of purpose. If you have a really strong idea of what you want to do, and you go at it with confidence and perseverance, then you've got a really good chance of making it work.

Whether I'm talking to a journalist or designing a product, passion and purpose and belief go into every detail. It's something that I think as customers we pick up on very

quickly. We can tell when someone's just doing something for the sake of it. It doesn't ring true and it doesn't feel like somebody's invested it with care and passion.

When we started out 12 years ago, there wasn't really a cycling market in the way there is now. What existed was very technical, it wasn't relevant, and it was tiny in comparison to what it is today. It was just weird people like me riding bikes. Everyone believed that cyclists didn't spend money, and that it wasn't an interesting lifestyle. There was a sense that cycling wasn't interesting beyond speed, performance and commuting. Whereas now it's something that's part of a lot of people's lives.

Secondly, if you don't know who your customer is, you shouldn't even start. You really have to know who you're for. And sometimes that necessarily becomes a binary thing. To be for someone, you need to be against someone else. It can become a bit exclusive, but that's the consequence of knowing who you're building this for. If you have a razor sharp mind of who your customer is, you can build everything around that.

In the first few years it was very easy. We didn't have many customers and there were only a few people in the company. The customer was me, so I could design everything around me. Imagine just doing whatever you want. You know you're going to make the right decision because it's for you.

Now it's much more complicated. We've built an international presence and we've reached younger and older customers, women too. The customer segmentation we do is now much more complex. We do this, first of all, by putting marketing right in the middle. I'm a marketer, a brand guy, so as the

founder it's very easy to place importance on marketing. As soon as you put marketing at the centre of the company, and make marketing lead the company, you're putting the customer at the centre, and you're leading the company according to what the customer wants.

It doesn't mean that you're doing research all the time, wondering whether the customer would like this. You have to be ahead of the customer.

As well as a CMO and lots of other great brand people, we have people based in each region – Australia, Japan, South Asia, the US, Europe – people on the ground who are with the customer all the time.

Most companies of our size sell products through their websites, advertise within each local market and then fulfil orders from a distribution somewhere, with maybe the odd trade show. That's as close as they get. For us, the first thing we do is put people on the ground.

Their job is to build an ambassador network of 'super-customers', reaching out to and spending time with our customers, to gather insights specific to each region.

Within the company we also increasingly have champions of key segments. I don't know what a 35-year-old woman who rides three times a week wants. We have people in the company who can really get under the skin of each person.

**Walking into your offices and seeing all the bikes stacked up in racks at the entrance – there's a sense that everyone within the company is unified around the same passion.** Cycling is embedded into our culture. We have four values. The first



**Below:**  
Rapha offices, London



is ‘Love the Sport’. This immediately puts our staff in the same place as the customer. They’re reading the same media, they’re thinking about the same things. This affects everything – from finance to service.

‘Suffer’ is the second. It’s about determination, ambition, commitment and confidence. It’s tough out there and the sport is too important – you’ve got to go for it. The third is ‘Thinking for Yourself’. I still see us as slightly outside the cycling industry – we’re a bit different, and I think that’s good. The final value is ‘Inspiring Others’. If we want the sport to be much more popular, we have to inspire other people. These four values are baked into the organisation.

**You said something earlier about care being central to what you do here. How important is attention to detail? To the brand, and to you more personally. How involved are you in the day-to-day running of the business, and how do you choose when you delegate and when you take control?** Like lots of founders, I can be bad at letting go of the right things and being detailed where it matters. Going from being all over every detail – from writing every word on the webpage, to working on designs for every product – to deciding where to relinquish control and leave people to make mistakes has been difficult.

I spend much less time now on operations, finance, tech and supply chains. The parts of the business I’m most involved in, and which excite me the most, are those that relate to the customer experience. I tend to spend a lot of time on marketing and brand and product design, as well as the more strategic thinking, looking forward and asking what are we doing next? What’s the next big adventure?

Care, quality and attention to detail are really important. This whole business is about loving the sport. Cycling was such a derided and essentially crap sport. And in a lot of ways it still is. It’s mired by doping issues, it doesn’t make any money, teams come and go, sponsors come and go, and it’s difficult to attract good ones in the first place.

In many ways it’s a bit of a shit show to be honest. Yet what the sport is all about is so amazing. It deserves to be taken much more seriously.

This is why cycling products have to be better. If I’m going to slog up a mountain for

**RAPHA FACTS**



**1.**  
Rapha’s name is taken from Saint Raphaël, a 1950s road bike team sponsored by a French apéritif brand of the same name.

**2.**  
Simon began securing funding for the company back in 2011, eventually raising £140,000 from six private investors, as well as through support from friends and family.

**3.**  
During Rapha’s three year sponsorship, Team Sky took the coveted maillot jaune at the Tour de France three times, with Chris Froome claiming victory in 2013, 2015 and 2016.

seven hours wearing a piece of polyester, its zips and pockets have at least got to work properly. I am passionate about raising the quality of everything to do with cycling. If you can write more compelling copy, make your returns policy better, use a higher quality stock of card on the postcard you send out – it all matters because it raises the bar for cycling. That’s what we do.

