

Steve Howell, Freshwater's chief executive, writes a monthly column -Business Talk - for the Western Mail newspaper. The following article appeared on Monday 9th August 2010. The views expressed are Steve's and not necessarily those of the company.

Steve Howell writes...

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# Pitch that put Wales firmly on course for global recognition

**I**N the summer of 1997, I received a phone call that proved to be far more significant than I could have imagined at the time.

It came from the then chief executive of Celtic Manor, Kay Dawes, to whom I'd written speculatively to see if the resort - most of which was still a building site - needed a PR consultant.

Having just left the BBC to set up my own business in Newport, the idea of working for this monster development just down the road was hardly a piece of lateral thinking.

But I didn't have any expectation the services of a local hack would be needed. So when the call came from Mrs Dawes, the sister of Sir Terry Matthews, as I sat at home contemplating a virtually empty diary, the challenge was to keep my composure.

She invited me to meet her marketing director and a few weeks later I was welcomed aboard to help in a small way with a few press releases.

The fact I didn't know much about golf didn't seem to matter. The main problem was the world knew virtually nothing about Celtic Manor.

It's hard to imagine now - only a few weeks away from The 2010 Ryder Cup - but London journalists would react to my 30-second patter with: "Celtic what? In Newport? You're kidding?"

Prince Charles eating banned beef on the bone there in February 1999 created a media opportunity that undoubtedly helped brand recognition.

But it was the Ryder Cup that really did it. Without Sir Terry's ambition to host golf's greatest team event, Celtic Manor would have been just another big hotel development - and far harder to get to than those in the Home Counties.

Instinct plays a much greater part in business than academic theorists would ever admit. And Terry knew he had to think big to fill all those bedrooms, golf courses and meeting facilities on the M4.

With the Ryder Cup as a story, my team - as we'd become - was able to secure media coverage in those early months worth literally millions of pounds.

Luckily for Terry, and for Wales, he had a kindred spirit in politics - Rhodri Morgan - with a similar nose for news and burning desire to demolish disparaging stereotypes of his home nation.

In many ways, the two men could not be more different. But their common goal and passion for Wales led to a partnership that swept aside the proud claims of Scotland, the home of golf, to host the 2010 event.

Measuring the value of all this - the ROI that now features in almost every tender that lands on my desk - is, frankly, almost impossible.

I could mention that employment in tourism has gone up 23% since 1998. Or that the number of overnight stays in Wales by people playing golf rose more

## BUSINESSTALK

STEVE HOWELL



■ Big names like Colin Montgomerie are now on course for the Celtic Manor

than 50% between 2002 and 2008.

I could say the Ryder Cup has been a catalyst for investment in hotels and golf facilities across Wales, or list the local companies that have won contracts to build and supply those developments.

And I could point to the £73m or so economic boost that will come from staging the event itself, employing literally thousands of local people and giving them a unique experience to put on their CVs.

But my belief is these benefits are a relatively small part of the story.

What we don't know and are never likely to measure properly is what this association with a major global brand has done - and will continue to do - for awareness of Wales and the country's image.

And, of course, measuring the benefits

is made all the harder by the fact that Wales' new-found ambition is not limited to the Ryder Cup.

In sport and culture, from the Millennium Centre to Liberty Stadium, there have been numerous examples of bold investments and exciting events.

My belief is Wales is now seen by many people as a modern, vibrant place. And, when speaking to London or even overseas journalists these days, I hardly ever hear anyone say "Celtic what?"

If you really want a sense of the potential value of the Ryder Cup, think of those three days in October as a multi-media speculative letter from Wales to the world - creating unimaginable opportunities by reaching two thousand million people.

■ Steve Howell is chief executive of Freshwater UK.