

INTERVIEWS WITH EXTRAORDINARY CEOS

Edition 1: 10 February 2020

Welcome to the first edition of “Interviews with extraordinary CEOs”: a series of interviews with leaders who are accomplishing something special – with insights that are relevant to all of us.

The philosophy behind this series is that *meaningful interactions with peer CEOs are invaluable. They are the best source of business / leadership development that exists.*

I will be interviewing leaders of organisations large and small, across many different industries. Each interview will provide you with thought-provoking insights and one or two invaluable nuggets that will be especially pertinent to your business.

Introducing Rupert Woodard of Excursions Ltd



For the inaugural interview, it gives me great pleasure to introduce you to Rupert Woodard, CEO of Excursions Ltd, one of the most accomplished, clear, focused and yet humble leaders with whom I have had the privilege to work.

Excursions has become the leader in its market – primarily through building a culture that would be the envy of any other CEO. Revenue and profit have tripled over the last three years.

What is Excursions' secret of success?

To quote Rupert:

***“It’s all about the customer experience. Our ‘USP’ is that we deliver an experience for each individual customer that they remember for all the right reasons.
And, to put it bluntly, we don’t stuff up!”***

Sounds so simple doesn’t it ... but how many of us could honestly make this claim for our businesses – let alone our customers?

As we will discover, a great deal needs to happen behind the scenes to deliver on this incomparable customer promise. Delivering the customer experience that is so important to Excursions’ success requires a combination of strategy, processes, systems, culture and, of course, leadership.

A 20 year old overnight success

Excursions Ltd (www.excursions.co.uk) provides shore excursions for cruise line passengers.

Whenever a small, luxury or expedition cruise ship docks at a British port, Excursions staff and an array of vehicles and guides are waiting to whisk the passengers off for a tour experience that is simply second to none.

The company was founded in 1999 when Rupert established his new company with three employees in a rumble-tumble set of rooms above a sandwich shop in a local Wiltshire market village.

“In the early days, I said yes to every single piece of business that came my way: big ships, little ships and everything in between.”

It took several years for Rupert to focus his strategy. “We decided not to go after the big ships but instead focus on small to mid-sized, luxury and expedition cruise ships visiting the UK. For two reasons:

- 1. Because at the top end of the market, cruise passengers demand a personalised service; an unforgettable experience.*
- 2. And secondly, they will pay for it. We never want to compete solely on price – that’s not a sustainable model for any business. We want to provide a top quality product to the discerning passengers of high-end clients.”*

The 6 essential elements of business success

Any great company needs to nail six critical elements – see the diagram on the right.

As we discuss Excursions’ response to each category, ask yourself how well your business performs on each one ...

Strategic clarity.

Clarity of which sectors of the market you are going to serve, which sectors you won’t serve – and why.

“Over the last few years, we have begun to turn certain travel groups and cruise companies away,” explains Rupert.

“Some clients are just not the right fit for us and vice versa. I refuse to lower the quality of our products and service, which therefore means a price-point that doesn’t work for some of the larger ships or travel groups. I would rather politely decline their business than infect our culture with high volume, low margin business. It’s just not us.”

Strategic clarity means being clear as to what you offer and just as importantly, what you don’t offer. Clarity of service. Clarity of required margin. Clarity of why your target customers buy from you. Clarity of what makes your business special.



An empowered culture.

The importance of culture cannot be over-stated. Only your people can deliver your strategy; only your people can deliver the change your business requires.

“This is the most important part of my job,” declared Rupert. “Our people are our source of competitive advantage. They are the ones who make the company a success.”

“The most important thing is to hire people with the right attitude. The second most important thing is to remove people with the wrong attitude as quickly as possible.”

“Then trust them. People with a can-do attitude who love their job and fully understand the level of service we need to provide ... the best thing I can do as CEO is get out of their way!”

“Every one of the team is fully empowered to act without seeking my approval when a situation arises in the heat of the moment. The coach supplier has let us down? They get coaches from another part of the country even if the cost is outrageous. They just do it. I don’t set spending limits; we review it afterwards. The most important thing is that the cruise line passengers have a seamless and quality experience.”

It’s when a crisis happens that you really get to know if your culture is working.

