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ROAD WARRIOR

A man with short brown hair, wearing a dark grey suit jacket over a light pink and white striped shirt, stands with his arms crossed. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a blurred office or industrial setting with blue and grey tones.

LET THERE BE LIGHT

Creating an
IT services firm

ADAM SPURR
GENESIS COMMUNICATIONS

PLUS: CREDIT CRUNCH STRATEGY

LET THERE BE LIGHT

Taking the load off SMEs for their day to day computing and comms needs is the mission of the fast growing Genesis Communications, and fast moving sales head Adam Spurr



A common theme in recent years in IT/telecoms sales is transforming a transactional based approach into consultative, solution selling, but it can take years for large firms to make the change. Proof that it can be done in a very short time comes from Genesis Communications, which has gone from one of the most transactional environments – selling business mobile phone contracts – to a portfolio of mobile and hosted applications, majoring on the Microsoft suite, and sold by a smaller but much more intelligent salesforce.

The credit for this turnaround goes to Adam Spurr, Genesis's sales director, and his colleagues, who last year conducted a management buyout of the firm from the Dixons group. "We have been a Microsoft gold partner for two years and are now one of its leading technical experts, with seven gold competences and one of the few offering its full software as a service portfolio. The impetus came from our mobiles customer base – we saw that everything is moving to portable devices and we worked backwards from there to offering all the systems such as CRM, document management, security and email that you need in and out of the office."

It's a smart strategy, led by MD Graham

Ward, who is ex-Vodafone and Motorola, and the sales strategy is masterminded by the high-octane Spurr, who is a fast working, process driven sales leader. "It's not been easy though to turn round a salesforce of 100 based in 13 branch offices, on 15k basics and a company Astra, with no office technology, who were just knocking on the doors of small businesses." Today's salesforce is about a third of the size and mostly working from home using the full array of mobile technology – and in addition to targeting a core SME base Genesis now has an enterprise level hosting firm, (after the 2007 acquisition of Servelagic), a partner channel and an account management team, masterminded from an HQ in the rather unfashionable town of Bury.

Spurr is a Lancashire man though, and after a management science degree at Loughborough, he enrolled on the first course run by Meta-morphose, one of the companies that specialises in training up and placing graduate sales staff. "My father was a director of P&P and so I saw that IT sales was a good place to be, and after being given all the basics at Meta-morphose on a four week course – from wearing a well fitting suit to how to make sales calls – I was pitched in as an account manager at Kewill, an ERP player."

This was deep end stuff – he was sent to

manage Scottish accounts, but benefited from an excellent sales manager, who coached him in the value of preparation and how to conduct meetings. "But I made some howlers – at one customer, after I showed them the system they ordered 400 tonnes of soap by mistake."

Knowing your stuff became even more crucial at design tech firm Parametric (PTC), where Spurr went to learn the new business side. "It did some of the industry's best sales training, which many of us still use today, and it's no accident that many have also gone on to senior sales roles." PTC's MEDDIC process is the one that salespeople remember, and a modern interpretation is used by Spurr, which comes from consultancy Gener8, run by Martin Tucker – also ex-PTC.

Spurr coped with the "oppressive" management style, which left no time to rest on laurels, and recalls a standout deal to a design house where he really had to know his stuff. "If you're not inspired by the technology, selling is really difficult, especially when customers know what they're talking about." He adds that PTC taught him the essential discipline of generating ROI propositions, and was a master of the replicable sales process.

He left for Datawatch, a BI and service management software vendor, partly because his wife reckoned his character was being adversely influenced by the aggressive PTC. Here he progressed up to UK sales director by his late 20s and after considerable success, including a big data warehousing deal at Norweb, he left to join Energis, only because he wasn't prepared to spend all his time in the South and indeed at European level.

Referral strategy

Phil Gripton, who was ex-PCT [and an ex-Salesforce profile] persuaded him to run Energis's major accounts team, and there were some major wins. "One of the biggest was a five year hosting deal with Opodo, which involved a lot of grooming of top management, building champions, and using our own management, which I expect my salespeople here at Genesis to do with me. Particularly valuable was an introduction to the CEO of Opodo, Giovanni Bisignani, who now heads IATA.

This came from a referral from Gold Medal Travel – I'm a big fan of referrals.”

More than that, referrals are built into the Genesis sales cycle. “When we close a deal we ask customers for the names of three of their suppliers, three personal contacts and three customers. The salespeople with the best rapport will even ask clients to make a call and set up a meeting with their contacts there and then. It's all in our CRM system.”

The idea came to Spurr at Datawatch, as he noticed that decision makers in sectors such as local authorities networked with each other extensively, and a similar community he targets now are chartered accountants. Microsoft, he says, is especially keen on fostering such associations via its huge partner base. Referrals aren't new but it's unusual to find a rigorous process in place.

