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Brilliant salesman in FT's toughest markets

By Michael Holman and Quentin Peel

Raymond O'Donnell, who has died aged 67, was a brilliant international salesman for the Financial Times. He was also one of the great raconteurs and possessed a contacts book packed with friendships that spanned the world and bridged its divides.

His bond with the FT lasted nearly 40 years, though he always remained a freelance. The paper was only one of many business interests that made - and lost - him small fortunes over the years but it was the closest to his heart.

It was in 1960s Tehran that the effervescent young Irishman introduced himself to the FT's then foreign editor, JDF Jones, explaining that he had a thriving business selling Christmas cards in the Gulf. Anyone making a success of this unlikely market, the foreign editor decided, could surely sell advertising space in the country surveys that were a feature of the FT's growing foreign coverage.

So began a relationship that endured until days before his death. His travels embraced the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the former Soviet Union, but Africa dominated his career.

He criss-crossed the continent selling advertising space, extolling what he described as "the ethic and the elegance" of the paper, and sharing with generations of FT correspondents the insights acquired over years of engagement with some of the most demanding countries in the world.

In Nigeria, he was instrumental in forging a special relationship for the FT. During the oil-boom years O'Donnell sold so many ads for the FT's annual Nigerian supplements that they had to be split up and published on consecutive days.

It was not just Nigeria. He made possible a bumper report on Iran in Ayatollah Khomeini's early days and another on Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet Union that was republished in Russian and distributed on the black market at a handsome mark-up. Advertisers were inundated with joint venture proposals from Russians who had seen nothing like it.

"He could sell almost anything to anyone, but he loved and understood the FT and earned millions of pounds for the newspaper," said Sir David Bell, the FT chairman. "He was always alert to a good story and endlessly good to journalists in the field."

He used the telephone like no one else, cajoling switchboards across the world to connect him to colleagues in an era when getting any international line was a challenge. A crate of champagne was a regular Christmas present for FT -telephonists.

A call from O'Donnell, however, was seldom to discuss business. It would be to check rugby scores and bark his latest anecdotes down the line - anecdotes that were frequently fantastical and impossible to verify.

Born in 1938, the son of a prosperous Irish doctor in Sutton, south-west London, he was educated at Wimbledon College. Beneath the bonhomie lay a perceptive mind, without a trace of malice. Raymond's O'Donnell's greatest gift was friendship. His many friends spanned colour and creed, region and class. Jimoh Ayinde, his driver in Lagos, was among the most dev-oted. He is survived by his wife, Beachy, a son and a daughter.

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