



Enter the Dragons' Den: Bob Gokani

BY PETER CACKETT

I have often daydreamed about inventing a successful new product and then going on to pitch for investment on *Dragons' Den*, with the TV show's seasoned entrepreneurs all competing with each other to invest in my company. My imagined fantasy carefully ignores all the lengthy and complicated tasks of product design, patent applications, manufacturing and marketing, to ever be a participant on the programme. Acknowledging that all these tasks remain alien concepts would ruin the dream!

Recently, David Lockington, my co-editor at *Eye News*, informed me that budding entrepreneur Bob Gokani had successfully invented both eye and ear drop applicators and founded a company called EziDrops Ltd. He had also recently been a contestant on *Dragons' Den* pitching for an investment in his growing business. Keen to not only understand the mysteries of how to design a product and bring it to market but also to find out what goes on behind the scenes on *Dragons' Den*, I contacted Bob to request an interview. I was delighted to meet up virtually with him in early summer.

Bob's family originates from the state of Gujarat in India. His grandfather emigrated to Uganda, East Africa as a result of British colonisation and set up in business there. Both of his parents and subsequently Bob were all born in Uganda. However, in 1972, the then president of Uganda Idi Amin ordered the expulsion of non-Ugandan passport holders, as he believed that they were

sabotaging the economy and gave them 90 days to leave. His family all had British passports and so they came to the UK as refugees. They were helped with the relocation and settled in Blackburn, with both his parents immediately starting work in a factory. "It was a good old northern town, but a real struggle. A textile town in those days, full of cobbled streets." Later on in 1987, the family managed to move and settle in Cheltenham.

Bob eventually left home to study for an Economics degree at Leicester Polytechnic (now De Montfort University) and then went straight into IT software sales. He worked for the same company for 24 years up until September 2023. It was during the last few years of employment there that he invented his eye drop applicator. "It was only because I started suffering from hay fever at the age of 50, never having experienced it before," he explained. He went to the doctor with his symptoms and was diagnosed with hay fever. "At the pharmacy they gave me a whole bag of stuff including antihistamines, nasal sprays and eye drops. I could manage everything except the eye drops. My eyes were red and sore, I was also constantly rubbing them and I just needed relief." He looked in the marketplace for an aid to help him with the drops and really didn't find much available. "I went to Boots and there was nothing, and it was then that I realised that I can't be the only person suffering from this problem. Later on, I did find some devices but they were cumbersome, overly engineered and not practical at all."

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It was as a result of this experience four years ago that he decided he wanted to design something that was practical, simple and universal. He sat down and sketched out a rough design of the prototype of the device. "I'm no artist, by the way," he said. "What I designed was very rudimentary."

Bob had a close friend Lucas, who he was helping at the time. Lucas had invented things in the past and when Bob told him about his idea, his friend said, "Why don't you come over and we'll put it onto a CAD system?" Bob explained that CAD (computer-aided design) software helps you create a three-dimensional (3D) image of a product. So together with his friend, they created a design on the computer, sent off the first iteration for 3D printing and received back a crude, physical product.

Once the design process of the completed prototype was completed, Bob immediately decided to start the registration process for the patent and approached a patent attorney. "You initially get a 12-month registration where you can explore the idea in openness with protection." Following this he had to start formalising the intellectual property protection. This is enormously complicated and expensive. "You have to justify the uniqueness of the elements of your product. That process is quite a challenging battle. It's also a very expensive process. Actually, that is probably the biggest barrier to entry when you are creating a unique invention."

Obtaining advice and support is the biggest challenge that Bob has faced. "There are definitely people out there that are in key positions who can really help push you in the right directions, but everyone is too busy to give that time. You almost become nervous about asking for help in case you are shunned and you worry that you are annoying them. However, we have battled through it and for every 10 people that you ask for help you will find that one will give you that time and help because they understand the problem and the situation."

On a positive note, he explained that he has obtained good advice from his local Chamber of Commerce. The University of Hertfordshire provided a great deal of help especially during the Covid-19 pandemic. A government body called Innovate provided assistance and his company was the first to receive help from this organisation pre-seed. "Normally their criterion for a start-up is five employees, amongst other things, before they will give you any support. We didn't have anything except the notion and the idea and they gave us one-to-one support through a business adviser." His local enterprise partnership (LEP) in Watford called Wenta also provided help with free business courses.

In addition, because Bob wanted to expand into international export, he contacted both the Department of Business and Trade (DBT) and the Chartered Institute of Export & International Trade (CioE&IT). The DBT provided him with an international growth adviser from the DBT, who gave help with a match-funding grant. For anyone with a start-up company he advises that there are huge amounts of help available from government bodies, "So go seek out that help because it's there!"



