



FIRST Quarterly

January 2010 edition

09

ENERGY



Interview with Ben Woldring
QUESTION PIECE

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INTERVIEW: BEN WOLDRING

INTERNET ENTREPRENEUR

Photo: Dick Pots

Bencom B.V., founded by internet entrepreneur Ben Woldring (24), is market leader with its independent comparison sites in the fields of telephone rates, internet access, digital TV, energy and hotels. Due to its experience and expertise Bencom is capable of offering accurate comparisons in the area of price comparisons, even in very complex and variable market situations. The company was established in 1998 and has developed nine internet sites.

In 2003 founder Ben Woldring was named Entrepreneur of the Year in the TCE category (Technology, Communication & Entertainment) and in 2006 he was voted Europe's Best Young Entrepreneur by the American magazine Business Week.

Could you briefly tell us about your company and how you became an entrepreneur?

When I was 13 years old, I got a school assignment for which I had to develop a website. I wanted to create a useful site, so I decided to build a website that compares phone rates. I got a bit carried away with the school project and its content formed the basis for my first website, Bellen.com. This website helps you compare the prices of various telecom providers in order to save money on your telephone bill. Eventually, I was invited to appear in the Dutch television programme *Kassa!*, which resulted in quite some attention for the website.

"I got a bit carried away with the school project"

I started out with Bencom which manages the telecom websites such as Bellen.com, Internetten.nl, Digitelevisie.nl and Totaalwijzer.nl. Currently, I own three companies. The energy websites such as Gaslicht.com and Energiewereld.nl are part of a separate company called Benergy B.V. LookingforBooking.com is the latest website, which is run by a separate B.V. (limited company) and also has its own location. This brings the total to 9 comparison sites.

After high school, you studied International Economics and Business at the University of Groningen and later also Art History. Could you tell



us about your experiences and did they help you in running your business?

Art History was not such a success, but during the first few years of International Economics and Business I had the feeling that I learned a lot. International Economics and Business is an English study and I followed courses such as Macroeconomics, Microeconomics, Statistics and Business English. I did not finish either of these studies, but for several years I took classes for International Business and Economics and took some exams.

International Economics and Business was a very interesting study, but I had already experienced various theories in my business life before learning the theory at University. This is difficult because you try to translate these theories to your own business. However, I still enjoyed exploring the theoretical side of doing business, as I had raised my business without any theoretical background whatsoever. It was interesting to see how some theories were right and others were completely wrong. I remember very well that a professor one day stated that the liberalisation of the energy market had failed because people do not switch between energy providers. This professor was wrong because that very morning I had checked how many households had switched providers on my site Gaslicht.com and the numbers had increased significantly. I did not think it would be very sensible to

share the information at that moment, but I drew my own conclusions, obviously.

"It was interesting to see how some theories were right and others were completely wrong"

Was it hard to combine studying and running a business?

At first it was not really a problem, but as the company began to expand, it became increasingly difficult to combine student life and doing business. This was especially the case with exams that took place at moments that my business became busier. When I started out on my 13th, I did everything myself, whereas currently I employ 20 people and the work is done at 3 offices located in Usquert, Groningen and Voorthuizen. I had to choose between the two and decided to go into business full time.

An ordinary day for you must be quite different from that of most students. Could you tell us what your work day looks like?

My agenda is usually very full, due to interviews and guest lectures in the Netherlands as well as abroad. Every week I receive invitations for presentations, for example at an Aegon marketing day, for Ericsson in Monaco, and the Chamber of Commerce in Curaçao. >

These are all interesting, but you can imagine that I cannot accept all requests. Usually I give about one presentation a month. My preference lies with giving a presentation at a nice conference and not for a room with only 10 people. I think it is important that the group I speak to is fun and that they are interested in my story. Commercial organisations will have to pay, because preparing for and giving the presentation takes me at least a day.

“We always try to solve problems that we signal in the market”

Dealing with the press also keeps me busy; you never know beforehand when journalists are going to call, so you always have to be pre-

pared. Besides that, I have to keep generating ideas for new sites and improving current sites. We always try to solve problems that we signal in the market by looking at them from a consumer's point of view. The solutions we provide are free of charge because our generation was raised with the idea that these services should be free.

You just talked about dealing with the press. Would you say that media play an important role in presenting your new sites?

The websites attract over 30,000 unique visitors each day and to promote a site such as LookingforBooking.com, which was launched in July, we put ads on the other sites we have. So, we have created our own platform that allows us to promote our new sites. But media attention certainly helps as well. When a new site is launched and this is pub-

lished in newspapers, magazines or online, it obviously has a positive effect on the number of visitors.

