

The South's



Most Ambitious Companies

JELLYFISH ONLINE MARKETING

— The South's Most Ambitious Companies —

FOREWORD

Which are the most ambitious companies in the region, those which have the most potential?

Research commissioned by law firm Rawlison Butler reveals that most are names which simply don't tally with those which appear regularly in the media as exemplars, because they tend not to be networkers or publicity hunters.

The research programme to identify the companies took as its criteria:

- * A desire to build a business of some significance, to be a leader rather than a follower.
- * An ability to think (and act) strategically as well as operationally and opportunistically.
- * A willingness to build a management team and to be open to new ideas and advice.
- * Either an ability to re-write time-honoured modus operandi, or a skilful perpetuator and up-dater of traditional beliefs to achieve/sustain competitive advantage.
- * An organisation which is determined to continually develop new standards in terms of process, practice, and delivery.
- * Demonstration of a will to succeed despite obstacles.

This paper considers the attributes of one of the researched companies.

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Rob Pierre knows only too well how fortunes can change rapidly in the fast-evolving internet industry. About three years ago the business of which he has been CEO since 2007 lost 60% of its gross profit in six months, when major clients departed unexpectedly.

One client, Skype, for whom digital marketing agency Jellyfish had been running a pay-per click campaign in twenty-seven languages, decided they didn't want to invest in PPC. Which? On-Line moved to a new agency after eight years - "Management wanted to change to a different commercial model and we couldn't agree terms," says Pierre - and Dennis Publishing also moved to another agency, though they returned to Jellyfish a year later.

As it happens, Jellyfish got through that difficult period because of the volume of prospects in the pipeline. But the company actually became rain-makers. In simple terms, they found a way to create clients as well as win new business, arguably inventing their own. "We were at a point where we knew business would come in. We believed in the proposition," says Pierre. For this reason he didn't make any redundancies, and instead put more money in to protect the business and maintain staff morale. If anything, he says the situation made him feel more determined. "I'm realistic, but I'm extremely positive. I don't worry about things that haven't happened yet. So you do everything in your power not to slip back and that's not all about pride, it's about knowing what it took to build the foundations and get the right people, realising how far back you would go if you lost them."

Pierre says that getting through challenging times has made the business stronger, because the management team has successfully been through hard times and hasn't just "ridden a wave".

But he concedes the business would probably be bigger today had it not been for those set-backs. "We did have the potential to be three or four times the size we are now - but we were lucky: other companies didn't make it at all."

Jellyfish had been launched in 1999 as a small IT services firm, under the name Avondale IT. In its early years it concentrated exclusively on paid search and digital subscription marketing in publishing, with clients like National Geographic and the aforementioned Which? and Dennis Publishing. We were at the Publishing and Media Expo promoting our services."

By 2005 Jellyfish had a turnover of £4million and was dominating the sector. By 2011, turnover had increased to over £12million and the company was employing more than eighty staff across three continents.

But the company had realised that concentrating solely on PPC could restrict its progress, so it pre-empted that by adding new services. "We needed to transform from a specialist to an integrated agency, to gain traction by offering the full digital service, but without it looking as if we were just bolting on other services to catch up," says Pierre.

This involved broadening the service offering in 2010 to include search engine optimisation, analytics, the acquisition of creative agency Creative Uncle and in 2012 the purchase of SEO specialist Weedoo. "We already did SEO but I wanted us to be brilliant at it," says Pierre.

Integrating the new business was easy, says Pierre, as Jellyfish was already used to operating as a collective of separate businesses. It's structured as a network of mini-companies (most of them limited companies with their own profit and loss accounts), handling different disciplines like video production, SEO, display, and design & build.

Most of them are headed by long-serving staff who own a stake in the business.

Next in the company's growth plans was opening a US office in 2009, working with one of its vendors, a paid search specialist. Pierre had been impressed by his work ethic: "No matter what time we needed him he was there. He said had we ever thought of opening in the States? I said 'no, but let's give it a go'."

