

DEFINING QUALITIES

Interview with
JAMES BEAGRIE
MANAGING DIRECTOR
MEON VALLEY TRAVEL

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.

"BUILDING A BUSINESS IS like creating a sandcastle on shifting sands. It takes talent to build but then any fool can kick it over," says James Beagrie, managing director of £40million turnover Meon Valley Travel.

"The pace of change is escalating," he continues. "It's not the fastest or the strongest who survive, but those who are best able to adapt. It's not whether you can keep up with change, it's how you keep up with it without making a drama out of it."

Change, notably, comes though technology he believes. "When we could only communicate with customers on the phone, we could only deal with one at a time but by using social media and live chat you can be looking after more than one at a time.

"It means that staff can be much more productive. And people who don't want to wait on the phone while you get their quote can send a question by live chat and then do something else while they wait for the reply."

Artificial intelligence could soon play a huge part in the travel industry, he thinks. It could improve data analytics, allowing, as an example, staff to be easily assigned to deal with queries from other regions of the world during periods of low call volume. And 'intelligent' chat

bots will potentially fast-track human interaction and on a more informed basis.

But would people be happy to trust a machine to anticipate their travel queries? "Henry Ford was said to have given the people what they needed, not what they want," replies Beagrie. "What they wanted was a faster horse!"

Provenance is a quality which can also define a successful company, Beagrie suggests. He started his career as a commercial insurance broker and later bought a loss-making insurance company and grew it to become one of the biggest of its kind in Europe. He later sold it to a global insurer, where he "drove growth" as managing director for a few years before jumping ship to "cure a travelling itch". That was to prove a turning point; having made the arrangements through Meon Valley, he went on to buy the agency. He jokes that he did so to keep his new girlfriend (now wife), who worked for Meon Valley (and still does).

Their specialism in repatriating medical emergency cases came from Beagrie's belief that medical insurer's weren't receiving the best prices from the travel and airline industry. He saw an opportunity to address this, while offering a USP of speed through an investment in technology: insurers used

to waiting twenty-four hours to get a quote for their emergency travel would now get it within the hour, but without paying a premium.

Being set up with a determination to solve customers' problems is a defining quality of a successful service provider, according to Beagrie. "For us, problem solving could be helping somebody out of trouble by bringing them home after an accident, or finding someone the holiday of their dreams, or demonstrating to a finance director that we can save their company time and money," he says.

And that has to be accompanied by the attribute of providing "celebrity service" for all customers. "Customers don't recommend a service provider just because they're cheap. Our staff imagine every customer is George Clooney or Kate Winslet, just popping in to book a flight, and treat them accordingly."

An example of problem solving was the response to the Icelandic ash cloud that grounded flights after a volcano exploded in 2010. Meon Valley managed to answer 19,000 calls – at least a hundred times the normal volume – within an average of 5.6seconds. "Compare this with the response time of airlines, which took hours just to give callers a recorded message," says Beagrie.

This was achieved by pulling in staff from all areas of the business, so increasing the number of people on duty at any one time from five to forty-five. "We had people working from home, staying at a local hotel, even sleeping on the floor at the office, fuelled by pizza deliveries," he recalls. "We care; the internet can't."

Operating in an international arena also requires cultural awareness as well as good service. "For example, if an English person in a business meeting says 'I hear what you say', what that means is 'I disagree with you but I'm too polite to say so, until tomorrow'," explains Beagrie. "If an American says 'I hear what you say', it literally means I get it. We operate in seventy countries now, so we have to identify and understand these differences in cultures and traveller expectations."

What all travellers, regardless of origin, certainly in the business travel market, have as a common expectation is value. "A £10 difference in price between, say, easyJet and British Airways might not be that relevant to an individual traveller, but it's important to the business market because lots of ten pounds add up," says Beagrie.

"Growing companies in particular can be paranoid that they might be losing

out or they're missing a deal. They want to set out how much everything costs.

"We are unique in being able to demonstrate how we compare all of the information about all of the availability at the time we make a booking. I could look back at a booking made on a particular day last July and I can tell you what the availability was at that time for the flights we didn't book. So nobody can say they could have got that cheaper with a different airline."

Interestingly, despite the impact of consumers booking through consolidator websites, Meon Valley Travel have found a way to make money from wholesaling by providing white labelled travel agency services to lifestyle brands and organisations such as the Professional Footballers' Association.

"Business is not a field of dreams; you can't just 'build it and they will come'. I define luck as where being prepared meets opportunity," Beagrie maintains. "Preparedness gives staff a sense of purpose, goals, and a roadmap."

The agency's location in a small market town could have been a challenge in terms of finding experienced travel industry people, but Meon Valley Travel have taken a different approach to recruitment.

"Attitude, aptitude and ambition are 90% of what we are looking for," says Beagrie. "We can train the right people to do everything else."

And the big plus is that turnover among the sixty-seven staff is low as there is not much local competition for staff to move to. "Those who do leave tend to do so for career progression or to have a family, and go with our blessing. Getting on for half of those who do leave return at some point."

Beagrie says he has learnt several lessons from his business career, such as surrounding himself with talented people who would have been described in a previous age as yes-men - but not in the vernacular. He means "yes, we'll find a way," and "yes, we'll make it work."

He also believes in sleeping on any big decision. "Save communicating it until the next day and you will wake up knowing whether you've made a good decision or not," he says.

"And don't just take the path of least resistance. No-one respects a director or manager who won't make tough decisions. Be honest and get it out there. And if you are going to fail, fail fast and move on."

There is, in fact, another goal which Beagrie would like to achieve. Despite the travel-related accolades Meon Valley Travel have won, there is one accolade Meon Valley Travel have has eluded them: "We got beaten again at the business awards for our town by the local hairdressers! Proof that in business, you can't win them all," he says with customary smile.



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