In the UK market, Bob showed the prototype to Boots. They understood immediately the concept of the product and the need for the product. After successfully passing the lengthy testing / approval process, EziDrops was offered a listing in Boots. Prior to an order being placed in March 2020, Covid-19 struck a blow in getting the products stocked in store. This set back was a massive blow, with Bob being left with a vast quantity of product. With perseverance Bob managed to get the products listed on Amazon, although the process took a few months. A year later, in April 2021, Boots finally listed EziDrops. His products are now widely stocked in pharmacy chains, opticians and also being recommended by ophthalmologists.

EziDrops has also experienced international success. "We went to an exhibition called Medica (a trade fair for medical technology and healthcare conference, in Germany), and we started getting enquiries from places like Serbia and Montenegro, Finland and Switzerland and started shipping orders. As a result of that success, in December 2023 EziDrops Ltd won the Micro Business of the Year trophy at the inaugural International Trade Awards." For Bob it was a total shock to be recognised like this and win the award. "It was unbelievable and has given us huge exposure."

I now move onto Bob's appearance on *Dragons' Den*. As a spoiler alert, for those readers that wish to watch the episode that Bob appears in before finding out what happens in the text below, it is available to watch online on the BBC iPlayer app, Series 21 Episode 11, 29:30–43:10. It was recorded in June 2023 and the five investment 'Dragons' for this particular show were Deborah Meaden, Peter Jones, Sara Davies, Steven Bartlett and Touker Suleyman.

I wanted to know how Bob came to appear on the show as a contestant. He explained that you can apply online and there is a closing date. However, in his case the BBC approached him and sent him an email enquiry via his website, asking if he would be interested in appearing on the programme. He replied to the email to say yes and he was immediately contacted by one of the assistant producers. They had a chat and he discovered that they had found out about him through social media. Although they receive thousands of applications, they also like to find their own contestants through research and are always looking out for innovative new start-ups. In his case they had never had a medical device like EziDrops on the programme. He was told by the producer that out of all the applications they had received for *Dragons' Den*, he would keep it as a priority and that he would guide him through the whole selection process.

Bob explained that although the BBC had approached him, there was still no guarantee that he would appear on the show as there is a lot of screening that goes on. At each stage of the process, you're being assessed on how you are going to cope with appearing on the show. "There was a short interview process, with a lot of questions and then I had to prepare a



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video as if I was pitching to the Dragons which was shown to the production team. There was also a lot of due diligence going on in the background where they checked that all the company's paperwork was in order. The level of scrutiny is unbelievable. Even in the week before the recorded show was due to be broadcast, I was receiving emails asking if I could prove this or that as they can still actually pull it. What they do is they over produce the show and there is no guarantee that your pitch will be shown." Bob also had to keep his appearance on the programme and the outcome of his showdown with the Dragons a secret from everyone as if it made it into the public domain, it would have ruined the element of surprise and it would have been pulled.

I asked Bob what happens on the day of the recording. He told me that the day is very fast paced with a lot to take on board. *Dragons' Den* is recorded at the Old Granada Studios in Manchester and his slot was scheduled for the morning session so he had to be there for 07:00. All the contestants for the day wait for their turn in a large open space and are given a corner of the room to set up and prepare.

Bob went on to describe his actual pitch where he was offering a 5% stake in his company for £25,000 (valuing his business at £500,000). Although he spent over an hour in the room with the Dragons, his segment on the show only comprises about 14 minutes. A large part of the discussion was not shown including his history and background and also his finances and whether he knew them or not. "So, there's a lot that wasn't shown. For example, as I was walking out the producer came up to me and said 'Did you hear what Peter Jones actually said? He said, "This time next year he's going to be driving a Ferrari.'" Now that wasn't in the final edit but I wish it had been!"

I asked Bob what his motivation was for appearing on the show, as sometimes contestants seem to be more interested in exposure for their company than actually getting an investment. Bob explained that he definitely wanted a Dragon onboard. However, the difficult part for Bob was that he knew the different traits of all the Dragons but he was scratching his head as to how they were going to be able to help him add value. "When you watch *Dragons' Den* you will often hear a Dragon say, 'I like your business, but what value can I add?' They are trying to think how they can help you and for me it wasn't easy to work that out. If for example someone like Tej Lalvani (another previous Dragon) had been there, he has distribution in pharmacies worldwide and I could see the value concept straight away and what doors he could open for me overnight."

I pointed out that the programme does appear to be edited for entertainment purposes so that the contestants do not have a flawless performance. Bob agreed: "The Dragons are there to find fault in something." In Bob's case, Sara Davies wanted to know about protection of intellectual property and Bob appeared vague as if he was unsure. However, all the patents were in place but he just did not feel comfortable discussing this in the public domain. Also, Steven Bartlett found difficulty understanding the concept of his devices and persistently picked out all the negative points. This put Bob on the back foot as the products had been carefully designed and extensive market research had already been performed.

