



ACHIEVING YOUR AMBITION

Interview with
John Gurd
Managing Director
Market Measures

Commissioned by

Avonglen

Financial Direction for your Business

Ironically, as an independent company grows and becomes more successful, so the day-today demands on the owner-manager increase and the emphasis on the 'here and now' can become the focus of the entire business.

It might be that the business has never been more successful financially, but the reality is likely to be that it has never been as vulnerable because it has never been so inward looking, less innovative, and more likely to be victim to a disrupter (the role which it probably played at the outset!).

But are there other reasons why those which have the potential to go further plateau instead and don't actually achieve what should have been possible?

In an independent report commissioned by Avonglen and to be published by DECISION magazine, business owners share their experiences and ambitions.

This is one of the papers to be published in the report.

Why did John Gurd leave a global leader with over 200 offices across every continent and instead pursue his career with the single office company set up by his father?

“Actually,” he says, ‘it just seemed the logical step to take. “One of the reasons was that I wanted to work in a agile, flexible way, having been at a market research company which was all process-driven. Someone senior would see the client at the beginning and then at the end, but here our key people are still directly involved in the actual work. You could say it is daft to have highly skilled people still doing some tasks which others are able to handle, but the closer we are to the data and to the client, the better the delivery of the project. That’s because someone with experience is going to understand more about what it is we are actually delivering. As well as doing the research we have to be able to provide a consultative approach, in other words enabling the client to use the data.”

He gives a telling example (or two). “We presented our work to a customer on a Friday afternoon and by the following Wednesday they had already recouped the money they had spent on the project by implementing our findings,” Gurd recalls. “I can tell you about the time a retailer wanted to find out why their German operation wasn’t meeting its targets. Our researchers found that one in ten people visiting the shops were leaving without a purchase simply because they couldn’t find the right size in stock. What set us apart is that we were able to put a euro sign in front of the problem to quantify the scale of it, rather than just giving the client a hypothesis. My view is that companies which use that insight well tend to perform better than those which don’t.”

But then came a realisation that there was some thinking he could bring to Market Measures from the corporate he had previously worked for. “I realised we were similar to many independent companies in that we

had got to a level where we were comfortable, without any borrowings, and were consistently providing what the customer wanted. We never really had a strategy, so we were reliant on doing more of the same. But to keep people motivated, there has to be ambition in the company, there needs to be impetus, and for that to happen, you need to spell out where you want the company to be in the next three to five years. It can't be vague. It has to be a structured plan. That starts by defining what you are good at, who do you want to do it for, and where you want to go with the business."

Part of that means distilling a company's values; Market Measures have defined theirs as 'smart thinking, giving extra, staying agile, and working together'. Says Gurd: "Without a strategy, as time goes on, you could end up with more of an ad-hoc business based on accumulated assumptions. Having the plan and values means you can keep reminding yourself of what you are trying to achieve. The heart of what we do isn't going to change, but we can take a less apologetic approach to sales, and be more confident and assertive."



John Gurd



Shopping
centre
research

To make it happen, John Gurd took the business growth and development course at Cranfield University. “I found it valuable to talk about other people’s business issues, because they are different conversations than you would have with your own team, he recalls.

Now, once a month for an hour, he speaks on the phone to a mentor sourced through a trade association. Their conversations often turn to HR. “A biggest challenge for a company like ours is how to manage people better to enable them to improve their performance,” he believes. “If that isn’t the focus of an owner manager, then they will be spending a disproportionate amount of time, energy, and emotion, having to deal with HR problems.”

It follows that a structured plan is going to have to address recruitment. “I work all the hours, and after putting the kids to bed, I then get the laptop out,” admits Gurd. “But of course you can’t expect staff to have that same

type of commitment to the company. I do need to know that if someone is joining the company it's because they are enthusiastic about our work. I want them to be pragmatic because I like people who are more to the point. If you have really competent people you can let go and give them more responsibility.

“Continuity is also important, but I am not sure it is entirely healthy just to have people who have been with the company for ever because there is a slight danger that the business can stagnate or become a little introspective if there is no new blood.”

In the past, Gurd has tried to bring in senior people, but if they had worked at large companies they were used to leading teams rather than actually doing the work. “I expected them to be good at research as well being good managers,” he explains.

The other advantage about having a structured plan is that there is more of a buzz around the place, observes Gurd. “Of course management has to be transparent about sharing the spoils of success. Money is not the only way to incentivise but it has to be there, coupled with defining how each individual can progress. The growth of the company enables their progression to be delivered.”

Is technology friend or foe when it comes to the journey?

“With internet tools such as SurveyMonkey, there has been a tendency for some companies to think they can do the research themselves,” Gurd explains. “After all, how hard can it be? Well, if you aren't asking the right questions of the right people, it's not just pointless but also potentially commercially destructive. I don't want to sound like an angry taxi driver complaining about Uber, but it would be like someone calling Dr Google



up on screen and deciding what information they should look at to define what illness they might have.”

And there’s another mind-set which might need adjusting. While restaurant chains, for example, will give the customer a code on their receipt so they can go on-line to say what they liked, or didn’t, maybe less than one per cent of actually bother to respond. In any case, says Gurd, maybe companies are missing the point here. How about getting a view from who he describes as the non-customer. “Businesses need to know why people who should be their customers actually aren’t,” he suggests.

The structured plan for Market Measures also takes into account what will keep Gurd himself motivated. “My key roles are to ensure we have new business, to over-view the work, and have a direct presence with larger projects,” he says. “In reality, I still want to do project work because I enjoy it.”



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