I’ve always been very passionate about cycling, but I didn’t always believe that I could share it. I definitely began by thinking that cycling should be a much bigger sport. It’s the toughest most beautiful sport in the world, and more people should love it. But I didn’t initially see our job as sharing it. I just wanted to give cyclists better stuff, honour them and honour the sport, and show the world how brilliant this thing is.

This year we’ll do £62 million turnover, so we’re not tiny anymore. But in the scheme of things, we’re still a small company and the sport is still a bit shit. What excites me is completely changing that. I want more people riding more often, and appreciating how it feels and where it can take you. I want the sport to be a much more compelling, exciting and relevant thing for beginners like you, as well as nutters like me. We’re not going to succeed in our own terms by being a niche brand in a niche sport. We want cycling to be the most popular sport in the world. That’s our ambition, but we’ve got miles to go.

It would be very easy for us to just dial back the growth. We’re 30% up this year, if it was 10% everything would feel much easier, but there’s something amazing about being very mission-focussed and driving hard. There’s no slowing down.

**You mentioned that exclusivity plays a part in the business. Especially in reference to the Rapha Cycle Club, how important is the idea of membership?** That question gets to the nub of one of the biggest challenges we’ve encountered – trying to discover how we grow and get bigger and reach more people, and yet ensure that we stay special. We’ve done it quite well so far, but it is challenging. The importance of membership and a business model built around it can’t be underestimated.

Our URL is Rapha.cc. Rapha.com was already taken, and .cc is the domain for the Cocos Islands, but I picked it because





**Left:**  
Rapha offices, London

I thought it could stand for ‘cycling club’. The board thought I was mad, because no one else used .cc at the time, but now lots of other cycling brands use it to echo the idea of ‘cycling club’.

The brand has always had a club idea behind it. We were trying to appeal to the idea that you’re in the club if you’re in the know. It was only for people who really got it. People who really understood that cycling was cool. But more than that, it’s about having relationships with customers, and membership is the ultimate relationship. It goes beyond paying your money and getting a discount – it’s proper engagement.

I don’t want any of our customers to buy something, have it in their wardrobe and not ride very much. It’s about taking them on a lifelong journey and being there every step of the way to help them. Which is scary and quite ambitious, but it’s what we want to do.

Whether it’s someone like me who’s ridden for 30 years and is just looking for the next amazing ride, or someone like you, who’s not ridden very much and might be thinking about getting a first bike. You might need help navigating the crazy amount of terminology, be looking to learn about techniques, or worried about safety. Whoever it is, I think we should take them by the hand and show them this amazing trajectory. And members are the best people to do this with – they’re part of our community. We can talk to them every day or every week, and actually put our products and ideas in front of them. They’re part of it.

**Companies are increasingly looking at subscription membership as a kind of key lever. For us it’s been natural and absolutely central to the business.** We don’t just care about selling loads of stuff. We’ve reached peak stuff. You’ve probably got everything you could possibly need, but you still want stuff. Why you want it is about experiences, not about more things.

It’s about growing strongly from these centres. We have clubhouses and we have the

Rapha cycling house, and we want to attract more people to the club and grow that way. It’s a bit like the centre of a tree trunk with all the concentric rings. We want the business to grow out, rather than become a sporadic mass of individual people buying shit.

For every person who loves the fact that they’re in the cycling club and that they’ve got this special kit, I want more people to join and be part of it. I don’t want people to love it because they’re able to think ‘I’ve got this kit and you don’t.’ That’s not real value. That’s ego, esteem, status stuff. We’re going to win by making cycling more rewarding and giving people better experiences.

In June we had 100 members in Tuscany. We all rode for the weekend, with drinks and music in the evenings. Really interesting people came along and we all hung out and had a lot of fun. It was a special three days. For everybody at the event, it was worth way more than the money that it cost to put on.

We don’t want our customers to value membership because they’re able to say ‘I’m in and you’re not.’ People should feel that there’s something interesting going on here, and that should make them want to be a part of it. When we first started we worked a lot with Soho House to discover how they approach membership. Initially, you had to apply to be a member by filling in various forms. The main reason wasn’t to feel elitist or exclusivist, but to have a sense of who was coming in. Community needs to be built – it won’t work if it’s a bunch of different types of people who have no common ground or shared values. Now you can just apply and you’re in, so you don’t have to answer lots of questions and jump through hoops. We realised that we’ve got to make it really easy. We’ve got 6,700 members now – it’s the biggest cycling club in the world. But it should be 20,000, 30,000 members, because then it becomes really interesting as a community of people.

I think exclusivity is really important in terms of knowing who you are and standing

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*We’re going to win by making cycling more rewarding and giving people better experiences*

for something, being united around an interest, rather than being obsessed by the idea of who’s in and who’s out. If you’re interested in road cycling, Rapha should be as open, friendly and supportive as possible. It doesn’t matter who you are. It’s not that you’ve got to be rich, good looking, fast or any of that stuff. I don’t want to be like that at all.

**What role does *Mondial* play in the broader business, and where do you see it going in the future?** *Mondial* is very pure Rapha in many ways. It’s cerebral, intelligent and a little out of reach.