The decision was that simple. "More is lost

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by indecision than by making wrong decisions – that's my motto," says Pierre. There is also a partnership with a big search agency in Japan, and an office in South Africa.

None of this would have been possible, says Pierre, without what he describes as one of the company's "big philosophies." He explains: With people progression you get the desired outcome. If they're the right people and the environment motivates them, they have to feel there is a long term benefit of working for you, not just through remuneration but also through learning and knowledge.

"I want people to progress - I want them to do what they enjoy and do best. I don't spend time trying to get people to do what's not in their comfort zone. Look at a football team – you don't get the goalkeeper to take penalties. Create the right formation where everyone utilises their talents to the greater good of the company. No one person is greater than the Jellyfish proposition."

That can mean people aspiring to jobs other than the one they were hired to do – either the next grade up or another discipline entirely. "Nobody gets any points for working late if they're doing their day job," says Pierre. "If they are working out of hours, either they have skill development issues or the workload is too much. However, if they're staying late because you're doing something over and above the work we're paying them for, that's different."

He cites the example of a former account manager who ran PPC campaigns. "I found out that he was doing a course in web analytics in his own time. I called him in and said 'if you stick with us for two years I will pay for the course and you can help us build the analytics programme.'" That account manager now heads up the analytics team.

There are more than 160 staff now but Pierre has bigger plans. "My aspiration," he explains, "is to get to 400 people so that we sit between the big six and the smaller performance agencies as an independent specialist." The Jellyfish strategy for getting to that point involves focusing on acquiring more work from bigger corporates. "We now have the resources, the credibility and

enough people," Pierre asserts.

One opportunity has been to offer training in digital to other businesses. Jellyfish Training was launched in 2013, offering a range of courses in analytics, optimisation, SEO and social media.

Conscious, from experience, of what can happen when a major client appoints a new marketing director, what Jellyfish are doing is to actually create brands and generate their own work as their own client. The process started with a local woman who runs "a great lifestyle business" giving Indian cookery lessons. "She was thinking of hiring people to do the cookery lessons in other areas to expand it," explains Pierre, "but I warned her there could be problems: the people she hired could phone in sick, or set up their own business."

So what was Pierre's solution? "For a share of her business I offered to build her a brand. We can put cookery videos on YouTube, get her on Google Hangouts as a case study, upgrade her website, even start selling the ingredients that people need to make her recipes. She could go from someone doing lessons in Reigate to teaching the world. If we get this right, creating a really polished, slick brand and personality solely online, it will be the template of all templates."

What are the barriers to Jellyfish achieving its aims? Pierre doesn't skip a beat: "I genuinely don't feel there are any," he says. So much is going on with Facebook, Twitter and Google. There's new stuff every day, and the more innovations there are, the more clients will need help to exploit the opportunities. Nowadays you can sit round the TV talking to relations overseas, while the teenager of the family is watching TV on his phone. We use TV to make phone calls and the phone to watch TV."

He likens working in such a fast-moving industry to sitting in a fast car. "When you're in it you don't feel how fast it's going compared to standing on the side of the road and watching it go by. I'm in that car so nothing seems that fast to me."

www.jellyfish.co.uk

REFERENCE

rb.

Rawlison Butler

Griffin House
135 High Street
Crawley
West Sussex
RH10 1DQ

Telephone: 01293 527 744
Fax: 01293 520 202

Ridgeland House
15 Carfax
Horsham
West Sussex
RH12 1DY

Telephone: 01403 252 492
Fax: 01403 241 545

Berkeley Square House,
Berkeley Square,
London W1J 6BD
Telephone: 020 7887 4548
Fax: 020 7887 6001

26 Kings Hill Avenue
Kings Hill
West Malling
Kent ME19 4AE
Telephone: 01732 424049

info@rawlisonbutler.com
www.rawlisonbutler.com



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