

A huge vision

WE SOMETIMES EXPERIENCE MOMENTS OF PURE CLARITY, WHEN WE KNOW SOMETHING SO ABSOLUTE THAT THERE ARE INSTINCTIVELY NO ALTERNATIVES. ONE SUCH MOMENT OCCURRED EARLIER THIS YEAR TO ANTON POTGIETER, CULMINATING IN THE BIRTH OF A RENEWED TELECOMS CONSTELLATION THAT WAS RECOGNISED BY THE JSE IN EARLY AUGUST WHEN THE HUGE GROUP BEGAN TRADING. KERRY DIMMER MET THE NUCLEUS OF THIS YOUTHFUL SUPER GROUP, AND FOUND A MODERN DAY MOGUL IN THE MAKING



Huge Group Limited is the holding company for 'huge telecom', previously known as TelePassport, an already highly successful company that gained a solid reputation for effective Least Cost Routing (LCR) solutions.

Anton Potgieter, the company's dynamic CEO, has been mindful of his family's investment in TelePassport since its establishment in 1993. The huge branding is his symphony, and like most of his decisions, it was a concept Potgieter instinctively knew was great. The way to greatness often depends on bringing something to life and "huge" is probably the thing that is going to do it for Potgieter and his team: 'It was a real breakthrough to discover that the 'huge' brand had not yet been used ... we now have the rights to web addresses like huge.co.za and hugetelecom.co.za.

'One of the brands I have enormous respect for is Virgin. It's been a kind of ambition of mine to have a name that is as usable as Virgin. I think we are pretty close with 'huge', or possibly better. Our initial advertising campaign talks about all the things we stand for – huge ideas, huge results, huge innovation, huge savings, huge performance. The legs of Huge Group Limited are also very long ... huge cellular, huge aviation, huge property and so on.'

Huge Group aims to grow from an existing ZAR300 million per annum to ZAR1 billion by this time next year. The rebranding, Potgieter explains, was necessary to give support to the sales channel of huge telecom. 'The texture of telecoms is in constant flux,' he says. 'It's time for us to advance into the next stage of the market which is telecoms management. It's a good time to make a bit of noise and we feel we are entitled to because we have quietly paid our dues in the background for the past 14 years. We are now coming out from under the radar.'

The focus for 'huge' has evolved from LCR to managed telecoms within the retail sector of the market. Potgieter expands: 'huge telecom's whole product offering, which is four major services, is aimed at proper management of the customer's telecoms structure and ultimately the costs thereof. What we do is what I refer to as a Robin Hood syndrome because we are actually helping our clients instead of solely trying to maximise our revenue ... we are taking something that our clients are already spending money on and helping them to spend less, saving some of them between ZAR10 – 15 million a year.

'It's a wonderful business to be in. I don't know how many organisations exist that you can actually feel really good about. It's a kind of "green" business where you give off less emissions, not more.'

Cape Town born Potgieter describes his early self as the epitome of the 'under-the-mountain dweller' – all his needs while growing up were satisfied within a five kilometre radius in the South African city. The discovery of information science while studying for his BBusSc at the University of Cape Town was accidental but proved to be the trigger for his achieving honours and a class medal. A Rhodes Scholarship nomination completed the package and played a role in defining the man who innovated in business almost from day one.

It was during his fifth year at university that Potgieter opened a small computer business called Innovative Computing. 'It was a way to earn beer money in a vibey atmosphere,' he grins. And then came TelePassport, a very different animal.

'When I looked at what TelePassport had in those early days I realised that the only way we were going to sell the service was to turn it into a bill and collect the money, so I wrote the first billing system. It is one aspect of business I still enjoy immensely and even though I am no longer responsible for billing systems, I am still somewhat involved in development.'

Potgieter, now resident in and passionate about Johannesburg, is deeply insightful about telecoms. He does not believe in failure. 'I don't believe in artificial rules stopping you from doing something. Some people would call me stubborn but I seem to have an inbuilt instinct for yes and no. I can look at a deal and know it's either brilliant or a disaster without having to analyse and dissect it. I also enjoy having a very short gap between thinking about something and actually doing it.

'I think that if you have to think about it, you are already half way towards a "no" decision, provided of course, you know your subject matter.'

Which of course brings us back to what Potgieter knows everything about – 'huge' and its future: 'We feel very well poised because of our products, most of which are under two years old. We are opening up new revenue streams as opposed to just flogging LCR. This is quite a maturing step for huge telecom.

'Automation is the only way to survive in managed telecoms when you get past a certain number of customers. The big differentiator in the market is the quality of the systems. Those need to be developed in-house, and we've got, in most cases, at least five years advantage time-wise. It is precisely because we run our own successful billing platform that the Huge Group will be able to grow substantially, our next growth coming from acquisition and alliances.'

Potgieter is a beacon within his world. If transformation is an eternal process then finding new ways to think about telecoms will be his ongoing directive. The final word has to, therefore, go to him: 'This is my passion, this is what I live for, and "huge" people are equally driven. Delivering a good service is making a difference to our clients and I enjoy being hands-on ... it's easy to make decisions because I almost kind-of-know before I have to ask myself.'