

DEFINING QUALITIES

Interview with
ALAN NEILSON
CHAIRMAN
VERSEONE GROUP

PMW | Partridge Muir & Warren

CHARTERED FINANCIAL PLANNERS

In a series of interviews with Simon Lewis, chief executive of Partridge Muir & Warren, owner-managers consider their approach to business and the specific qualities which deliver sustainable success.

The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.

IN THE FUTURE, IF it isn't happening now, companies are going to be judged by the customer not just on the service they provide, but the overall experience, says serial entrepreneur Alan Neilson.

"Companies can have specific point fixes, such as fast tracking service by introducing same-day delivery, which is good, but the overall customer experience involving all aspects of their interaction is key and the only differentiator. What do I mean by experience? At a basic level, how easy is it to find what you want, and what do you feel about the brand? If a customer is really enjoying the experience, the company can look to premium pricing and a deeper, long-term relationship.

"But customers aren't always thinking about the bigger picture; usually they look to address a specific and immediate problem they want to plug. It's the impression and the feeling they are left with afterwards which makes all the difference though."

"The only way that companies are going to be able to survive," he believes, "is to be completely customer-centric, looking in from the outside, rather than from inside the business looking out. As we go forward, technology is not going to be about the latest case management system, but how to improve the customer experience. I always think that

directors should be the first to interact with a new system so they can discover first-hand whether it delivers the right customer experience. I can't imagine many telephone systems would have passed that kind of test."

With a BSc in computer studies, Neilson acts as a director, adviser, and investor for a number of early-stage technology businesses. He's the founder chairman of VerseOne Group, which delivers an integrated suite of products to enhance the online customer experience, whether that's web-based communication from intranets to portals, interfaces to enable companies to provide live support, 'dynamic group chat' within an organisation so that a query can be answered while maintaining the conversation with the customer, plus 'drag and drop', so that files can be shared during a conversation or meeting.

"Everything has to be geared towards empowering the customer or the employees who support the customer to deliver an integrated and exceptional experience irrespective of the channels the customer chooses to interact with the organisation," says Neilson.

"The digital wave has changed the way businesses have to behave. For example, the notion of Monday to Friday, nine to five, being the normal working week is disappearing. IT started in the

back office, then spread to the shopfloor, and now, in order to keep ahead, even an established company has to be about being an agent provocateur. That means senior management thinking and behaving differently."

"I'm old enough to remember back in the day when computerisation was all about doing existing tasks faster and more accurately," he muses. "The transformation of transactions and data analysis, the application of IT to remove whole layers of how a company operates means that we've been transformed by technology - customer and supplier alike.

"What companies are having to do is align process with technology, so they can give the best customer experience, such as Amazon constantly flagging up options on the basis of if you are interested in that, you might like this."

When VerseOne started out, websites were static, more of a brochure online. One thing hasn't changed since then: content is still fundamental, because that is what a customer is after when they interact with an organisation, Neilson maintains.

"Our ambition from the start was to make a difference, and that hasn't changed either," he says. "Applying

technology for the sake of it, because it's available, isn't a solution. Regardless of how IT moves forward, managing content on an integrated basis is an important part of delivering the best customer experience. The challenge for us is having the right team members who share the same passion about the deployment of technology and who want to make a positive impact on people's lives."

Neilson's intention is to float, which wouldn't be for the first time. He's already taken one company to the main market and another to AIM. "It would be good for the team," says Neilson. "Because everyone has share options now or the right to have them granted, flotation gives that a realisable value as well as improving the profile of the company. Motivated people generally do a better job, but they need to have an actual input to the goal if that is to happen."

But he's not expecting day and night commitment. "If I could actually turn the clock back, and if I listened to my older self, I would have a better work life balance," he says. "My two older kids still talk about having to come with me to the office on a Saturday morning and drawing on the whiteboards while I was catching up on work.

"I like to think I'm more patient as a manager now, because experience makes you realise that not everyone can work at your speed. It's about making sure that the average speed of the team collectively will deliver the goal. By sharing the vision, you create an environment which raises everyone's passion and sense of enjoyment. As managing director, you've got to make time to instigate one to ones."

VerseOne have a staff council, with reps from different parts of the business, which looks at issues from their perspective without the presence of managers. "It's important for the company, because the title of management doesn't mean that's someone who exclusively comes up with the ideas," says Neilson. A member of the staff council makes a presentation at the company's monthly board meeting. It's minuted, and at the next board meeting, the directors explain how they have addressed the issues raised.

But new ideas shouldn't re-invent any wheels, Neilson asserts. And to achieve its goals, an ambitious company needs one particular attribute and one particular course of action. "You need tenacity, but not at any cost. If, for example, all the indicators indicate a need for more flexibility, then you need to be willing and agile enough to make

the necessary adjustments to achieve your goal.

"And it is better to get external money in quicker if you want to scale up - it just takes so much longer organically. Once you get past proof of concept for a new project, be prepared to get the money in.



With a heritage of nearly fifty years, the chartered financial planning and wealth management company Partridge Muir & Warren Ltd (PMW) see themselves as both guides and guardians to their clients. Their default position is one of conservatism, with the majority of their clients seeking a consistent, competitive return on their capital, which is why the average current client relationship lasts nineteen years.

PMW provide four specific services:

Wealth management is their core service, to which the majority of our clients subscribe, incorporating an in-depth assessment of circumstances and goals, the creation and implementation of a bespoke financial strategy and a formal process of ongoing review of investments and reassessment of overall strategy.

The financial planning service delivers a rigorous singular process that identifies individual client needs, confirms client priorities and sets out a specific bespoke financial solution.

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