“Last year, the flagship of our most important client became stranded off the Scandinavian coast. Once all passengers were safely landed, over 700 were flown directly to Gatwick and with minimal notice we were asked to find hotels and transport for everyone. It was outside our normal season and a weekend to boot – but every member of the Excursions’ team stopped what they were doing and sped to Gatwick. It didn’t matter what department they were in – Shetlands, Orkney, Edinburgh, Accounts, Admin, HR – it was all hands on deck. No-one thought twice about it, because that is what we do. The best thing of all is that it all happened without me: I was out of the country at the time.”

And what about ‘values’?

“Well, we haven’t gone through the process of writing down our values. We just know. To deliver the quality experience we all want to deliver for our customers, we need to work together, share insights and information, always be improving, be professional at all times but also sunny – cruise line passengers are on holiday after all. We also need to be innovative – to make sure our tours are keeping one step ahead of the competition. This means that we form relationships with every single external person who we need to work with to deliver for the client - port staff, local tourist destination staff, guides, coach drivers, attraction managers, everyone. They are all a part of our extended team.”

Efficient Processes.

Excursions looks after more than 500 inbound port visits and 150,000 individual passengers a year. There is no possible way that they could provide a market-leading customer experience to every guest without processes that are clear, documented and as streamlined as possible. *“Everyone is involved in updating and improving our processes and our central database ensures no duplication. Communication is critical and it demands relentless attention. Formal and informal cross-company communication is part of our DNA.”*

Enabling systems.

“Our product database, central admin system and finance system are fully integrated so that the myriad of costs for each tour are captured and invoicing is streamlined and error-free. One-time entry from quote to invoice is our goal – no double-entry, minimum errors and one version of the truth.”

They also built a smartphone app to keep control of every single tour. *“We know which guide is assigned to which bus and which bus to which tour. The contact details of the port authority and cruise line contact are contained in every tour file, which our people have at their fingertips at all times.”*

“The next generation of the app will be even more exciting. Every Excursions coordinator will be able to see, via GPS, every tour guide and every passenger assigned to each bus and tour. Each tour guide will be able to see their passengers and even the passengers can see where their guide is if they get lost. Everyone can stay in touch via the app’s messaging capability.”

The concept for the app arose during a brainstorming session where the team simply asked themselves: “How can we make the customer experience even better?” It has the potential to revolutionise the industry.

Customer Experience.

At the heart of all of this is the customer – and the experience that they expect. Many companies talk about this. Rupert’s company lives and breathes it.

“The quality of experience we deliver and the fact we deliver it time and time again at every single port across the country is why our business has tripled in the last three years,” explained Rupert. *“Four years ago, a brand new ocean cruise company was born and it has quickly become one of the biggest in the industry. It is a brand that expects high quality and innovative tours that are near-faultless. Solely due to our reputation, they approached us a year before launching to help them build their UK-wide excursions programme. Our relationship is based on trust. We are two companies working together to deliver the experience that their end customer demands at a price that works for everyone.”*

Leadership.

The last piece of the puzzle is leadership. All of the above is only possible with genuine, focused and empathetic leadership, which Rupert displays in spades. The CEO sets the tone of any organisation – and, to put it simply, Rupert cares. Like its leader, Excursions people are dedicated, self-deprecating, obsessed with delivering for the customer, commercial and know how to have a damn good time. Most strong leaders find delegating a challenge: for it requires a clear brief, a dose of humility and a focus on outcomes. Rupert is a highly effective delegator. His business couldn’t have grown if he wasn’t.

Excursions’ structure is clear and uncomplicated, everyone knows what they are accountable for – and they work together as one team to deliver for the customer. And to top it all off, Rupert is not complacent. Always alert to changes and trends in his industry, how his key clients are faring and how the whole Excursions team is feeling and performing.

What can the rest of us learn from Rupert's story and business?

So many things, but here are my top 6:

1. Success rarely happens overnight
2. Never take anything for granted
3. Strategic clarity is essential – Who are you serving? Why? What do you do? What don't you do? Why? What are your key principles as an organisation? Why?
4. A repeatable customer experience requires continual work on processes and systems
5. Customer experience is the reason we are all in business – so define it and deliver it
6. And lastly, all of the above will come to nought unless you have a culture that empowers your people to deliver

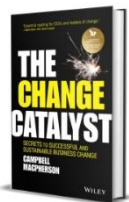
In the end, it's all about your people.



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