

Waging war on the wags

THE success of Operation Truancy Watch, it would seem, depends on people informing on their neighbours. As we know, good neighbourliness is not what it was, so people may be more inclined to tell Stoke-on-Trent City Council if the people next door break the law. Yet if little Johnny is playing truant at home, it's not going to take angry parents long to work out somebody nearby must have dropped them in it. For some people the idea will be too much trouble, which is a pity, because anything which may reduce the level of truancy in the Potteries has to be worth trying.

It is unclear whether some parents have received fines before subsequently being prosecuted, but the fact that in the last year 73 prosecutions and 118 fixed penalties were issued to the parents of Potteries schoolchildren is appalling. One of the basic assumptions of any thinking about a child's development is that parents want them to fulfil their potential. But if a parent is too feckless to grasp that a child's best opportunities in life are built on the foundation of an education, what can the authorities do? Parents should be punished for failing their offspring so completely, but if they display such monumental indifference to education, one wonders how much their child will absorb even when in school. It is a depressing prospect, for if minds are closed there is little that can be done. Yet the authorities have to try, for if they can turn round a handful of children a year, it has to be worthwhile. But how depressing that we must take people kicking and screaming to receive the best start in life.

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David Elks



My View

Knowing when to call it a day is John's business

John Caudwell has called in advisers to sound out potential buyers of his business empire. If the tycoon does sell up, how will he spend his days? The Sentinel's Business Editor gives his view

THERE are two basic qualities that define a great entrepreneur like John Caudwell.

The first is being able to spot a good business opportunity. The second is knowing when to get out.

So could it be that the Stoke-born founder of the Caudwell Group is poised to sell off parts of his mobile phone empire? And if he does, what next for the Midlands' richest man?

The appointment of investment bank NM Rothschild to weigh up a sale of Phones 4u, and even, as industry analysts suggest, the possible break-up of the Caudwell Group, certainly shows signs of the pressures that his empire is now facing.

In the past eight months, Mr Caudwell has closed down his Must Have IT chain of shops, has been stung by allegations of mis-selling and misleading advertising, and lost a battle with the Inland Revenue over the use of a tax-saving offshore trust.

It's the sort of bad news that could damage, if not derail, a lesser business and make every entrepreneur think about selling up if there is a good enough offer on the table.

Let's not underestimate the challenges the self-confessed workaholic has already overcome in successfully growing his business.

In just 18 years, the former second-hand car salesman has shown acute commercial acumen by tapping into the booming mobile phone market and creating a £1.6 billion group offering



DECISIONS, DECISIONS: John Caudwell at this year's Caudwell Trust charity ball and, clockwise from top left, cycling to raise charity funds; with partner Clare Johnson; in the office; and taking a motorcycle for a spin

everything from handsets and ringtones to insurance.

The Caudwell Group now employs around 4,000 people at its operations across Stoke, Newcastle and Crewe, and is currently recruiting 200 people at Phones 4u.

It's not a bad achievement for a working-class kid from Stoke-on-Trent who began life sweeping factory floors.

Mr Caudwell has garnered a reputation as a tough, no-nonsense businessman, whose aggressive growth strategy has raised the hackles of customers and suppliers alike. But he has also responded to criticism.

When one of his former companies, Singlepoint, faced complaints from consumers and disgruntled staff, he drafted in a human resources expert from Toyota to introduce training and improved conditions. That had the knock-on effect of cutting consumer complaints.

Of course, the pace of growth has been stemmed by the maturity of the industry, and every part of his diverse business now faces increasing competition.

Indeed investment has not always yielded tangible results.

Mr Caudwell has pumped tens of millions into Phones 4u in a bid to topple Carphone Warehouse as the number one phone shop.

He has introduced a training academy to deliver top-notch customer service, and dangled a £1 million carrot in bonus schemes to encourage his staff to 'live, breathe and die' for the company.

While directors at Phones 4u insist the business is still growing, market analysts say Carphone Warehouse has maintained its dominance.

Of course, profits from a sale of Phones 4u could be used to add to the mighty cashpile that the group amassed after flogging its

Singlepoint business to Vodafone for £405 million two years ago.

Some analysts say the Singlepoint sale has weakened the viability of the group and that it may now be broken up and sold off.

So what would Mr Caudwell do if he quit the business? Some say he might settle down to a life of sailing his yacht or enjoying the trappings of wealth.

Given his craving for public recognition, it is more likely he would devote himself to either a new business or spend greater time on his charitable interests.

It's clear that the father-of-five ranks the pleasure of helping sick children through his Caudwell Trust as highly as the kick of being the best in business.

For him, doing nothing is not an option. As he said in June: "I could never just do nothing — it would drive me mad. I have to have a sense of purpose. There will always be more to do and goals to strive for."

May Un Mar Lady Revisited

December 8, 1986

