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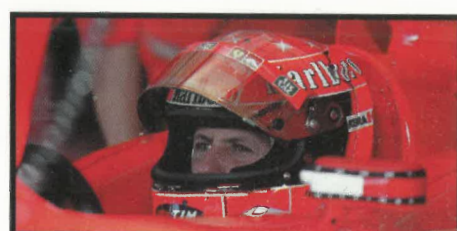
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Outsourcing your bottom line - here's how



Formula One - the websites



Outsourcing the BOTTOM LINE

**With the brain drain making good staff hard to find,
a new generation of companies is coming into its own.**

Times were when you could start a company in South Africa and, provided you had just a spark of entrepreneurial ingenuity and worked hard, you would have been able to retire rich.

Times change. These days you may just become a candidate for Tara after scouring the market for competent staff. As most CEOs will testify: businesses are as good as their people and finding the right people when so many have packed for Perth, is about as easy as tripping over gold ingots in Sandton.

Enter a new breed of businessmen, or, in this case,

a curvaceous young businesswoman who, frankly, looks as if she would be more at home on the catwalk than in a boardroom. Appearances can be deceptive. Suzanne Ravenall, chief executive officer of International Development and Change Services (I.D.C.S.) is a fast-talking, power-dressing super-shrewd cookie who is widely regarded as one of the leading players in the industry of field marketing.

What, you may wonder, is field marketing? It's another of those new business-speak terms for a plethora of services that have sprung up around the

Story by
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Photography by
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world to answer the calls of today's harried entrepreneur. And, in South Africa, it has for obvious reasons found a ready niche.

Suzanne presides over a staff of 200 and says that the way things are going that will soon be 2 000. She's savvy, high-charged and (extremely) serious about what she does.

Exactly what is it that she, or rather I.D.C.S. does, I inquire a bit plaintively (dynamic young female CEOs can make ageing editors not only plaintive, but also contemplative; indeed even ruminative).

She flashes what used to be described as an Ipana smile and sets off at about 400 words a minute. "There are usually issues companies have, whether it be relevant to running a sales division or perhaps the administration side of an HR department, or even taking over a training department, as examples. We would look at what they are hoping to achieve from that organization or department. Our job is to come up with a package of solutions as to how this will be run to enable them to get the effect and results they are looking for."

"So you are really a business consultant?"

"Among other things," smiles Suzanne sweetly.

"Our particular interest is customer service and quality - this is where the rest of the world is going right now. If there are two or three competitors in a market, clearly each will wish to show that they are providing a better product than the others.

““ The more you can outsource these days, the better. ””

"One of the ways to differentiate is by providing value added service and, in particular, customer service so that, at the end of the day, you always end up pleasing the customer. It's making sure that you have quicker turnaround times, quicker effectiveness, better results, better service - more quality in fact, in everything you do.

"Outsourcing is about utilising a company that can do it better than you can as they have the expertise. The more you can outsource these days, the better."

Hmmmm. Jawellnofine. But Suzanne is making sense even though my tape recorder is into overdrive to cope with her rat-tat-tat-tat delivery.

She says that the field marketing industry has three tiers. The most basic of all is on the merchandising level which may utilise a shared sales team. This could work for some fast moving consumer goods businesses which may not wish to have their own exclusive teams. Although I.D.C.S. is not in this tier at present, they are partnering with South African and overseas companies to supply a superior service; one that Suzanne asserts, South Africa has not yet experienced.

The second tier is what Suzanne very practically calls the "bums on seats" aspect. This would involve taking responsibility for a department but only in terms of staffing. The outsourcing company could provide a bank with tellers, as an example. "The responsibility would be to find the people, train them and then insource them back into the organisation," she says.

Not really outsourcing then, rather insourcing, I comment wisely. Suzanne nods agreement.

Now we come to the most advanced tier and this is where Suzanne and her company have made their names. "We provide a total outsourcing solution," she says. "We would take a department and move it to the level where it provides exceptional quality and added value to make a business better than its competitors. We would also provide full management if needed."

An example?

"How about eBucks.com?" asks Suzanne. "This is the first bank-backed electronic currency and is owned by the FirstRand Group. Our job is to look after the field marketing and training aspects (of eBucks.com). The people who work in the field marketing arena for eBucks.com are employed and managed by I.D.C.S."

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Above: Leave it to the experts: outsourcing business consultant Suzanne Ravenall says that field marketing (which is an important component of outsourcing) is the way to go for harried businessmen.


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Now all of this begs the question: if it is so hard to find qualified and experienced staff, how does I.D.C.S. manage? Suzanne says she works with top personnel agencies, each with a proven record, but "one thing we are really good at is taking people from inside an organisation, particularly those people with a passion and an enthusiasm for being successful, and training them. This means that a lot of sales people we bring on board have not really got a good track record in sales. But they have the drive to do well."

Each recruit is expected to complete an intensive induction course where, according to Suzanne, "we put them through absolute hell. But when they come out the other side, they are an incredibly disciplined and effective team of people."

The concept works, says Suzanne. But it needs a focused dedication from I.D.C.S. that is rare in today's

South African business environment. The company's growth in the past few years would suggest it has achieved this focus.

I look at this statuesque blonde and ask her what she does for fun. She's got a few run-of-the-mill hobbies but one that stands out for a British lass is her penchant for watching rugby. I haven't the heart to ask her if she cheers for the Lions or the Boks but she notes, quite pertinently I feel, that rugby is a game of out-maneuvring the other team. Which is obviously what Suzanne and Co. do rather well. 

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