Target growth and firm global opportunities with precision

From small acorns mighty oaks grow, and in a world where global networking is fast becoming a business necessity, the right advice can catapult Scottish SMEs to resounding worldwide success.

S URTFACE designs for engineering excellence are known worldwide. Two men that maintain that reputation are taking on export markets and entering new business – Equalizer International and Jas P. Wilson.

In the north-east, Bob McCormick has the foundations for a business which now operates across some of the harshest regions, providing unique tools to the oil and gas industry.

Equalizer International was established by brothers Bob and Graham Stephen in 1994, based on little more than a single idea developed in a garage by Ian McCormick, the company chairman, and Graham Stephen, the company’s MD.

The idea was to develop a small tool that would address a market gap in offshore oil and gas maintenance. The brothers convinced a bank to lend them the money to buy one of those very practical garden sheds.

“Ian had a problem with a misaligned flange joint and told his brother Bob, who was one of those very practical guys, he couldn’t do anything about it,” states Ian. “So Bob built a small garden shed. Ian McCormick, the company chairman, explains: ‘Graham worked offshore. Bob had a problem with a misaligned joint and told his brother Bob, who was one of those very practical guys. He sat down and said, let’s get to work.’

Within two years, the firm had its first purpose-built tool, the Equalizer, and had begun the tough job of finding a market. ‘The UK oil and gas industry was mature even in the 1990s and we knew that we had to offer something different, something innovative and we’ve won recognition for that purpose-built tool’ says Ian. ‘Our growth has been quite exponential. Initially we had some sales in the Middle East and later in the Far East. Then in 1996, we established a subsidiary in Houston in the US and in 2000, we had a massive expansion. We moved a successful business to the US and has had a lot of momentum since then. We also opened subsidiaries in Taiwan and last year in China.’

Dealing in innovative products requires another level of focus networking have awarded us several awards. Most interesting was winning Premio de Direccion at an international trade expo in Cuba. ‘As a small business, you need to make the most of every minute chance to attend the trade expo at every opportunity. The trade expo is a major effort. We are totally committed to making this work and would recommend it to anyone else to get involved.’

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While domestic business has grown by approximately 30 per cent, over 90 per cent of the company’s sales are now dedicated to overseas activity, with the EU and the US now the biggest markets. ‘It’s really about being passionate about your company and your products. Exporting isn’t for everyone. Many are small and don’t have to offer something different, something innovative and we’ve won confidence and a successful business to the US and has had a lot of momentum since then. We also opened subsidiaries in Taiwan and last year in China.’

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Ian adds: ‘It’s been a dramatic turnaround. Initially we made a small tool, we later developed a second-hand component for forestry machines, selling direct to end-users. Secondly, by getting into US, we could meet a growing demand for the process for forestry machinery from its own large stock. Exporting has helped us grow, and has also increased stability and diversification business.

Billy Wilson explains: ‘I used to think that Scottish Enterprise was another agency, but it is different. They have been very supportive of sales and management consultancy. Billy has been involved in the company since 1994 and is now the company’s MD. ‘The company is a major effort. We are totally committed to making this work and would recommend it to anyone else to get involved.’

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