

# **Pharos**informatics

## **Case study**

Stepping into the  
breach at short notice

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## *Stepping into the breach at short notice*

### General Management

#### **Client situation and objectives**

Unwins Group is a £15M Group, based in Cambridge, which has just celebrated 100 years in business in the horticultural products market. The Group has two Divisions, one offering horticultural products through garden centres and the other serving the retail consumer directly through a Mail Order business.

The group had recruited an experienced turnaround director in the capacity of Managing Director, Mark Taylor with a brief to review the group and implement a new strategy. Mark quickly realised that the Group faced a survival crisis having been under managed for a number of years. In a business where the staff had many years of service and was used to a steady life this was a shock to all the staff.

The Mail Order Directors offered to buy the Mail Order Division and when the Board refused; resigned in the hope that the Board would change its mind.

#### **Sourcing the solution**

Mark Taylor Managing Director of turnaround specialists BlueSky Associates was someone I had networked with for sometime. Following the resignation of the Mail order Directors Mark was looking for a seasoned general manager to assist him and run the Mail Order business, while he worked on an exit strategy for the shareholders.

#### **Agreeing the brief and the price**

Initially the brief was to take control of the business and build rapport with the shell-shocked staff through the busiest time of the year from February to April. This brief was then extended to prepare the business for sale by the summer of 2004.

Negotiating the price was swiftly agreed over a short meeting and a follow up telephone conversation. The project commenced three days after the initial conversation.

#### **The project**

There was an immediate need to quickly establish control of the business and build rapport with the Mail order team who had just lost their five managers.

## Stage one

Review of the business identified the following requirements;

To focus on customer service and warehouse operations. Key metrics were introduced to measure customer call volume, response to customer queries and order lead-times.

To start preparing the business for the next season by developing the strategy, branding and Mail order catalogues. This led to a rationalisation of the number of brands traded from five to two. The strategy chosen was to concentrate on Unwins as a supplier of flower seed and plants and Marshalls as a leading supplier of vegetable seed, plants and trees.

To establish regular formal and informal communication channels with a workforce not used to such dramatic change.

To quickly develop working relationships with key suppliers at the height of the main selling season.

## Stage two

After successfully leading the business through the main season the next aim was to prepare and present the Mail Order business for sale. Detailed discussions were held with two potential trade buyers – Fothergill Seeds and Westland Horticulture; a fast growing Irish Group with revenues of £45M.

## Stage three

After completion of the sale to Westland Horticulture the project was extended for a third time to support Westland to understand the business and recruit a new management team as a part time Consultant.

## Summary

9 months after the initial call the project was completed with the following deliverables;

Mail order business met sales & profit objectives for the period.

Business successfully sold

New management team recruited.

This provided excellent value to both Unwins and Westland. Mark Taylor Group Managing Director of Unwins commented that the successful Mail Order project was an important contributory factor in delivering a successful trade sale and value to the shareholders.