

BGP Stories from the front-line

Chris Jones on rediscovering his passion for the business

“Now, if it’s right for the customer and right for the business, I tell people, just do it. You don’t need to ask permission.” Chris Jones, BGP 2020



Three years ago Chris Jones was exhausted from spending his days solving other people’s problems. The business that he had created sixteen years before was no longer providing the personal and professional satisfaction he sought. Convinced there must be a better way, he enrolled on the Business Growth Programme, and on Friday 10th November he came

back to Cranfield to tell the story of how he and his team have transformed Micro-Epsilon UK, and in doing so rekindled his enthusiasm for the company he leads.

Chris is a mechanical engineer, from an engineering background, who has enjoyed working with machinery since childhood. After university he embarked on a career in technical sales, specialising in measurement sensors and at the age of 27 founded his own sales import agency, from his spare bedroom. He was motivated to start a business, he says, by seeing others making money from his efforts and with no prospect of a pay rise. Two years later, his partnership with industrial sensors supplier Micro-Epsilon Messtechnik was growing really well. And so Chris formed a joint venture, a UK sales subsidiary, Micro-Epsilon UK limited in which he is a joint owner. The firm’s products are used in multiple manufacturing sectors, in high-performance motorsports and in advanced technology industries like semiconductor production and medical devices. Each one can cost from a few hundred pounds to many tens of thousands. As one of his own staff puts it, the car you drive uses our sensors, the plane you fly in uses our sensors, and if you go to McDonald’s the sensors we supply ensure your French fries aren’t burnt!

As he built the business, Chris’s philosophy pre-BGP was that you grew essentially by selling more products and by recruiting more staff. Micro-Epsilon did indeed grow, but this chosen path also produced more and more headaches. During office hours a huge amount of Chris’s time was spent dealing with issues brought to him by the workforce – acting, in BGP terms, as a hero, with a fair amount of meddling thrown in. Only at 5pm when the office was empty was he able to get on with doing his job as MD. One of his priorities, then, on joining the programme was analysing the use of his own time and changing how he allocated it. The result was to free up an entire day where he could spend time working on the strategic development of the company.

By training and inclination Chris is highly analytical. As Micro-Epsilon is basically a sales company, he took a deep dive on the programme into his own customer base, analysing the reasons why customers bought and the strengths and weaknesses of his competitors.

There were some key findings:

- Untapped opportunities existed in the current customer base, which are now systematically identified and exploited
- All sales enquiries are not created equal, but his salesforce were treating them as such. Now the company allocates its resources in line with the value of each opportunity, prioritising high value sales to the customers they really want: the “Hot 100”. This is also the area in which Chris now concentrates his time, where he can add most value.
- The business has a much greater handle on why customers buy. Chris has aligned Micro-Epsilon’s marketing and sales messages and behaviour with what customers really value.

- To guide the team's efforts, Chris has created handbooks for both Marketing and Sales, so processes, roles and responsibilities are made clear and industry-specific.
- In his marketplace, Marketing is what creates the pipeline that feeds Sales, and needs to be seen as such. Chris has seized the opportunity to position the business as the thought leader in the field of sensors, through articles, opinion pieces, speaking engagements and so on. This builds trust and confidence in his sales prospects and leads the business to competing on value and expertise, not price.

The effect has been dramatic improvements in the key metrics of topline sales, gross margins and net profit. By paying more attention to the start and end of the sales pipeline, Chris has also seen an impressive rise in conversion rates [from quotation to order]: his people no longer shy away from asking for the order. The greater empowerment outlined by Chris has at the

same time, he says, made the company a happier and more relaxed place in which to work. When introducing a new programme of Friday meetings to review the past week, and Monday meetings to discuss the week ahead, Chris has taken care to emphasise the positive. As a result morale is high and the improvement in financial performance has enabled Micro-Epsilon to enhance its employee package of rewards and benefits.

As for Chris himself, post-BGP he enjoys significantly less stress, time for overseas holidays and the chance to restore his beloved Land Rover Defender to its full glory!

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About the companies

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