

Talking Technology

Hotchkiss looking to lead

By Steve Burns, Capital News contributor

According to Profit Magazine, SearchEngine Position.com is one of Canada's hottest startup companies.

Today we go inside the company with president and CEO Gord Hotchkiss to learn more about why they have been so successful.

Leadership is an easy word to say, more difficult to put into practice.

Providing effective leadership is how I would define Gord Hotchkiss.

He is leading his team and transforming his company to a search engine powerhouse.

"Our niche is search, which we remain focused on. We develop strong relationships with our customers and look for ways to help them increase their online traffic and conversions to sales," Hotchkiss says.

"We have also broadened the scope of the services that we can provide to the customer by establishing relationships with other companies, like Opt In E-mail, which is a permission-based e-mail marketing tool."

Establishing a search niche has not been easy but the company has remained focused on knowing everything about the search business.

That has allowed them to provide to their customers a comprehensive approach to search engine rankings.

Although customers could attempt to do this work themselves, Hotchkiss says "we eliminate the frustration involved in positioning a company on the Web.

"This can often be a very time consuming process, which yields little tangible results for the entrepreneur.

"We spend time with our customers to understand their business, help them choose key search words to optimize the search results, measure and monitor the results and make any adjustments required.

"We believe that search as a marketing tool is going to continue to be huge.



Gordon Hotchkiss of SearchEnginePosition—one of Canada's hottest startup companies. Photo Gordon Bazzana

"In fact, we expect that some of the larger search engines will get involved in direct marketing and yellow pages as a way to diversify their business.

"It just makes sense to be able to provide customers with a number of ways to advertise."

Becoming successful in the competitive search market requires a long term vision, Hotchkiss says.

"We want to become the leader in our niche and have always strove to be passionate about doing this.

"I think our customers see our commitment to helping them. They turn to us for solutions and partner with them to deliver the best search results."

"We are slowly transforming our company to serve both the large business through customized services and the smaller to medium size business through packaged solutions.

"The reason for this is that we have been very successful in raising our profile within the search industry.

"As a result, larger companies continue to approach us to take on their entire search work, which can be an enormous customized task.

"At the same time we recognize that it has been the smaller to medium sized business that has made us successful.

"We are in the process of creating a number of packages for the small to medium sized customer that will help them access our services at a price they can afford."

We talked at length about the challenges facing the average entrepreneur in positioning their company on the Web.

"One of the most significant issues for any entrepreneur is knowing whether or not the investment in search engine positioning is paying off," Hotchkiss says.

" They are often not sure how this marketing tool is working for them. Is it actually converting leads to customers? How does it compare with other forms of advertising? The lack of quantifiable results can often be frustrating.

"We are in the process of developing a unique tool to be released next month that will assist the entrepreneur in quantifying and tracking the results from all form of online advertising.

"This tool shows exactly how each form of advertising is performing and compares the costs associated with each.

"This will be a powerful tool in the hands of our customers as it will allow them to invest in those activities that are producing the highest return on their investment."

As the company has grown, so have the financing needs of the business.

However, accessing capital for his business has been one of the "lessons learned" for Hotchkiss.

"Early on I tried to find people to invest in our Company. I learned a lot in the process of raising money.

"If I could do it over again, I would have channelled my energy on growing the business and improving the bottom line rather than on the hope of raising money.

"At the end of the day you need to have a profitable company or you will not be around in the long term. We have spent the last two years focusing on growing our business profitably and it has paid off for us.

"In hindsight, I think not raising the money was a blessing in disguise. With raising money comes more people trying to control your business.

"If we had listened to those trying to invest in our company and where they thought we should focus our effort, we simply would not be in business today."

As the company has grown it has expanded its team considerably.

Hotchkiss and his team have worked hard on creating a unique work culture.

"We want a professional work environment where everyone is listened to, where their input is valued and where they can grow their skills.

"One of the ways we do this is by using coaching as an effective leadership practice.

"Having team members linked with a coach that cares about them and what they are looking for has helped keep us a close family of coworkers."

Hotchkiss's philosophy on business growth is interesting. "I think of growing my business more in terms of continual and gradual improvement, rather than in huge leaps forward.

"For example, we plan in six month increments, which helps our team look back over the previous six months to celebrate the successes.

"We can always improve upon where we are today but I think it is important to remind yourself how far you have come."

One of the more exciting periods of time for Hotchkiss was last summer where he spent time at a Growth Camp outside of Toronto with the other CEOs of the Profit Magazine's 50 Hottest Start ups.

"I really enjoyed this time with the other leaders. No matter what business they were in I could learn from them. Innovation happens in every business and listening to how they created innovation and handled incredible growth was invaluable to me.

“One thing that was a take away for me was that all of the leaders thought they were doing things the right way but we never really feel like we are completely on top of things. That is the entrepreneurial spirit in a

nutshell.”

Hotchkiss has some valuable advice for upcoming entrepreneurs.

Build a team of leaders: Although everyone in the company will look to you for leadership, you need to build a team of leaders. You need to be a good coach and mentor to other leaders who can in turn be the same to other team members. The best way to lead is to lead by example.

Keep communication channels open: To increase communication, keep your organizational structure flat. If you have too many layers to get to the person that can implement the change, you have crippled your organization's ability to be responsive to your team and your customers.

Take time to implement systems: Although you need to manage the day-to-day running of your business, take the time to get systems in place in every area of your company. This simply means establishing systematic ways for how you do business. Establish business success metrics and implement systems to measure and monitor the results.

So when you think of Searchengineposition.com, think about more than positioning.

Whether it is leadership in the search industry, leadership in positioning their customers on the Web or leadership in creating a high performance work team—Searchengineposition is all about leadership.

Perhaps their commitment to leadership will inspire you and your team members to become more effective leaders in your niche.

Next Week: Inside Global Multi-Media.

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