

MARTEK MARINE LTD

Martek Marine was established in 2000 and, in four years, has achieved a £6m annual turnover from a £6,000 capital start. To achieve these levels of success, it has used teleworking to provide 24/7 response time to its clients alongside maximising the productivity of staff who are frequently on the move.

OBJECTIVES

The market in which Martek was determined to succeed is one that is exceptionally demanding. The global nature of the maritime business means that a successful supplier needs to be able to provide a high level of response to clients who maybe almost anywhere, in any time zone. With international law demanding the installation of safety monitoring systems, the market is large and potentially lucrative, but it is also highly competitive.

In order to succeed, Martek needed to differentiate itself not only through the quality of its products but also through its ability to respond to clients at any time of day or night, and to provide a high level of human and technical service. Inevitably, this meant that its employees would spend days on the move – time that represented a huge potential loss of productivity unless it could be effectively utilised. In addition, staff would need to be able to interface with the company's core systems from almost any location in the world in order to access the data they require to do their jobs. Finally, whenever it launched a new product, it was imperative that Martek promoted it to as wide an audience as possible within the shortest time possible.

Through the deployment of robust IT systems, excellent skills and first-class human resource practices, Martek has been able to achieve these objectives.

SOLUTION

"We saw it as critical to be able to respond at any time to client needs," says Paul Luen, Managing Director of Martek Marine. "So we committed ourselves to an advanced teleworking strategy, embracing new technologies as soon as they became available."

Rather than deploy a computer server suitable for a small business link itself, Martek chose a product more suited to a corporate client. While the cost of this was significantly greater, it provided benefits in terms of function, response and durability. Martek also invested in a dedicated 2mb internet link into this server, effectively removing any bandwidth constraints on its operations.

Best practice in:
Teleworking
(broadband, mobile & wireless)

Sector:
Manufacturer

Size of firm:
27 employees

Location:
Manvers, Rotherham

Website:
www.martek-marine.com



“We are able to deliver a better-engineered product, incorporating higher quality materials, with a better finish, for a price equivalent to that of our competitors.”

PAUL LUEN – MANAGING DIRECTOR, MARTEK MARINE

The company's central office is in Rotherham but nine of its staff work away from this location, either around the UK or overseas in the US and Singapore. They have home offices that are equipped with broadband and combined fax/printer/copier/scanners, dedicated business phone lines and PCs. The PCs are connected over virtual private networks (VPNs) directly into the company's central network, giving the same access as if they were inside the office.

Having offices in the USA (Iowa) and Singapore immediately gave the company the potential to offer a 24-hour service. These two locations are respectively eight hours behind GMT and eight hours ahead. So, outside normal UK office hours, calls to the head office are diverted, as appropriate, to Singapore or Iowa to give the 24 hour coverage on which the company depends.

Apart from the nine remotely sited staff, many of Martek's employees spend time on the move. They are equipped with high-specification, wireless-enabled laptops, selected for long battery life. These provide staff with the facility to carry on working in airport lounges and hotels. Wireless capability allows high-speed access back to the company's core systems and e-mail, and (where wi-fi isn't available) the employee is able to use their bluetooth-enabled mobile phone or a land-line to achieve a connection. As more airlines provide in-flight internet access, productivity is likely to rise further.

With a global marketplace and roaming workforce, the company's telephony costs could be astronomical but they take steps to reduce these. It is now making increasing use of VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) which allows voice connections between computers over the internet and removes call-charges other than the cost of the internet connection. Wherever possible, employees are contacted by SMS messages when overseas, rather than a more expensive phone call.

This use of remote working technology also permits the company to webcast events, such as product launches, to its employees, agents and clients around the world. Mobile video conferencing is also used to support staff or communicate with clients at a distance.

The company also makes extensive use of its website as a component of its communication strategy and the site has attracted over £1m of business.





RESULTS

Results have been spectacular. From a £6,000 start-up, the company now has £6m per annum turnover and has achieved this without borrowing. Overseas sales are approaching £6m from 60 countries and sales growth averaged 179% over the first three years of trading.

The focus on smart use of technology and its contribution to the achievement of work-life balance has paid dividends in terms of staff retention, which is almost 100%. This ensures that the company retains expertise and doesn't waste resources training new people. It even retained the services of its tele-marketeer when she had to accompany her husband back to the USA.

Its recent adoption of VoIP has saved an estimated £4,000 in telephone call charges annually, and this will increase as agents, customers and suppliers adopt the same system. The VoIP system also cuts the time needed to find a contact's name and number, as the details are stored in the software.

"Perhaps the single biggest indicator of our internal efficiency and productivity is our calculated net contribution per employee," says Paul. "This is between two and four times greater than competitors in our sector, going by their filed accounts."

CHALLENGES

Martek's greatest challenge has been to recruit, train and encourage the right staff to create a dynamic, fun and empowered workplace, "We concentrated on using our network of contacts, and a mix of selection techniques, including psychometrics, 'in-basket' exercises, verbal references and telephone interviews", says Paul.

Developing a comprehensive teleworking strategy, rather than leaping in and adopting ad-hoc approaches, was a major challenge at the outset.

The development of a website which features highly in search-engine rankings provides another ongoing test. "We are currently investing heavily in a comprehensive search engine optimisation strategy as part of a general upgrade of the site," says Paul. "We expect this to give us increased visibility, more traffic and reduce our costs per visitor and per sales acquisition."



Top tips:

- Don't be too conservative at the start of a project – allocate greater resources at the lead-in phase.
- Carry out comprehensive consultation with staff before embarking on technology change. This will help to optimise the buy-in for the project and reduce resistance to change.
- Seek out new technologies and embrace them; dare to be different and lead the way.

LAST WORD

“Our IT systems are particularly advanced for our age and size of business and we have made a tremendous investment to maximise the efficiency of our information exchange,” says Paul Luen, Managing Director of Martek Marine.

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