During the pitch both Touker Suleyman recommended licensing the product at 10-20 cents and selling with every eye and ear drop product. I wanted to know why Bob was against this idea. Bob explained that this suggestion was a curve ball. He explained that initially Touker had offered the full amount for a 40% stake in his business, with Peter, which threw him and made him feel really deflated because he had already gone into the pitch undervaluing the company on purpose. Also, he had

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already broken into America with an order for his products with Walgreens and an expected order from CVS (the largest pharmacy chain in the US). Therefore, at the time of filming, he had no need to go down the licensing route whilst retail was working so well. However, licensing his products is still something that he may consider in the future.

Towards the end of Bob's pitch Touker Suleyman and Peter Jones offered a joint deal where they would each offer half of the money for a 15% (30% total) stake and then reducing to 10% (20% total) if they got their money back within six months but again Bob ultimately turned the deal down. I wanted to know if there was an option after the show to contact the Dragons and negotiate again or if the door is then closed. "In all honesty, the moment is gone," Bob said. He explained that they are seeing hundreds of pitches each year and even if you did do deal a with them you wouldn't be working directly with them but with members of their team. "They are too busy running multi-million-pound businesses!" There was a positive note from his appearance though as Peter Jones commented that he thought Bob would be a multi-millionaire in a few years.

I suggest to Bob that it must be enormously stressful to put his reputation and that of his company on the line by appearing on the show. He agreed with me and also informed me that once the recording has taken place you have no comeback to say that you do not want it to be shown. "You've signed the contract and from the moment they put the microphone on, they can use any of it." Bob discussed appearing on the show with his wife and kids beforehand. "Ultimately, what you have to think about is that it's not just about the exposure or trying to make money out of this. For me it was more important to make sure there was no negative impact on my sons. As soon as the episode was aired, they were getting messages on social media. Can you imagine if the outcome of the appearance was a negative one? My two boys would have had to live with that because it never goes away. That was the main concern I had and to stay composed and not get into any interaction that could cause controversy." Ultimately the appearance did not have any detrimental effect on Bob's family and his sons' friends were in fact praising Bob for his performance. He has no regrets for taking part. "The BBC Team assign a welfare officer to you throughout the whole process. The whole experience with the *Dragon's Den* team at the BBC has been fantastic."

Bob's quote at the end of his segment was: "The Dragons missed a big fish," and he still feels this way as his company continues to flourish. He is now in the process of arranging international retail partners, already having signed contracts with Australia, New Zealand, Slovenia, Singapore, Finland and many more in the pipeline. These contracts are distribution agreements with another company that gives them exclusive rights to sell his products in that particular territory. They will buy his devices

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at an agreed price and are responsible for marketing and selling them locally. The companies are usually well connected with pharmacies, opticians or ophthalmology. For example, a potential partner in Greece has access to distribution to 2500 pharmacies there and will be adding EziDrops into their portfolio.

It is not all plain sailing though as there are many pitfalls everywhere. For example, contracts with Boots and CVS are very onerous and they can have a huge impact on his business. "These very big institutions are highly geared to protecting themselves."

I ask Bob if he could go back in time to his 17-year-old self and give him some advice, what would he say. "I reflect on that a lot," Bob replied. "It's basically to try and understand yourself and who you are. The more you know about yourself, the better you can direct your own future. If I had known that I had the ability to invent products very early on, then I might have done that a lot sooner rather than by accident as I have always had the ability to create something. The more you know yourself, the more successful you can potentially be."

I also wanted to know what advice Bob had for a young budding entrepreneur looking for success in business. "Firstly, remember to read the small print and caveat on the tin. Although business and working for yourself can be thoroughly rewarding, remember, it takes over your whole life. Secondly, you can't be half hearted and must be willing to fully immerse yourself, which will impact your whole life and that of your families. Lastly, unless you are able to raise funds early on, be prepared to invest a lot of your own personal savings into the venture. That said, reach out to all your local government bodies, there's a lot of help out there, a lot of initiatives and grant funding. Go and talk to all the main bodies, i.e. Chamber of Commerce, LEPs, Innovate, DBT and the Chartered Institute of Export and International Trade, because they are the

ones who will steer you in the right direction. Just keep asking for help."

Although Bob has no aspirations to be a Dragon himself in the future, he is now happily helping other entrepreneurs looking for help and advice. Bob loves providing assistance and thoroughly enjoys giving back. "Knowing the difficulties that I have been through, if that's going to help somebody else, then why not?"

Bob is delighted that on his journey, within only a few years, EziDrops has become a household brand and product, with his products having been described as "Simple genius" and "The paperclip of eyecare." He's developed a passion for inventing and presently has created three successful products, two eye drop applicators and an innovate ear drop applicator. Bob signed off with a final summary to say, "EziDrops was a notion of an idea, which slowly flourished into a full-grown business. My advice therefore is to never brush off any ideas but to explore the opportunities to their fullest!" As we drew our discussion to a close, I wished Bob every success with EziDrops battling the dragons of the business world.

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