



Committed to Sound Client Relationships

by Andrew Ngozo

In a fast moving and rapidly changing technological age, most organisations in the information services struggle to survive, and at best fizzle out naturally within a few years. But such is not the tale of WorldWide Information Services (WWIS), which, in 2016, not only celebrates 10 years at the apex of the industry but has had international acclaim from global players.

From humble beginnings and taking over a non-profit making entity in early 2006, André Van Tonder, Managing Director at WWIS was determined to defy all odds and succeed. He says, at the time, he asked himself whether it was worth taking the risk. "Both me and my business partner, Fiona Bester took the risk nonetheless. We made a big loss during the first year but the tide started turning afterwards. WWIS broke ground despite the fact that international competition was stiff. They had the resources that we did not have," he states.

The Right Credentials

Van Tonder explains that their breakthrough came when he had meetings at the London Online conference in the UK. He elaborates: "We had the right credentials. WWIS had the local knowledge required to do business in this space. We had to do responsible selling in order to please both our suppliers and the end users. Business became so good that we became selective of who our suppliers were." It is no surprise, then, that WWIS has

*André Van Tonder, Managing Director at
WorldWide Information Services (WWIS)*

become one of the leading information services companies in South Africa and recognised worldwide.

In 2010 WWIS was awarded the Agency of the Year Award by Thomson Reuters, a major multinational mass media and information firm. "This was our breakthrough as it gave us a new status locally and abroad. As a result we have been growing rapidly ever since, especially since some of our competitors are now history," he states.

What is WWIS's recipe for success, in seemingly difficult

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economic times? "At the core of our success is that the entire team is driven by a passion for what we do. It is comprised of extensively experienced individuals who have built and forged relationships in the sector for several decades," he says. In addition, van Tonder says, as an intermediary between the customer and the publisher they look at the precise needs of the customer and develop a relationship with the publisher.

"WWIS is not a sales agent but an agency partner. We are sustainability focused and seek to develop enduring relationships where they are valued and can make a difference. We help shape publisher and client needs and wants; negotiating fair remuneration for services rendered," notes van Tonder. He adds that they do business with publishers based on longer term opportunities and deliver many value-added services to both publishers and their clients; all the while seeking out opportunities to maximise sustainability for them.

In a tightly contested industry, WWIS prides itself on that it has grown significantly and acquired market share from its competitors as a result of being able to be different. "We have the ability to innovate in our solutions delivery and have a flexibility of approach and pricing. We have unparalleled knowledge of the industry in which we operate and are committed to sound client relationship management in person rather than through call centres," he points out. Further to the above, van Tonder states that WWIS is persistent and fearless in pursuing more attractive, efficient and effective delivery of services. "We operate without conflict of interest as we do not market our own products and services, in competition with publishers. Our vision is to become the dominant managing agent in the provision of subscription and information services to academic libraries and research institutions in South Africa, Southern and Central Africa."

A Lean and Mean Team

The 10 years that have elapsed have been no mean feat, says van Tonder. "We did not get to where we are by relaxing. We are perceived as one organisation that walks the extra mile for publishers and end users because, easily, the greatest investment and asset is our people who are enthusiastic about their work!" he exclaims. It is not only human resources that WWIS invests in. Van Tonder says his is a lean and mean organisation that seeks to

maximise on resources. "We don't spend money irresponsibly. We invest in infrastructure, cut costs where applicable and keep costs as low as possible. This means, for example, utilising unpretentious offices. As a result our books are very healthy," says van Tonder who adds that he is grateful for the humble beginnings because they "prepared us for the hard times later on".

He says there are key ingredients which have contributed to WWIS's success 10 years on. "These are passion, trustworthiness, accountability, knowledge, reputation that's built on customer

trust and transparency. We acknowledge the ever changing needs of the industry and adjust accordingly while constantly reinventing ourselves to ensure that we can always improve," he notes. According to him, it is important for the industry that there are competitors. "Friendly competition is vital because if there is none then you are running at a loss. I believe we have the best [human] assets in the industry. Underlying all of that is the hard work which makes us indispensable to the publishers."

In conclusion, van Tonder points out that the subscription agent business is not an easy one as many agents have closed their doors, merged or been taken over especially over the last decade. As quoted by Melissanne Scheld, managing director at Publishers Communication Group (PCG): "Agents are key to a successful publishing supply chain as they are the intermediaries between content and library consumer. Without agents involved in facilitating the purchase process between thousands of libraries and thousands of publishers, the system would likely grind to a halt.

"The long-term future will require greater transparency in business transactions between agents, librarians and publishers. As OA models grow, an agent's role will not only be that of a traditional sales functionary but also a content advocate, working with both libraries and academics/researchers to bring forth new content. As long as there are subscription-based products, there will be a need for subscription agents." □

To Provide the Best ROI

WWIS' mission is to innovate in the delivery of subscription and information services, through flexible local pricing, client and partner consideration and seamless, value added technology services. Its primary objective is to provide clients with the best return on their investment in information resources.