

HOW BUSINESS COMMUNICATES EFFECTIVELY

Interview with
KEVAN WALSH
CHIEF EXECUTIVE
ZENERGI



In a series of interviews with Andrew Skipsey, managing director of M12 Solutions, directors and partners at professional practices consider the issues.

The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.

"THE THING ABOUT US is that although we deal with a lot of data, we don't see ourselves as being driven by technology," says Kevan Walsh, chief executive of Zenergi, who founded the energy procurement and invoice management business with his wife Rachel in 2003.

"As a business, what sets us apart, and you can ask any of the team, is that we follow the Zen way, which encourages practices that enhance human well-being in the modern world, although we don't make a big deal of it," he explains.

Absolutely technology plays its part though. If the phone isn't answered by Zenergi themselves in three rings, on the fourth the call is automatically routed to a third party to cover. "We're personable, we use people's name when we are talking to them, we thank them for getting in touch, and make sure that at the end, the caller has put the phone down before we do," explains Walsh.

"Why? Because I hate it with a passion when you are speaking to a company and their representative can't wait to get you off the phone to take the next call. Also, if we say we are going to call someone back at four o'clock, that's when it happens.

"So I would say we are a service company which happens to be in energy. And you could describe us as manually

automated in that we don't dispatch a standard email to every customer; they are all personalised. We tend to use email anyway as a back-up to what we have discussed with the client. It's for the record, rather than the prime means of communication."

What enables a company to gain a competitive edge through customer service is to put all those marginal gains together, Walsh maintains. "Technology has a part to play, but it won't achieve it alone! If you are serving a particular market, a niche, then word gets around. We haven't made a cold sales call; all of our business comes from attending relevant conferences and referrals. Our zen approach to business means that with a team of forty, our team attrition is nigh on zero, and our customer retention rate is 97.8%."

Today, Zenergi are in the top ten out of 500 brokers in the UK, with over 90% of their clients coming from the education sector. Their conversion rate of prospects is 87%. A milestone was achieved last year when Zenergi calculated they had supplied more than one terawatt of energy to customers - that's a trillion kilowatt hours.

Before starting the business, the founders worked at an existing brokerage "so we could learn how not to do it," Walsh explains. "I remember seeing a letter

from a customer complaining that the service was nowhere near as good as it used to be, and I vowed but that would never happen in my company as a consequence of growth." The name they chose for the business is an amalgam of zen and energy, with the intention of "depicting a calm journey in a market which at the time could have been described as frantic."

The company is KPI driven based on customer satisfaction levels. "If technology is to be deployed successfully, there is a need to massively bespoke the customer relationship," says Walsh. "We have measured, as a KPI, that 9% of the bills we receive each month from energy providers for our customers are wrong. That would have amounted to £3.4million of overcharging in the last four years; the difference is, we have found the errors on behalf of our customers. Our system, thanks to our investment in technology takes two minutes rather than two weeks to validate each bill." Technology also means that an account manager can just as effectively look after 500 as 100 customers.

A problem though for companies such as Zenergi is that it can still be the case that energy suppliers tend to have different legacy systems for quoting and billing and 'never the twain shall meet'. Only 25% of energy suppliers routinely

send out digital bills," Walsh observes. The future, he says, has to be more integration.

"The challenge is also finding out what technology is out there and what it could do for your business, because it still tends to happen by chance," says Walsh, and he gives a telling example of how such a discovery could easily become a game-changer. "When we were looking at housebuilding, I was shown a window which if you touched the glass, it would immediately become frosted. Touch it again and it would be clear again. What a fantastic feature for a bathroom, but I discovered it just by chance."

Walsh isn't convinced that social media is of particular benefit to Zenergi: "Does having a Twitter feed really get you any new business in b2b? It seems to me to be mostly fluff or generic stuff pulled out from anywhere. Just because technology makes something possible, it doesn't follow that it will be right for your business. I like technology a lot because of what it can do for us, but while it should provide us with more time as a consequence of automating tasks, the opposite can be the case, and we end up spending more time on technology related activities."



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