

# The sky's the limit for innovative pair

PENNY HAW

IT'S not surprising entrepreneurs who think alike are a good match. Yet Thomas Kritzer of Sky Messaging and Frank McDouall of Carfind.co.za work well together because they think differently. Differently, that is, from others in their respective fields.

McDouall is a mechanical engineer and business management graduate who, while working as a salesman for Auto Deutsch BMW in the 1990s, envisaged a different way of selling cars. Rather than sitting in a showroom waiting for potential customers to come to him, he imagined taking vehicles to them via the internet. Thus transpired the line, "Imagine if the car you wanted came looking for you".

When the registration for the domain came through, he took the leap and left his job. In April 2000, McDouall and a friend went live with the first simple rendition of Carfind.co.za.

It comprised three pages and four "mailto" links, which they created and monitored from a spare bedroom at home. Simple it may have been but Carfind found a quick following. It also drew the attention of contemporaries in the industry. Within four months of activation, one of SA's largest motor groups, Associated Motor Holdings, approached the pair. The group wanted in on the action.

Negotiations ensued and Associated Motor Holdings eventually became a majority shareholder. McDouall retained the balance of the shares and operating control.

Today, 15 years later, Carfind lists an average of 46,000 vehicles every month. About 2,475,000 hits generate between 40,000 and 50,000 inquiries a month.

In 2010, Sky Messaging was still a fledgling business when Kritzer, the MD, spotted a Carfind-branded car in traffic in Cape Town.

Like McDouall, Kritzer and his business partner, Dietmar Frey, were set on finding unusual ways of doing business. They combined their shared fervour for flying (Frey is a commercial pilot and Kritzer has a private pilot's licence) and entrepreneurial energies with Kritzer's marketing expertise (he's a BCom graduate with experience in marketing in SA and the US) to establish an unusual advertising company.

USING Piper Super Cub single-engine monoplanes and a patented banner towing system, Sky Messaging targets captive audiences with aerial advertising. (In most cases, audiences are "held captive" by congested roads.)

"Although there's nothing new about aerial banner advertising, operators have traditionally focused on events," explains Kritzer. "While we cover some relevant events for clients,



When Carfinder founder Frank McDouall got together with Sky Messaging's Thomas Kritzer, it was not long before both their businesses took off. Picture: SUPPLIED

our primary target is gridlock traffic, where our aim is to capture attention, relieve boredom, and build product and brand awareness."

Certainly, the banners impress. A five-month-long study concluded in 2014 by postgraduate marketing research students from the University of Cape Town found 98% of respondents had spotted aerial banners while navigating peak-hour traffic. The banners were, agreed 89%, "visible and legible".

Moreover, 66% of respondents confirmed they would engage with the brand advertised. Another independent study found that a DHL-Stormers banner, which asked Twitter users to tweet images thereof, reached 437,767 followers after just 12 flights over gridlock traffic in Cape Town.

Given his company's focus on traffic, Kritzer's sighting of the Carfind-branded car triggered an idea. At his desk shortly thereafter, he phoned McDouall to introduce himself and Sky Messaging.

True to form and determined to distinguish his company from its competitors, McDouall had already embarked on an alternative approach to the company's advertising.

Carfind's first billboard had motorists hooting and calling radio

stations before the final screw was in place when it was (deliberately) erected upside down.

EVEN so, McDouall wasn't immediately convinced by the potential value of towing a Carfind-branded banner behind an aircraft. But he agreed, albeit half-heartedly, to have a look at "the info".

"When I followed up later, Frank said, 'Your rates are ridiculous,'" Kritzer recalls. "I asked him what rates he was comparing them to and so began the discussion."

Before long, having already planned a trip to Cape Town, McDouall agreed to meet Kritzer. Little over a month later, the first Carfind banner took flight.

Since then, Sky Messaging has flown the Carfind banner over Johannesburg, Pretoria, Cape Town, Durban, Pietermaritzburg, Bloemfontein, Kimberley, Oudtshoorn, Port Elizabeth, George, Knysna, Plettenberg Bay, Cape St Francis, East London and Bisho 355 times. Carfind

flights total 680 hours and have covered 67,772km of traffic.

"That equates to 1.7 times around earth," says Kritzer, adding that Carfind banners are to be towed a further 280 hours between now and December. Advertising is vital to businesses such as Carfind, says McDouall. Not only is competition plentiful among vehicle sales websites in attracting buyers, it's also essential



to be top of mind among dealers who are Carfind's primary clients.

Carfind doesn't sell cars. It is what McDouall terms "an information broker" that generates leads. Income is generated by businesses and, to a lesser extent, individuals selling cars who rent space on the site. But, because repeat business depends on

buyers making use of the site and purchasing cars, it's in Carfind's best interest to build traffic among consumers to the site too.

The key to Carfind's success was to become the "go-to site" for sellers and buyers of vehicles and remain as such. Contrary to what many believe, says McDouall, this does not rely on search engine optimisation. Instead, it requires continuing and strategic branding and advertising activity.

"Search engines are for people who don't know where to go online," says McDouall. "For me, when you want to build a brand, it's about creating a destination site. If someone wants to find a car using the internet and a name doesn't immediately come to mind, they'll go to a search engine."

