

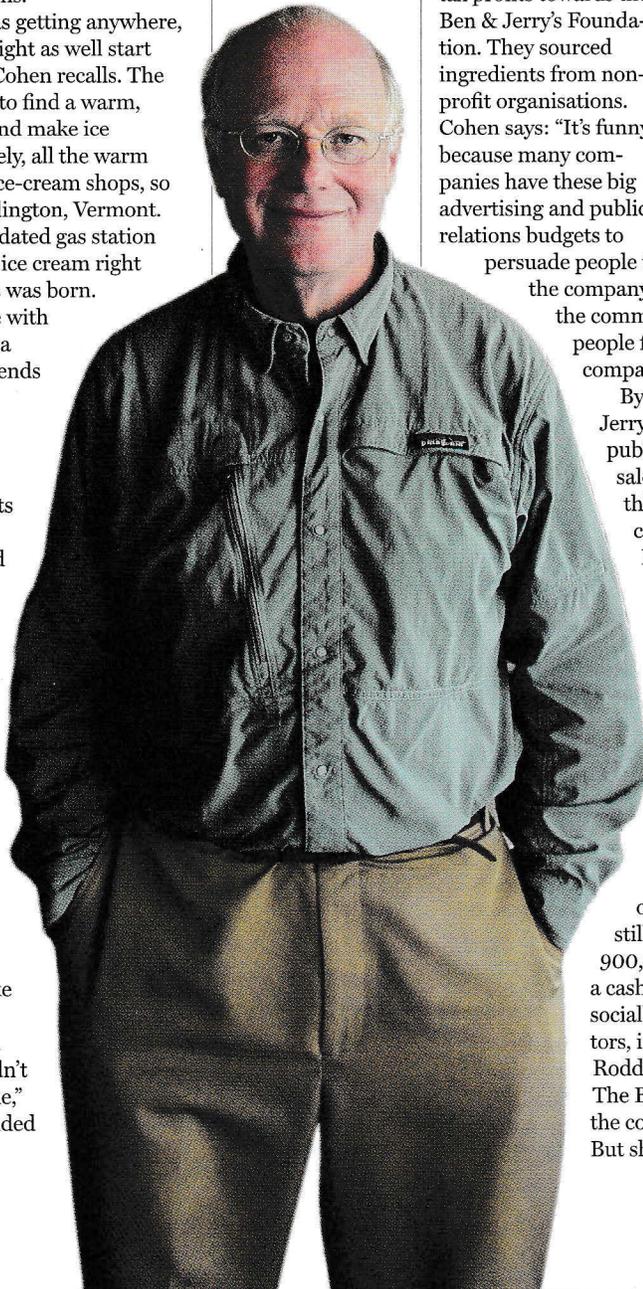
# A force for good

*Ben Cohen, one of the founders of ice-cream maker Ben & Jerry's, believes a business can make a difference. By Kathryn Tully*

**I**T WAS 1978, AND BEN Cohen, a struggling potter, and his school friend, Jerry Greenfield, who had just failed to get into medical school, were weighing their options.

"Neither of us was getting anywhere, so we decided we might as well start our own business," Cohen recalls. The pair hatched a plan to find a warm, rural college town and make ice cream. "Unfortunately, all the warm towns already had ice-cream shops, so we ended up in Burlington, Vermont. We fixed up a dilapidated gas station and started making ice cream right there." Ben & Jerry's was born. Starting the venture with \$8,000 in cash and a \$4,000 loan, the friends began to specialise in unusual flavours. They whipped up recipes with chunks of cookies and sweets and names such as Dastardly Mush and Chunky Monkey.

Six years later, Ben and Jerry's had sales of \$4m. Yet the duo was keen to quit. "We felt big business exploited the community, its workers and the environment," Cohen says. But then he told an old diner owner of the plan to sell up. "He said, 'If you don't like the way business is done, why don't you change it?' That hadn't really occurred to me," he laughs. "So I decided I'd give that a shot."



The pair set about making their products and factories greener, closed the gap between the highest- and lowest-paid employees and directed 7.5 per cent of annual pre-tax profits towards the Ben & Jerry's Foundation. They sourced ingredients from non-profit organisations. Cohen says: "It's funny because many companies have these big advertising and public relations budgets to

persuade people to feel good about the company. We just helped the community and then people felt good about the company anyway."

By 1999, Ben & Jerry's was a successful public company with sales of \$237m. But this also meant it could be bought. Perry Odak, the chief executive, put the company into play, against the wishes of Cohen and Greenfield. Dreyer's, a rival ice-cream company, and Unilever, the consumer goods group, both made offers. Cohen, who still owned more than 900,000 shares, made a cash offer with other socially conscious investors, including Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop, to take the company private. But shareholders, who

favoured an all-stock offer of the same value proposed by Dreyer's, filed a law suit. In April 2000, Unilever trumped both offers, bidding \$43 a share for the company, a near 25 per cent premium on its share price that valued Ben & Jerry's at \$326m.

Cohen, Greenfield and the board were obliged to accept the deal. Unilever pledged to continue the company's social mission, but for Cohen the sale was anything but euphoric. "It was just about the worst day of my life," he says.

They are now just employees, but Cohen and Greenfield still attend Ben & Jerry's franchisee meetings, work on public relations and share ideas with the company's management.

The sale of the company has, how-

ever, given Cohen the platform and the resources to become a passionate advocate of other causes, such as getting the US government to shift spending away from defence and towards education, healthcare, housing and fighting poverty. "The annual Pentagon budget today is over \$700bn," he says. "You could eliminate global childhood starvation with eight days of that budget."

He spends much of his free time walking the family dog. "She's the highest-energy dog I've ever seen. If she doesn't have an hour-and-a-half romp in the woods, she goes crazy." Greenfield often joins them. "After all, what's a Ben without a Jerry?" he laughs. "The first question people ask if we show up alone is, 'Where's the other one?'"

Cohen and Greenfield are currently promoting a Ben & Jerry's initiative to make all its ingredients fair trade. "We are incredibly excited and encouraged by that," Cohen says. "Hopefully Unilever will do more things to marry for-profit business with meeting social needs." Is he heartened that other companies are also seeking to make business a force for social good? "Sometimes I'm encouraged. Companies often say we couldn't possibly do that or we'd go out of business," he says. "Ben & Jerry's and now a bunch of other companies have proved that's just not true." ■

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