

REBEL WITH A CAUSE

The combined job title CEO and head of marketing is certainly an unusual one... But then Andy Pearce of Powwownow is no ordinary marketer. He met with **Lucy Fisher**

Andy Pearce, CEO and head of marketing at Powwownow, is nothing if not enthusiastic. Not yet 40, he's already founded two businesses and now, at the helm of Powwownow – the conference calling company known for its outspoken marketing campaigns – he remains determined to make an impression.

"I like to stand out from the crowd, to challenge common thoughts on marketing," he says. "Marketing is my great love, especially in what is essentially quite a dull marketplace."

His CV is certainly not dull. After a two-year stint as a windsurfing instructor shortly after he left school, Pearce decided he needed to get a 'proper job.' He tried telemarketing for a while, but soon decided he wanted to work for himself and launched his first business venture, a wheelie bin cleaning company called Bin Clean, which he started in 1991, having borrowed a thousand pounds to buy a van and cleaning equipment.

Pearce explains that wheelie bins were new at the time, but that people had found they became smelly quickly. "Demand was phenomenal," he says.

He offered a service cleaning wheelie bins every six weeks. "I cleaned up to 200 bins a day. It was hard work," he says. "But it was harder to collect the money than to clean the bins."

It also proved tough to raise the necessary funds to grow the business, so Pearce eventually sold Bin Clean to a private individual, for £40,000. "I'd had enough of bins," he says, in typically forthright style.

His next move was to set up Inkfish Call Centres, which he started with a £25,000 business angel investment. As founder member and managing director, he then steered the business to a £26.4 million turnover in seven years.

His early experience of telemarketing paid off, as he explains. "Our USP was that our competition were talking about

bums on seats, not quality of service. We focused on training and motivating our staff. That marketing message was the reason we were so successful," he says.

Inkfish sold outsourced contact centre solutions to big name clients such as O2 and Renault. The company rapidly expanded, housing five centres across the UK.

A non-conformist approach

The parallels with Powwownow become clear when Pearce explains: "We wanted an easily recognisable brand. Everyone else had boring names. At the time, there weren't many cool brands around."

It's clear that Pearce strives for the same type of impact today. In a market not known for irreverence, originality or boldness, he has overseen a number of imaginative campaigns, and his aversion to the traditional B2B cliché appears stronger than ever.

"I can't really think of many companies who do good B2B marketing. We're trying to do it differently... I do wonder sometimes whether we push it too far," he admits.

Last Summer's 'Dirty habits' campaign on Heart, Virgin and Capital Radio, for example, was certainly different – and it got results. The script – written with the help of agency Base One – focused on "disturbing facts" about the private thoughts and personal hygiene habits of many of us at business meetings. The details can probably be left to the imagination, but the script concluded: "Powwownow video conferencing... for when you really don't want to meet face-to-face."

On the back of this campaign, unique visitors to the Powwownow website increased 100 per cent from 1000 to 2000 a day during the two-week period that it ran. "It was amazingly effective," says Pearce. "I'd love to run it again, but breakfast and drive time on the radio is a big spend. The long term ROI is good but the short term isn't so good

Experimenting with social media

Pearce and his team also spent much of 2009 learning about how best to leverage social media networks. The work here continues. "It was clear that there's potential there and I believed it was a way for us to get ahead. We wanted to steal a march," he says.

As a starting point, he explains, they began by identifying the key benefits of conference calling, and then using these ideas to communicate brand messages via topical hooks. "We have gained good exposure via Twitter," he says. "It's an effective channel for thought leadership and brand exposure."

Powwownow has developed three individual channels on Twitter – powwownow_green, which focuses on topics such as the environmental impact of flying; powwownowbizfish, which looks at business efficiencies; and my_powwownow, which Pearce describes as the 'direct voice' of the company.

One of the company's key and ongoing marketing tactics is to respond to external, or topical, opportunities, such as the snowfall across the UK this year and last, railstrikes – and British Airways' decision to scrap the short-haul sandwich. "When we tweeted about the snow, and how you can continue with your day-to-day business via conference call, we saw a 300 per cent increase in new customers," explains Pearce.

Taking on big names such as Boris Johnson in national press on topics such as the environmental and business benefits of conference calls versus business flights, is day-to-day stuff for Pearce. Not normally one to back away from controversy, he did however back out at the last minute from plans to offer Powwownow branded sandwiches during flights on BA, due to fears it could land itself in a difficult legal situation. Pearce admits, "Our marketing frequently gets us into trouble – but sometimes not as much trouble as we hoped."

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WHENEVER.

