

DEFINING QUALITIES

Interview with
WILLIAM FREEAR
MANAGING DIRECTOR
PILGRIMS 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.

BILL FREEAR WANTED to pursue a career in animal conservation, but didn't think he would make enough of an impact. Instead, he went on to set up a company providing security risk management services. That includes preparing clients to cope with potentially life-threatening situations.

Before setting up Pilgrims Group in 1997, he served with the UK Special Forces, where he assimilated a version of the Kipling mantra 'If you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same.' "It made us very stable emotionally," he explains

He left at thirty-six and initially worked for security contractors, taking a brief from them and drawing up a plan, which they then put their logo on. "They didn't add anything else apart from a mark-up," recalls Freear. He began to advise companies in high-risk environments how should respond to risks such as a ransom demand, particularly in countries where police intervention would usually result in the death of both captor and captive.

It was some work that Pilgrims were doing for the Metropolitan Police which got the attention of the BBC, who asked Freear to come up with courses on public order so that their staff knew what to do if, say, they happened to be caught up in a riot. The natural progression was

then to look at how their journalists and camera operators should work in hostile environments.

But they don't get a cosy talk accompanied by a PowerPoint presentation in a warm hotel room with pots of coffee at regular intervals. The trademark of the Pilgrims Academy is recreating challenging, high pressure scenarios, focusing on what Freear describes as situational awareness training. A bespoke "town" for simulated real-life scenarios has been built in a secluded indoor location.

"For our corporate clients, we start by understanding what the company's threat and risk footprint looks like, focus on the type of people the company is sending into that territory, and then identify what they need," says Freear. "For hostile environments our lead trainers are from the UK Special Forces and they work with actors and paramedics doing role play exercises as part of the training scenario."

The training includes fast-tracking information into people's minds and creating new different muscle memory. "So for instance, when they watched the footage from internal cameras in a plane crash, they saw passengers trying to undo buckle-up seat belts in the same way as inertia-reel car seat belts," Freear explains. "We address that in our

training. We get them to shut their eyes and undo the seat belt fifteen times to create a different muscle memory."

It was western intervention in Iraq which resulted in the world's media suddenly realising that its staff needed both training and assistance in the field.

"When we are working with clients overseas, we assess the threats and risks associated with going to a particular location, identify the potential mitigation measures that are possible, and then agree an implementation plan that matches the client's risk tolerance, business goals and budget," says Freear.

There can be commercial imperatives that clients want evaluated as well. With the first indication of the Arab spring, Pilgrims did a risk assessment and gap analysis (the comparison of actual performance with potential or desired performance) for a global IT company. We looked at each individual country and developed a phased evacuation plan which enabled our client to maintain its facilities throughout the crisis," Freear explains. "Other companies just pulled everyone out straight away and later returned to find their premises looted or destroyed."

For a Big Four accountancy firm in Georgia, Pilgrims briefed them not only

on how to prepare for an evacuation, but the signs to look out for which would determine whether one should take place. "That saved them a huge amount of cost and disruption," says Freear.

When a communications company wanted to open up in Iraq, Pilgrims rather than a real estate agency looked at possible locations and provided a briefing. "When executives from the company flew in, our security teams picked them up from the airport in our own vehicles and provided secure accommodation," explains Freear. "It was a complete life support package."

With "exponential" growth in security threats, arguably companies like Pilgrims Group are in a good place, but Freear says that while "in some respects the world has got more dangerous," budgets to deal with it have actually reduced.

A "significant" number of clients they tend to be in healthcare, media, energy, telecoms and financial services - are American, which is why Pilgrims Group have opened an office in the US. Having a base there will enable Pilgrims to bid for contracts in sectors such as government and oil and gas, which foreign companies "are unable to win."

That said, attempting to win contracts from non-western governments can

be both frustrating and financially wounding. Freear tells how Pilgrims Group once won a £45million, five-year contract in an African state. Despite the tender taking six months to get to a decision, the award was then cancelled on "trivial" grounds related to incorrect formatting of the financial pages. This led to a full re-run of the tender, which took another three months. Pilgrims won the contract again, despite the competition trying to undercut them on price. And then the problems really started, with Pilgrims prevented from obtaining vital paperwork, and the client terminating the contract without giving a reason.

"Losing that contract was down to gross corruption," says Freear. "It was an open secret, and the client turned a blind eye."

Freear says the episode lost Pilgrims five years of sales effort and two years spent on the bidding process. "It damaged us hugely," he says. "It not only cost us hundreds of thousands of pounds directly but that contract would have created a platform for significant growth in the region and that country in particular."

Challenges relating to the tendering process can also have a more prosaic source. "Procurement teams will often focus on the cheapest bid as long as

the contractor is technically compliant," explains Freear. "But that's not the same as technically competent."

As a consequence, he says it's sometimes impossible to bid at a price that is competitive without putting at risk Pilgrim Group's record of never having lost a client on their watch (in terms of demise). "There was one contract where we were the most expensive when we re-tendered after seven years. The only way we could keep the contract despite the client wanting the same service was to take a completely arbitrary figure of £70,000 off the price, so we walked away."

While building Pilgrims Group, Freear didn't become less interested in conservation. It's something which could be described as unfinished business. He explains: "In the last twenty years, 96% of the remaining black rhinos in Africa have been killed. Today there are about 5000, but about 300 a year are still being killed for their horn, perceived as a status symbol in some countries. This is being done by serious organised crime syndicates as well as terrorist groups with links to drugs, money laundering, and other serious organised crime."



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.

The investment management service is designed for those that feel comfortable to assess, without receiving advice, the suitability of a service which their needs and choose to benefit from PMW's approach to investment.

For clients who wish to ensure their wealth is protected and that their family are financially supported should anything happen to them, the trust and estate management service covers all aspects of essential estate planning, such as the establishment of wills and powers of attorney, making the most of exemptions, giving away excess income, and creating trusts.

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Report researched and published for
Partridge Muir & Warren
by DECISION magazine

www.decisionmagazine.co.uk