Could you tell us more about your newest website which is called LookingforBooking.com?

I got the idea for LookingforBooking.com while sitting in a hotel bar. I was having a beer after speaking at a conference and was talking to someone who had paid €60,- less for a room at the same hotel including breakfast. That felt very bad because I was under the impression that I had thoroughly checked where to book. I thought to myself, how could this have happened? Are there more people experiencing this problem? Comparison used to be difficult because some booking sites included reservation costs and tourism taxes, while others did not. Besides that, there are so many booking websites making exclusive deals with hotel chains and individual hotels that it is quite possible that when making a booking at a hotel, similar rooms may be offered at different prices, depending on the booking company you use. Nowadays the number of booking sites is unlimited and checking them all is very time consuming because for every site you have to fill in the arrival and departure date, where you want to go and other information. This gave me the idea to create a search engine that will compare booking sites for you and I named it LookingforBooking.com. This search engine shows the prices that include all the extra costs so that there are no surprises. Using LookingforBooking.com also saves you a lot of time, which is an added benefit.

“It is a jungle”

How does LookingforBooking.com work exactly?

The search engine contains all 2100 hotels in the Netherlands, so when you indicate that you want to stay at a hotel in Groningen, Maastricht or Tilburg, this search engine will give an up-to-date list of all the hotels there so not only the hotels that we have an agreement with. Per hotel you will find a list of booking sites that offer rooms there, and it shows whether breakfast is included and gives other relevant information. You see huge price dif-

The screenshot shows the Bellen.com website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'Bellen.com' logo and 'Voor objectieve en actuele vergelijkingen'. Below the navigation, there are several promotional banners and comparison tools. One prominent banner is for 'Populairste toestellen op Bellen.com' featuring Nokia N95, Sony Ericsson WS80i, and Nokia 6300. Another banner is for 'Belwijzer: alle gsm abonnementen vergelijken' with a table of mobile phone subscriptions. Below that, there's a 'Top 5 Internet + bellen' table comparing different providers and plans. The website also features a 'De telefoongids' section and a 'Belven naar buitenland' tool. The footer contains copyright information and links to various related websites.

ferences and it appears that sometimes it is better to book directly at the hotel's own site and sometimes it is better to book through a booking site. There are also big price differences between booking sites. It is a jungle.

Can the site only be used for hotels in the Netherlands?

No, all the hotel chains in the surrounding countries such as Germany, Belgium and France have been registered as well. However, a small hotel somewhere in Germany might not be on the site. We are working on this and trying to keep expanding.

“Being a student is the ideal basis to start as an entrepreneur”

The novelty of your idea has blown over a bit. Does this influence the success of your new products or is it still the same hype as it was with ‘bellen.com’ many years ago?

‘Looking for booking’ is a complete new market for me to get into. You really get a kick when you have meetings with big hotel

chains, such as the Hilton, the Spanish NH Hoteles, the Dutch ‘Bastion’ or a London Intercontinental hotel, to discuss whether they are willing to invest in the concept of LookingforBooking.com. These kinds of experiences make it very exciting and interesting to enter a new market.

In the telecom and the energy market, I know everyone and I have good contacts. In a new market you have to start building new relationships and that is the challenge of turning a new idea into a success. So far, the site has been received very well and the number of visitors is promising. Of course you want new sites right away to be a huge success like bellen.com. Yet, this cannot be expected; bellen.com has existed for around eleven years now and LookingforBooking.com is only a few months old. LookingforBooking.com still has to grow, but it is going in the right direction. CNBC made some television recordings and this has been broadcast a few weeks ago. We will have to wait and see.

Your company is 11 years old now and you are still going strong.

I think the fact that we ended at the 11th place

at Deloitte’s Technology fast 50, which is an award for the fastest growing enterprises in The Netherlands, shows we are doing well. We recently ended up at the 90th place in the fast 500 of the EMEA (Europe, the Middle East and Africa) area as well. This is exciting news.

We want to round off with the traditional last question: do you have any advice for our readers regarding entrepreneurship?

If you really dream of starting up your own business, do not wait too long; do it when you are still young. Being a student is the ideal basis to start as an entrepreneur, because the cost of living is relatively low. When you are used to the luxury of having a lease car and a good salary, taking the step of starting your own company will be much bigger. Of course you do not earn a lot of money in your first years. I worked hard those beginning years and the returns were minimal, but it did not matter because I still lived at home. By now, I own an apartment in the centre of Groningen and I can permit myself some luxury. So, if you have a good idea it can pay off to take the step and become an entrepreneur. Follow your dream... |

