

# A STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS

**H**ow does a successful private company blend entrepreneurship with corporate discipline to build on a 30-year old success story and plot a strategic direction for the future?

"It's one thing to have ideas about a strategy," Lincoln Booth, the general manager of Christchurch based food-company Cookie Time Ltd (CTL) says. "It's another thing to clearly articulate it and then activate it to plan with the team".

CTL sells its products in the highly competitive impulse/convenience segment of the retail market, effectively competing with any product in this space, whether it is a beverage or a sandwich.

It has been a category leader throughout its existence via its franchised distribution and retail, licensing and manufacturing operations. The company employs more than 80 full time staff and more than 40 independent franchisees distribute CTL products to more than 6000 retail outlets throughout New Zealand.

"Commitment to quality, operational excellence and maintaining ongoing growth, allied with entrepreneurship and innovation have been behind our success to this point," Lincoln says. "However having an effective strategy and plan is critical to continuing that success into the future."

## THE NEED FOR A SIMPLER FRAMEWORK

For CTL to continue to prosper, a focus on the 5 to 10 year planning horizon was the key and gaining key stakeholder alignment on this direction was essential.

"Throughout my career, I have been involved with strategic planning and building business plans," he says. "The result, usually quite a significant document, containing all the key



elements of a strategy, but it mostly stayed on the shelf and was referenced to on few occasions.

"I instinctively felt the need for a simpler framework to guide my strategic planning."

Lincoln was introduced to Advisory Works' Kendall Langston at an Air New Zealand sponsored breakfast where the company's planning framework was introduced.

The proprietary system, called The Five Pillars of Business Execution, is recognised by leading academic institutions as one of the most effective business frameworks in the world.

Lincoln says the approach is a commitment to high performance and is about making good businesses better. This is achieved by being very clear on your strategic horizon and on the things you chose to do, but more importantly the things you chose not to do.

"Previously my view of strategy was 'more is better'. The Advisory Works approach brought in a different perspective on business planning," he says.

Advisory Works' Kendall Langston says having executives involved in producing a strategic plan helps reduce resistance to its effective implementation.

"There is scope for a company to adjust and change the plan, but this only happens by coming back to the centre, updating the plan and aligning it to what needs to change," he says. "Within good businesses there is the entrepreneur's curse whereby there can be too much choice. Our framework is designed to distil the options down so that it is obvious what the strategy and focus should be."

### STRUCTURED REVIEW OF THE WHOLE PLAN REDUCES THE NEED FOR AD HOC CHANGES

While it was obvious that there was a need to involve the management team Lincoln Booth says the framework provided a base for this involvement.

"The result is that we have been able to blend the fantastic parts of the Cookie Time Way with the Advisory Works approach."

He says the process of bringing an outsider into the company provoked much healthy debate, but there was now clear recognition of the strength of having an independent facilitator.

"There was a need to develop trust, but by working at a slow, steady pace, we've now made our facilitator part of our management team," Lincoln says. "Care was taken in introducing Kendall and Advisory Works into the business and deciding that he was the right person."

He adds: "The approach to strategy we have adopted is an internationally tried and tested one, and this provides a high level of confidence."

CTL's strategic plan is now a one pager, albeit with deep strategic thinking behind it.

The challenge for the CTL management team has been to get their messaging and plans right to ensure alignment for their five to 10 year strategy, which is supported by annual reviews.

Implementing the framework at CTL began with a one-hour session and an audit or health check of the company's planning and business execution processes.

"While we scored well on some things, there were obvious areas for improvement. The process has helped us focus on bringing simplicity into the business," Lincoln says.



**"Our framework is designed to distil the options down so that it is obvious what the strategy and focus should be."**

"We've made sure we involve the management team, but in looking for alignment, we've also tried to avoid talkfests and decisions by committee."

Implementation of the new approach obviously started at the top, and time was spent developing their relationship with Kendall and having Lincoln and the two owners embrace the fact that they had a facilitator. Writing a plan was still a big task and the final result was subjected to a '100 day check' to make sure things were on track.

"Our strategic plan covers the next 10 years, so it is important to stay on message to execute that plan. However, if something is not working, we get it off the list and move on quickly," he says.

Focus and simplicity is the approach to dealing with the challenge of spreading the plan down to the rest of business. It begins with a Monday morning 'huddle' with a small agenda, providing a chance for a quick catch up and a review of key metrics.

"The result has been more clarity (and shared understanding) around why we are doing things, allowing us to refocus on the big strategic moves in the five to 10 year space," Lincoln says.

## CASE STUDY: COOKIE TIME

"Since we've worked with Advisory Works and implemented the framework, it's been easier to lead the team knowing they've all been through the same journey of discovery."

After three years, the framework is "business as usual" and the novelty has gone.

Lincoln says that having a one-page plan as a living document has resulted in more rigour, discipline, clarity and simplicity. There is also more alignment from owners through senior management down to middle management.

"People know the plan and they know their part in implementing it," he says.

Advisory Works works one-on-one with Lincoln to support the development of his senior team. Kendall also facilitates a series of regular half-day workshops to support CTL's initiative to develop emerging leaders.

"The future senior leaders of the company are important because the legacy of a good leader is to have developed other people to replace the current regime," Lincoln says. He is also part of Advisory Works' CEO Leadership Peer Group which meets bimonthly. Some of CTL's emerging leaders are also members of the Woman's Leadership Peer Group.

CTL is forging ahead with a move into the retail space. It has opened its first full-scale outlet, the Cookie Muncher Cookie Bar in Queenstown and in December 2013, the first international Cookie Bar was opened in Harajuku, Tokyo.

"Our vision is 'a taste for every occasion, a smile on every face'. Our plan is to take our products to the world on the back on that vision," Lincoln says. ■

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