

With odds stacked against him, Thomas Lundgren had only one way out

Not only did Thomas Lundgren put his house in order, he made pots of money helping others do the same. **CT** charts his incredible success story

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There ought to be a sort of Hall of Fame, a modern-day Parthenon — for the underdogs of the world — the derided, the insulted, the rejected, who go on to convert their humiliations into sterling successes. For, one man's insult is another's inspiration, and you can't really write off anyone who packs in his heart the unbeatable combination of unflinching belief in his own ideas and unwavering determination to bring them to fruition.

Were there ever such a place, Thomas Lundgren would surely

occupy a special seat in it. He was a penniless dreamer about a decade back. He got mercilessly knocked about by people, by circumstances, by fate, but who still hung in there, with his far-out ideas of world conquest through a funky, souped-up home fashion brand. Today, his

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dream of world domination is still far off, though he is slowly inching towards it.

Thomas Lundgren is the brain behind THE One, a small little red logo that first appeared on home furnishings but has now expanded to glassware, music, cuisine and

lifestyle. With nine stores already in the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan and Kuwait, his tenth will open within six weeks in Sweden, his home country.

Last week, Thomas Lundgren was honoured for his achievements by Khaleej Times in association with Coral International Hotels, Resorts & Spas; he is the second of many prominent UAE personalities to be presented each month with the Coral International Hotels, Resorts & Spas Trophy for excellence in their respective fields.

CT Pg. 24: "People who work with me are my family"



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At a specially organised luncheon in the hotel, he was presented the trophy by Michel Noblet, the hotel's managing director.

Tall, with bluish-grey eyes, Lundgren exudes the pioneering spirit of early Nordic seafarers. But he is a maverick pioneer who dresses in faded jeans, navy-blue blazer and a blue backpack slung over his broad shoulders. No briefcase for him. "When I opened my store, the first thing I threw away was the briefcase," says the 43-year-old Swede who carved out his own niche on his own terms and wacky ideas. No wonder, any kind of conformity or pretence is anathema to him.

His father's death when he was five shaped his humongous drive, a lifelong struggle against fear of failing, of financial insecurity. His mother and he had nothing. "I hate leftover food because I lived on that as a kid," he says matter-of-factly.

As he grew up, he worked for Sony Music for some time and had dreams of going to Australia, but his real destiny lay in the sands of Arabia. The 80s saw him working as a decorator in Saudi Arabia for IKEA, the giant Swedish home décor house. Then just when he thought he had had enough of Saudi Arabia, IKEA shifted him to Kuwait as decoration manager.

Thoroughly disillusioned, saturated with the sight of flat packs, chip boards and all round boring furniture, it was in 1994 that Lundgren came up with his ideas of funky, sexed-up contemporary fur-

mass-produced furniture extinct". Furnishings that he "would sell at masstige prices — a money tag between mass and prestige."

But it was easier to think it up than to get it down to reality, as he was soon to discover. Putting on a tie, glasses and with a briefcase "to appear older and serious" — he made the rounds of banks to raise money for his venture. Ten banks rejected him. "Some didn't believe me; some wanted me to be employed. They didn't want to do it my way," recalls Lundgren. Today, the bank's rejection letters are tacked in white frames in his office on what he calls the 'Infamous Wall'.

He had approached friends, but they, too, didn't have the kind of money needed for a venture. Then, one of his friends, who had made a great deal of money in a deal, gave Lundgren the money. "I'm going to give you the money and I'm going to retire," the friend told him. "Now it's up to you, whether I'll fly monkey class or business class for the rest of my life."

Lundgren's first store, THE One, opened in Abu Dhabi in 1996, the name thought up by his long-supportive wife, Ewa. THE One, meaning Total Home Experience.

But troubles were still far from over. Lundgren realised he had employed far too many people, the store was in a wrong location and he was bringing out such bad products that his friends moaned, "This is not what you talked about." Then



Michel Noblet presents Thomas Lundgren with the trophy

electrical fire broke out where his million dollars worth of material was stacked, and a shoddy accountant had merely dumped all bills and invoices in a box. Lundgren survived both. "From 1996 to 1999, I probably died three or four times," says Lundgren. "It was like a bad movie. It was too painful, too much survival." Which is why, he now thinks anybody has to be stupid and naïve to want to succeed as an entrepreneur. "Had I known what kind of ordeal it would be, 24-hours work all the time, enough to send you to hospital, would I have

In February 1997, however, Lundgren was on the right spot at the right time when he got the premises in Dubai. "If I hadn't got that, I would've have been," he says making a slashing gesture across his throat, "dead". It took nine years to achieve what he had dreamt of. "Building a brand takes a long long time."

Always an original thinker, Thomas Lundgren has created a new business ethos all his own. Nothing in THE One is reordered, no matter how popular, the store set up is changed constantly to give custom-

ers are no longer customers, they are fans. Why does he do these things? "I had no family to speak of. So, people who work with me are my family. I'm very proud there are people who are with me for a long time, like my general manager, Jane, who has been with me for 14 years. I have to provide security for them. I know what insecurity can do."

When asked why did he set out to change the world, Lundgren smiles. "To be an entrepreneur is not enough. I've succeeded in that, and it's no challenge. Now, I want to be a social entrepreneur." Like five years ago, he started hiring handicapped people. "You know, I've found out that handicapped people not only do fantastic jobs, but because of them other people around them become nicer."

Thomas Lundgren has come a long hard way, from rejection to success. But like everything else, in his lexicon, even success has a meaning all his own. He explains, "There are so many problems in the world. So many bad things are happening. So, when I leave this world, do I want to leave behind a company that doesn't improve the lives of those who work for it? No. because after all, what are you going to do with all the money you have? So, at some stage, what success really means is that it gives you the freedom to make choices. And that's what I am going to do: take care of my people and make my company a great place to work