

5 ways Dolphin Bay beats hard times

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Cape Town - Dolphin Bay, a South African company manufacturing wood preservative chemicals, looked set to be knocked hard by the recession of recent years.

As an importer of ingredients for the manufacture of its products, Dolphin Bay was hit hard by the currency fluctuations and as supplier to struggling local industries, including construction, the chance of survival was slim.

Despite the odds, Bertus Coetzee's business and market share grew steadily in recent years.

He has distilled his recipe for success into five key points, which he reveals here to Fin24.

1. Build business relationships

Recognising that its own growth depends on the growth of its clients' businesses, Coetzee says building long-term partnerships is key. "This means always going the extra mile for our clients in very practical ways, over and over again, to build both our and their businesses."

In addition to being a supplier of goods, Dolphin Bay therefore diversified to offer its clients a host of value-added services, including training its clients' operators in the optimal use of wood preservatives, setting up wood treatment plants for clients, removing their chemical waste, advising them of new market opportunities and even developing new technologies to streamline their treatment processes.

"We need to listen to our clients carefully in order to understand their changing needs, and stay on our toes so that we can continue to help them in the best possible way. This approach has made a huge difference.

"Customers are better off, and of course, this is good for our business, too."

2. Innovate ceaselessly

AT, an electronic titration system that enables clients to eliminate error and unnecessary wastage when determining how much chemical should be used in a mixture; and a second formulation of ACQ, the new-generation wood-preservative that Dolphin Bay first introduced to South Africa in 2013.

ACQ-treated wood is in demand internationally as an alternative to the widely used CCA, and this opens up export opportunities for Dolphin Bay and its clients. "This is particularly useful in the current economic climate, which favours exports and penalises imports," says Coetzee.

"Innovation is crucial for long-term success, especially in our fast-changing business environment. Of course, it also makes business interesting. We're always excited to see what may lie just around the corner."

3. Hire the right people

From salesperson, factory assistant to chemist, every business has to ensure that the staff have the right experience, personality to do an outstanding job as well as a passion for consistent excellence.

And team work is as important as individual performance.

"Doing something exceptional once is not good enough," says Coetzee. "For example, impressing a client just once is not enough to meet your business standard.

"At Dolphin Bay we work in teams, which means that every team member needs to perform. An excellent salesperson cannot perform well if he is not backed up by the factory and supply staff, as well as the rest of the team."

Dedication and a willingness to work outside normal hours is also a key ingredient.

"For example all the customers of our salesman Mark Duckham will confirm that morning or night, it's never too late for them to call him, and he will always be polite and helpful. This is because he shares our vision of building long-term, sustainable relationships with clients."

Staff must also be humble enough to always want to learn more, and have a desire to help grow the business. Those who perform well and are shown to be trustworthy, are upskilled and promoted, wherever possible.

"It is important to notice and nurture staff dedication," says Coetzee.

4. Seek fresh opportunities

Be constantly on the lookout for new business opportunities, in South Africa and abroad, for your own sake and that of your clients.

As the South African market staggered due to the ailing economy, Coetzee realised that opportunities were opening up in other African countries. He started to build partnerships in these countries with companies that had a strong track record. Where necessary, he took action that placed considerable trust in his partner companies, to ensure that deals could go through.

Dolphin Bay sells more CCA than any other product, but saw the opportunity provided by international demand for alternatives. As a result, the company's chemists have spent years perfecting their own formulations of the wood preservative ACQ.

Services to clients constitute new opportunities, and include engineers setting up new wood-treatment plants and optimising the operations at existing plants.

"We recently improved the capacity at a client's plant by at least 30%, by making changes to relatively small components," says Coetzee.

5. Set a focus, together

At the beginning of each year, Coetzee says he and his staff meet to refresh their motivation and set an agenda for the new year.

Each staff member draws up five new aims - 'focus points' - for the year, after reviewing the five points set up the previous year. An honest discussion follows about whether each person's aims were met, and why this was or was not the case.

Each staff member establishes his or her own aims, although Coetzee ensures they are measurable.

"The team then looks at the points they set themselves for the new year, choose keywords from among these points, and finally I distil them into a mini-vision statement for the coming twelve months," says Coetzee.

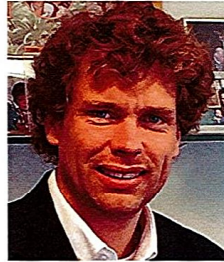
The mini-vision for 2015 acknowledges that "trust is built over time by building honest business relationships", and encourages all staff to "commit to continually improve their contribution, as this will build our company culture and create excitement".

"This process of setting focus points nudges us out of the holiday mood and back into work, as well as establishing our aims for the year," says Coetzee.

By incorporating everyone's aims into the company vision, it helps to build motivation and establish commitment to the business.

"After all, a company's success is directly proportional to the dedication and satisfaction of its staff," says Coetzee.

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Dolphin Bay owner Bertus Coetzee. (Pic: Supplied)

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