

Interview with Michael Spencer – Managing Director, Epsilis 22 April 2002

Joseph:

Going back prior to the beginning of this exercise, why did you feel it was necessary to conduct the customer survey?

Michael:

We don't always see ourselves as clients see us. At the end of the day their insight is more important, to measure what you are doing and improve customer service.

Joseph:

There are some very flattering quotes here from your client's first impressions of Epsilis. Are there any surprises?

Michael:

There were a few surprises.

Firstly, I would like to thank all our clients who took the time out to respond to the survey, openly and constructively. Thankfully most of it was positive but all feedback is vital!

Secondly, how competitively priced we seem to appear, but finally and more importantly that there seem to be a few misunderstandings which exist. So there is some work for us to do.

Joseph:

I noticed that the clients talked about the importance of flexibility relating to the way Epsilis approached the project. Why do you feel this is important?

Michael:

With my previous experience of being the customer of IT suppliers, I found it irritating that they took the approach of, "this is what you are going to get", rather than "ask what the client want".

Flexibility is important because it allows you to provide what the client wants.

Joseph:

Those interviewed already had their own existing websites but wanted upgrades, which allowed the client themselves the ability to change and update the content. Is what Epsilis provides now, the new generation of websites in the way they are conceived and managed?

Michael:

Epsilis have offered Content Management almost from the start. We have noticed that more and more of our competitors are starting to follow us, so we must be working along the right lines!

Joseph:

I noticed that clients used different names and descriptions for the Content Management facility - why do you think this is so and is it a problem for Epsilis?

Michael:

Essentially we don't mind what people call it, as long as our client's are happy! The product was first branded as InABox. However this name has since been dropped because it wasn't exclusive to Epsilis. We also felt that InABox may have given the impression that it was an off the shelf cheap template, which it was not.

The latest and enhanced version of our Content Management product is now branded Epecentre as it does exactly what it says. It puts the client at the centre of managing their website.

Joseph:

What would you like to say to the client, who suggested that Epsilis should have probed more to ensure that a clear specification was produced, rather than concentrate on deadlines?

Michael:

We do try and get a clear understanding of client's needs. We try not to be too formal and don't usually produce specification documents. This is to avoid the "signed off specification" syndrome I have come across so many times. Basically clients are held to what the specification says regardless of what the client actually wants unless more money changes hands.

At the beginning we know how hard it is to specify exactly what is wanted. So we recognise the partner process of working together and letting the project evolve. This is behind our philosophy to introduce the client to the basic website as early as possible. The client develops greater knowledge and experience of the way the site works. Then working together we will end up with the web site that they are happy with.

Joseph:

It has also been suggested, that Epsilis should give clients a briefing or even a company presentation on what Epsilis actually does prior to starting a project. How do you respond to this?

Michael:

We prefer to concentrate on listening to what the client wants. We do normally spend a few minutes talking about Epsilis but we don't always get the balance right. So we will now try harder to give people greater opportunity to ask for more information.

Joseph:

On the subject of customer service, the survey deliberately did not try to prompt clients so that we could get an understanding of the client's perspective. Again very positive but clients mentioned that they would like more regular updates on progress of the project, including costings and information on technology now available. Can anything be done?

Michael:

It's a learning process – the right level of communication is always a challenge. We want to keep clients properly informed – an additional measure we have taken is to issue weekly reports on new projects undertaken.

On the question of costs – we normally work on the basis of fixed price quotations and don't change the cost unless the goal posts change radically. If this were to happen we would want to discuss the impact on costs as it happened. We would not want the client to be unpleasantly surprised when they get the invoice.

For some time we have been thinking about placing articles on our website on any topic which may be of relevance or interest to our clients. We will alert our clients via Email. We also hope to start issuing a newsletter on a quarterly basis, which will cover relevant information and may also highlight a case study.

Joseph:

One of the biggest issues seemed to be over design concepts, e.g. the volume of designs and how was this covered in the budgets. A suggestion was also made where customers could pay upfront for a number of concepts? Can you clarify this issue for us?

Michael:

Graphic designs are so emotive, it's a case of like and dislike - and it is a hard one to get around.

Our policy is to provide the client with a range of designs – typically 4, but if more new concepts or amendments are required, then we will happily provide them at no additional charge.

Joseph:

What will happen next?

Michael:

Studies show that, customers often do not say anything when they are very unhappy with the service they are getting. They just go somewhere else. The company's aim is to develop long-term relationships, so the need to maintain a dialogue with our clients is important. This will help to resolve issues before they become problems. We will also encourage the client to have open discussions with us on important relevant areas outside of the current projects undertaken.

Joseph:

One last question Michael - The future for Epsilis looks very bright but success can bring it's own problems. There was some concern expressed in the survey, that while your company grows, the high standards of products and service might suffer. How can you guarantee that this will not happen?

Michael:

I am pleased that our customers think that we have a good team here. I believe we offer the right combination of having the appropriate skills to complete projects, as well as having a positive attitude in order to provide the best service. It has always been my main priority to build a successful business by creating long-term relationships with clients by providing excellent customer service. I want to work with a finite number of clients who we can sustain the best level of customer service for. I intend to ensure the growth of the company is controlled so we do not compromise our service.

Any new addition to the team will be carefully selected and will undergo a programme of training and ongoing development. We will soon start to implement standardisation of procedures and processes, which will help to maintain quality and efficiency.

I appreciate the problem when successful companies grow and cannot maintain the service levels, which secured the customers business in the first place. It is a juggling act to have the right number of skilled people and the right amount of work. This is why my philosophy is to keep the team small enough and concentrate on our continuous development. This will help to ensure that our standards will remain high.

Joseph: Michael, thank you for your time.