Company: Diamond Circle Events
Products: Tickets for sporting events, shows, pop concerts and experience packages – mainly to hospitality companies, but also some direct corporate clients.
Turnover: £630,000
Team (l-r): Managing director Alan Lambert; admin assistant Tor Allport; office manager Charlotte Williams; sales manager Clive Holmes
Website: diamondcircle.net

Business bootcamp

Joining the big time

When Alan Lambert contacted us to ask for advice on growing his hospitality company, we sent business expert Laura Ashley-Timms (left) along to help

WORDS | ANDREW NEISH **PHOTOGRAPHY** | RICHARD CANNON

The challenge

Corporate hospitality company Diamond Circle Events is four years old, but MD Alan Lambert has been in post for just a year and it's the first time he's run a business. So his plan to treble turnover in two years is ambitious.

Alan and the team, office manager Charlotte Williams, sales manager Clive Holmes and admin assistant Tor Allport, also want to grow the customer base, get more direct clients, diversify Diamond Circle's offering, manage cash flow better (it's a seasonal business), and sharpen their marketing skills.

To help them achieve this we sent former Marks & Spencer executive and experienced business coach Laura Ashley-Timms to spend the day with the team. Laura is now director of coaching at mentoring company Notion (**businesscoaching.co.uk**), whose clients include Sainsbury's, Nokia, KPMG and AXA.

It's an intensive day at Diamond Circle's Luton premises. Laura leads brainstorming sessions for the whole team, sends members off into breakouts to thrash out ideas to improve their roles, and asks searching questions.

The target

Laura kicks off by asking the team where they would like to be in two years' time. "I want Diamond Circle to be one of the major hospitality and ticketing providers in the UK, offering our own events in addition to ticket sales, with a £2 million turnover and £600,000 profit," says Alan.

Laura warns: "It's a long way from where you are now. You'll have to make fairly significant changes and use the resources you have smartly."

The team identifies where they're weakest: marketing and sales strategy; intelligently targeting clients for 'quick win' revenue; cash flow and accounting.

Raising the profile

Laura explains that small businesses can use a range of low-cost strategies to raise profile and attract customers. "Marketing doesn't have to be very expensive," she says. "Any marketing spend should have a guaranteed return on investment. You do that by testing really small with any ideas you have, and only roll out what works. Don't do anything that you can't test small."

A cheap way to boost their profile, Laura suggests, is to write think pieces and blogs – on the website, in customer emails or in the press – that inspire potential customers. "It could be about the business value of throwing a party for clients. You're educating your customers on what's good about holding corporate events and therefore what's good about your products. These articles could be turned into free publicity, by being written up as press releases."

Diamond Circle currently sends out email newsletters once a week to over 5,000 of its clients, but they're not generating sales. Clive suggests that the emails should be more entertaining, with celebrity gossip, concert news, and industry latest, to catch a customer's eye. Laura agrees. "Mix your content in a customer email," she says. "If you're just trying to sell me something, I'll delete it unless I want to buy. Give me content that adds value – news, a bit of fun and gossip. Then if I want to buy, my relationship is with you, not with one of your competitors. Mix this 'added-value' content with sales content in a ratio of three to one. It's a good balance. And be punchy. Less text is better."

The team agree to send their first new-look email within the week.

A working website

Diamond Circle's website isn't working. There's no phone number, no way for visitors to sign up to customer emails, and it isn't ranking on Google compared with rivals' sites. Tor is sent off to research competitor websites and returns with a damning report: they have all of the above, are more attractive, and tickets can be bought online. "It would be worth investing in a website with all this information on it. There's nothing on ours," says Tor.

The team knows it will take time to develop the site, but agree to put the phone number on in the first instance.

Sales strategy

It's vital Diamond Circle takes steps to boost revenue quickly, to make that £2 million target realistic and boost cash flow during the quiet end-of-summer period. "We have strong clients, 15 between me and Alan, but we need to do a fair bit of work," admits Clive. He and Alan have got used to selling the same events repeatedly to regular clients but Laura challenges them: "Often we have favourite things we sell to people because that's the relationship we've always had. Perhaps you haven't told your existing customers about products other than the ones that they already buy from you. Doing that can double a company's turnover. This is a quick win for revenue."

Clive and Charlotte brainstorm more sales ideas. They come up with: special offers; giving unsold tickets to customers for good PR; entertaining clients at events to warm them up to new products; directing customers to current and new products by trailing them on Twitter and Facebook; doing a survey with customers to find out what events they'd be interested in during the coming months.

However, the team needs to work on how they find new customers and direct corporate customers. They've looked at buying in client databases and have targeted law firms with emails (lawyers are keen on hospitality events) but didn't follow up with phone calls.

"You need absolute clarity about where the market opportunities are," says Laura. "Identify your top three market opportunities, and then create specific marketing campaigns for them."

Revenue plan

Diamond Circle has no cash flow plan. Charlotte does a report at the end of each month, recording sales, ticket stock and overheads. This worries Laura. "Everything you're doing now is retrospective, there's no future planning," she says. "That's when you run into trouble. You can't change what's happened in the last month, and if you haven't got enough to cover it, you're in trouble. And in a seasonal business, you're going to struggle."

She suggests that the team creates a revenue plan. Working back from the £2 million revenue goal, it's a one-page spreadsheet that includes targets, costs and overheads.

Laura also advises updating their manual accounting system: "Automating and simplifying your processes to the clearest and simplest terms will help you enormously. As a small business at an early stage, you should look at simpler book-keeping software rather than advanced accounting software."

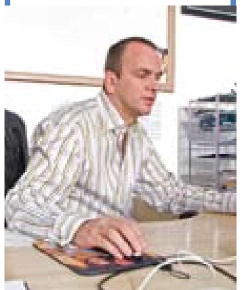
The wrap-up

The team get together for the final session to go over Laura's advice. It's been a tough but rewarding day, and Laura tells them: "You genuinely have talent, a huge amount of passion and lots of potential. What's exciting is that you've got all the right ingredients to push this business forward."

Alan says: "It was a fantastic day, very thought-provoking, and it gave us impetus to progress as a company."

MD'S MISSION

During the day, Laura and Alan have their own breakout session about his role as MD. Alan enjoys the intimacy of a small team and likes to be a friend to his employees. Laura explains that he needs to consider the line between leadership and friendship – often a challenge in small companies. "Being the figurehead



of this organisation as it grows significantly and becomes a leader in the market is going to call for a certain amount of statesmanship," she says. "You want your team to have great fun with you on that journey, but you also need to remember what people need from a leader. They need to be able to come to you and be inspired by you as their boss to drive this company forward, not the guy who will just buy them a pint of beer at the end of a tough day."

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