At Energis, Spurr also “had a great time” running partners and was then sent to Ireland to turn around a troubled country operation. “That was a big achievement for me, as afterwards Energis was confident enough to invest in a new IP network. It was about revisiting the basics and getting the salespeople and managers to constantly ask the right questions. These are the same anywhere and what I practise now – why are clients going to buy, why now and why from you – and if you can't answer these either do some more work or don't continue.”

Practice makes perfect

As to why seemingly good sales managers let their operations deteriorate, he reckons that doing the right things over and over again takes tremendous tenacity. Anything has to be practised repeatedly, like sportspeople do, and then reinforced though reporting such as through weekly metrics sessions he has with his direct reports at Genesis.

Spurr made one more move before Genesis, joining Nelson-based Daisy Communications as managing director to help serial entrepreneur Matthew Riley take the firm forward. But when Riley wanted “hands on” again there was no MD's role left and Spurr found himself at DSG Retail, a division of Dixons trading as Genesis, which was purely a mobile phone services operation for the Link and PC World. “It had an interesting culture – there had been, literally, a big bin where all customer complaints went.” When Dixons decided to sell the firm, Spurr was one of four who led a management buyout.

His instinct was to wipe out the entire salesforce and start afresh, but that would have been too disruptive, so he's kept

those who could adjust to value-based selling and brought in others, and now heads a team of about 45. The firm itself is quite sizeable – some 220 people, including 120 in customer operations. Before the buyout, Spurr had already launched a fixed line business stream and an academy type sales induction and training programme, sowing the seeds for the now rapid expansion into hosting.

“I've now got my remote direct salesforce targeting smaller businesses of under 50 seats. Salesforce.com is moving up into corporate accounts, but these are shark infested waters – the bigger vendors will always beat you on price if you don't own the technology, but of course they can't support smaller users. But we're finding that supporting a large number of small customers is fairly easy if you invest also in automation and self-service.”

Spurr reckons that the outsourcing proposition is becoming increasingly compelling for SMEs – “Why would they want to maintain their own servers? Look at those BT ads with Gordon Ramsey. We are also one of the few going across the piece with one bill for all services, including broadband, mobile and application hosting. Understanding usage patterns of SMEs and using economies of scale is compelling for our proposition.”

While his field force is busy with smaller firms, he has also set up a major accounts team for 150 larger customers, such as Jet2.com (a low-cost airline that is still in business). A few enterprise-level new business salespeople have also been hired to sell pan-European general hosting services for Genesis's data centres, which are the Servelogic operation, with clients such as Citroën and Fitness First on board.

“I put all my salespeople through Gener8's programme [see gener8.biz], and we've recently done a week's sales academy, run in-house, bringing in people from Microsoft, RIM and so on. I'm very keen on process both for new business and account management – people understand structures such as MEDDIC and EDIP – evaluation, demonstrate, inoculate against the competition, and penetration – which we use with account managers.”

His salespeople are fully toiled up with mobile kit and report everything into the firm's Dynamics CRM system, which he says gives all the sales reporting he needs, with Sharepoint also handling account development plans among other things. Salespeople can also use their laptops to demo everything online too. At the front end of the sales cycle there is a telesales team but Spurr says the company has got

very good at search engine optimisation (SEO) and pay per click techniques, and there is a constant flow of leads from the Internet. “I have four people just fielding inbound calls – SEO does cost us a lot – we spend thousands a month on it – but it pays off if done right.” He's signed up a firm called Search Logic to deliver this service (see www.searchlogic.com).

Using the Internet skillfully works both for attracting SME customers and also the enterprise clients for infrastructure hosting. As Spurr explains, it is not primarily the end customer that's doing searching, but design and implementation partners. “That's how we won Citroën. If you look at the website it says it's hosted by us but in fact our actual client is the design firm. But selling these deals is very complex as you have to deal with several partners in the chain for something like a major website. It's not like you can just get one org chart and go from there, and if we just heard from Citroën they were doing a big project we would have already missed the deal as it's their partners who were selecting the infrastructure provider.”

Spurr says the biggest problem with running a largely dispersed salesforce is trust, and it's no place for hands-on sales managers. “You have to make sure you hire the right people in the field and as managers – a hands-on manager is driven mad by remote working and you're better off having an office.” There are 40k basics on offer and 80-100 OTEs – it's not tier one but not at all bad in today's climate.

Spurr is a family man and Man U season ticket holder – about the only time he likes to see red, we suspect. **SF**

About Genesis Comms

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BACKGROUND: Genesis has moved quickly to cover the spectrum of SME communications, with two key moves being MD Graham Ward, ex-MD of Vodafone Corporate leading the MBO, and the acquisition of Leicester-based hosting firm Servelogic.

PRODUCTS: Business mobiles, broadband, hosted IT services/ software as a service, tracking.

REVENUES: £45 million.

CUSTOMERS: Ofcom, Nokia, Jet2.com, Eurotel, Freedom, Doncasters, Carl Zeiss, Dot.Net Solutions, National School of Government, Eden Florists.