We began *Rouleur* magazine 10 years ago, and sold it in the last couple of years, so we’ve always done publishing.

I think storytelling, the written word, photography, print and online content have always been a thread through our work. There’s definitely an appetite for long form copy and beautiful, tangible publishing. There’s been an explosion of niche beautiful things that have intelligence and real value.

As well as trying to reach more and more people and educate new riders in a way that’s relevant and helpful, we also have to keep pushing at the other end, at what the high-end of cycling can be. We have to continue to push the intelligent, more esoteric, more artistic, avant-garde side of what Rapha is – and *Mondial* is absolutely at that end.

In print, it needs to be quarterly not half-yearly. Going forward, it could be online, it could be a channel of programming. It doesn’t just have to be a printed magazine. As a printed mag I love it. I love the fact that we’re not beholden to anybody, we take on advertising just because we quite like having some nice brands there, not because it’s essential to make it profitable; and we don’t have to put anything on the masthead because we’re never going to sell it through distribution. It’s entirely about our members and our customers. It’s not about the greater world. It’s a really indulgent thing, and we have the luxury of being able to be totally creative with it.



**Especially in light of your background as a designer and marketer, what is the role of creativity within the business?**

It's totally intrinsic to everything we do. There's so much stuff out there, and we've got so much choice, creativity can help us lead the customer. Most people latch onto two things. One is utility, stuff that just works. You have to have that, especially electronic, digital things that can transform your life. Utility is fantastic, but it can be a bit mundane.

The other thing that touches people is stuff that inspires, surprises and delights them. And that tends to come from creative thoughts or acts. My favourite brands are the brands that do that.

We have to be slightly ahead of the customer, introducing them to things that blow their minds as well as work – and creativity is key to getting there. Our cycle clubs are open from 7.30 in the morning to 8 at night. Nobody else does that. TVs are the central point of every club, showing inspiring races. You can be creative about everything. It's not just product, design or literature – services can be just as creative.

**Do you find it difficult to marry this creative side with more pragmatic concerns?** No I don't. It comes back to those core values I suppose. 'Think for yourself' is creativity. We're trying to instil an attitude in everybody that means they aren't happy with doing the same old stuff: re-think it, find a better or more interesting way. Whether you're a designer or in a technical role, you've got to think for yourself.

There's no compromise here. I think everything is done as perfectly as it can be.

We've also grown by 40% a year for 12 years. So commercially it's worked too. I understand about profitability and balance sheets, because I used to be an accountant years ago, but I've been able to combine that with being creative and innovative.

Why not? Why not have something that's really successful and commercially viable but also creative and innovative? Why do you have to choose? We haven't had to yet.

In fact, the more you invest in creativity, with the right kind of framework, the more profitable and resilient you can be.

**What role does storytelling play? With regards to *Mondial* but also in terms of other editorial content, and in relation to the broader business too?** It's a great way

**THERE'S MORE**



**1.**  
On joining the company, each new Rapha employee is issued with a silk race number, to indicate the order in which they've joined. Simon, of course, is number 1.

**2.**  
The business' stylish offices are based in a former abattoir, in the reclaimed industrial area behind London's King's Cross station.

**Below:**  
Type detail in the Rapha offices, London



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*With Mondial, there's an element of seduction*

in. I love the fact that people might come in through the magazine rather than discovering the brand because they have to buy some shorts to wear on their bike. That's legitimate, but kind of functional. With *Mondial*, by contrast, there's an element of seduction. If you read an article that is interesting, vaguely linked to cycling and helps you discover something, before you know it, you could be speaking French and watching the Tour de France! *Mondial* is a medium for us to tell stories.

When we talk about membership, we talk about three Cs: commerce, community and content being combined. They should be indivisible. We've always produced a lot of essays, films, magazines and books. But I think there's a big opportunity to step up and do much more.

Cycling media is appalling. The sport isn't going to meet millions more people if it isn't engaging and if it can't tell stories properly. If I compare cycling media with what Vice Media does, for example, they're a world apart. I think Rapha's role should be to bridge that gap.

Producing content on a much bigger scale shouldn't be that hard, but it needs to be film and video, it's got to be constant and it's got to be on mobile. That's how people are consuming content. If we're trying to enhance cycling and make it more appealing, then content has the potential to connect everything up. I get to ride a bike for an hour or two every day. That means there's 10 hours a day when I'm not riding a bike, but I'm still a cyclist. We have to consider what content can do to connect you to riding, racing and the cycling community by telling inspiring stories. It can wrap around the moments you're on the bike, and make them even more successful and memorable. Obsessive I know, but I think it's a good thing.

**Cycling has this reputation for being all-consuming in a way many other sports don't.** It's somewhat different isn't it, to team sport or fishing. Fishing is still the most popular sport in the UK, but I don't think it has any cultural relevance really. Whereas cycling surrounds us: its utility, health, sport, travel, history, culture, coffee and its food. That's what makes me so confident. Cycling, that thing that we're selling, is just so brilliant. We're going to make great products because cycling itself is so powerful.