



Trend Spotter. Brendan van Staaden meets customer's needs by anticipating future market trends.

SNAPSHOT

MAKING THE RIGHT CALL

QUICK THINKING AND VISIONARY LEADERSHIP LEAD TO PHENOMENAL GROWTH FOR CALL CENTRE SPECIALIST. BY JULIET PITMAN

Brendan van Staaden is a man who knows where he's going. "We want to be a billion rand business in three years' time," he answers, without hesitating, when asked about plans for Inter-Active Technologies' five-year future.

It might sound like a bold ambition for a business that's only six years old, but Inter-Active's growth track record shows that this isn't entrepreneurial pie-in-the-sky. Started by Van Staaden in a single room of his house in 2004,

the company has grown its revenue from R400 000 in the first year to close to R116 million in 2009, and its staff from one to over 500.

A specialist call centre and communications business, Inter-Active was initially created for the purpose of a management buy-out of Phillips Business Communications, where Van Staaden was working. "The deal never happened so I eventually bought my partner's share, shelved the business and went back into employment," he says.

TAKING THE LEAP

But the idea of forming a professional call centre services company niggled and refused to go away. Van Staaden tried to sell it to his then employer but the idea never took off and he grew frustrated with waiting for things to happen. "My opportunity eventually came when someone told me they needed the services I was thinking about and suggested I go on my own," he relates. With nothing more than a promise of an order worth R400 000, Van Staaden left his job and took Inter-Active off the shelf.

"Happily the client was true to their word and placed the order, but that was only the first hurdle. I then had to make the thing happen," he says. Fortunately making things happen is Van Staaden's strong point – he describes himself as "passionate about creating

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grow

something out of nothing." The job was delivered and in a short time the business had grown to include a small call centre of 20 people.

QUICK THINKING

"I make decisions quickly and that helped me in those early days," he says. Short response times and on-the-spot decisions allowed the business to pick up big-name clients quickly – by way of example, Van Staaden relates how he came to set up a call centre for MultiChoice.

"I was having dinner with another client, MTN, one Friday night when MultiChoice, with whom we had a small maintenance contract, called to say they needed help with a large volume of overflow calls their inbound call centre was receiving." On the strength of their positive relationship with Inter-Active, MTN offered to help and by the next morning Van Staaden had 100 agents working in a call centre that MTN had made available together with a routing number for overflow calls.

TIPPING POINT

It was a turning point for the business. "On the strength of that MultiChoice asked us to build them an overflow centre, so we moved to larger premises, set up a server room, started training agents and piloted the concept. It was all done on risk but it worked and two and a half years later is still running," says Van Staaden.

Over time, the company has refined the overflow call centre model and now has two contracts for similar services waiting in the wings. It's also expanded significantly into the outbound call centre space and today has in excess of 800 call centre agents. "We've also experienced tremendous growth in the activity-based costings arena and developed software to deliver this service, which helps clients determine their real costs and true profitability," he adds.

CHALLENGES AND SUCCESS FACTORS

Van Staaden attributes Inter-Active's phenomenal success in part to its

INTER-ACTIVE TECHNOLOGIES

PLAYERS

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ability to predict market trends. "We try to think a couple of steps ahead of the customer so we can reasonably anticipate what they are going to need next. It's about understanding the market sufficiently so you get ahead of it," he says. But while the journey has included heady highs, Van Staaden is quick to point out that he's had his share of low points too. "It certainly hasn't been without challenges, the biggest probably being financial. My wife and I have funded this business ourselves from day one and everything we make we've put back into its growth," he says.

INVESTING IN PEOPLE

People are the other big challenge, but on that score Inter-Active is winning – the company has a staff turnover of less than 3%, almost unheard of in the call centre industry. "My biggest disappointments probably come from people I bet on, not delivering, but then my biggest joys come from people exceeding expectations too," Van Staaden explains.

He believes strongly in accessible leadership and investing in people. The company recently invested in a staff wellness centre complete with free Internet café, entertainment area, gym, spa and canteen. There are also countless examples of developing people from the inside – a security guard who showed initiative by asking for a computer to be set up in the guard's hut is today a fully operational call centre agent.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

"Stories like that – the tenacity of the underdog – inspire me to do more," says Van Staaden. That 'more' includes growth into Africa, where the company has set its sights, and acquisitions. And of course there's that billion rand goal, but if anyone is up to the task, it's this man. □