Building brand identity requires differentiation, which is one of the reasons aerial advertising works for Carfind. Not only has Sky Messaging helped take the Carfind brand above and beyond when it comes to reach, its exclusivity terms (clients secure exclusive use of aerial advertising in their markets) mean that Carfind is the only car sales website you'll see in the sky.

## Sky Messaging flies flag of transparency and flexibility

EVERY minute and kilometre flown for clients by fixed-wing aerial advertising company Sky Messaging is, says MD Thomas Kritzer, "accountable and viewable" on Google Maps using the company's custom-designed Flight and Business Management System.

"The ability to track, measure and report on all our flights is fundamental to our business."

"The objective is to always provide complete transparency to clients," Kritzer says.

"They are always privy to the status of their contracts and to each flight's details."

"They can view targeted areas in detail and are able to tweak campaigns as required."

He recalls a call from Carfind.co.za's Frank McDouall one Saturday morning.

"Frank was at an event at the Johannesburg Expo Centre at Nasrec and, although we hadn't scheduled a flight for his company that day, he realised the event he was attending would provide a good audience for the Carfind banner."

"He called and asked if the crew could fly."

"That's the kind of opportunity and flexibility we like to offer."

The technology is not, however, just about being able to monitor and adapt flight schedules. Sky Messaging's new GeoNotification application means clients are able to receive text notifications when their

banner is within a certain radius of relevant targets, which provides additional marketing opportunities.

"For example, if a client wants to know when his banner is within 3km above Buccleuch Interchange, the Flight and Business Management System tracks the aircraft to the position and sends an SMS to the client," explains Kritzer.

"This is useful in that clients can tie in sightings of the banner with promotions and competitions. It also enables clients to notify their dealers, franchisees and/or clients about the whereabouts of their banner."

"Carfind uses GeoNotifications to notify dealerships and...customers about promotions, new listings and the like." Penny Haw



Thomas Kritzer, MD of Sky Messaging, and his pilot. The advertising company uses a custom-made system to track and measure all its flights.

## Pavlo's perspective



PAVLO PHITIDIS

AS THE internet becomes increasingly littered with content, standing out from the crowd is vital if you want to be noticed.

Google has cornered the search market and created a mysterious algorithm that promises to help people stand out from the very noisy crowd, at a price.

Search engine optimisation no longer exists beyond a few cosmetic design and refinement changes that websites should have. Ultimately, standing out means big budgets for AdWords and pay-per-click Google revenue services making Google increasingly like all other media, the domain of corporate giants with massive ad spend — except for carfind.co.za.

Founded by the indomitable Frank McDouall, carfind.co.za adopted a different approach to this problem. Good entrepreneurs should learn their trades before embarking on business ownership. He spent years doing just that as an automotive salesman at a dealership.

He earned a degree in civil engineering but his passion is selling — which gave him the insights that serve carfind.co.za today.

After building his own website, McDouall designed the user experience to emulate the way different people buy cars.

Car buyers' needs differ. A young family looks for different things in a car to those of a student, for example. Selling cars on a showroom floor gave him the insights and understanding of this process. His engineering background allowed him to develop the functionality on the website to emulate the buying processes of the different types of car buyers.

It's called getting the user experience right and it's vital for success. Every additional click of the mouse sees a 50% purchase fall off.

With a sublime user experience in play, McDouall needed to get users aware that the website existed.

Buying a car, like almost any other product, only occurs when there's a "felt need" by a customer.

Advertising is needed to maintain brand awareness so when the need arises, carfind.co.za is the port of

first call. Cleverly managed advertising budgets combine frequency and novelty to leave an indelible print in the back of consumers' brains, to be recalled when the need arises. Arguably the most persistent player in aerial advertising, Thomas Kritzer of Sky Messaging built his business with precision engineering. He is German.

Using the best technology available, his planes pull aerial banners up and down the main traffic arterials at peak hours attracting the weary eyes of commuters to a novelty of advertising. Weighing only 10kg, a 180m<sup>2</sup> aerial banner can be seen from long distances.

Kritzer's decision to become the best at this niche, highly specialised form of advertising made him the market leader in a few short years. His continued focus and insistence on remaining focused on aerial advertising is paying off.

As is the nature of specialisation in the domain of an entrepreneurial eye, additional products that build on the foundation he created are close to emerging — including night banners. Watch this space; rather, the one above your head.

When entrepreneurs build specialist niche businesses and find others that can serve their purposes, the pioneering spirit that allowed each to build their business ignites again. The agreement of service between McDouall and Kritzer was struck in five minutes. Each knew how what was needed to get a deal done.

Entrepreneurial growth companies are the businesses that generate the jobs and innovation to raise the commercial standards of SA. They are built by people like McDouall and Kritzer who embody patience, focus, courage and commitment.

These are virtues that will allow SA's businesses and political leaders to collaborate, creating a new standard to replace "good enough" with excellence.

Phitidis is CEO of Aurik Business Incubator, director of Aurik Enterprise Development, entrepreneurship commentator on Talk Radio 702 & 567 Cape Talk and presenter of The Growth Engines.

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