



Case Study : Davis Bell McCraith Wines



It only seems like yesterday that we talked with Davis Bell McCraith (DBM) about their new website and how it helped a nascent wine merchant. Actually, it was nine years ago. Now, with the challenge of new GDPR data protection laws addressed, and amid Brexit's uncertainties, the two companies will soon celebrate a decade-long partnership. It's a partnership that, like good marriages and wonderful wine, goes on rewarding...

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On interview day, DBM partner Richard Davis dashes in and out of his warehouse faster than wine-makers' feet during [pigeage](#). Eventually, we talk; there's lots going on in the business, so no change there. What has Evergreen been up to with DBM – their biggest and oldest client – over the years?

An integral part of our business

'Nothing's fundamentally changed,' explains Richard Davis who, with Aidan Bell and Susan McCraith, started Davis Bell McCraith in 2009. 'We're three times bigger than when we spoke then, have a larger team and now accommodate multi-users. Evergreen is an integral part of our business and has worked alongside us all the way. They've done a great job keeping up with our evolving website requirements. The relationship demonstrates the importance of longevity in business partnerships if you want to get maximum value from your investment'.

For Evergreen and DBM – both growing businesses since 2009 – it’s been a decade of getting to know each other. Davis again: *‘As with any marriage, we know each other’s little foibles and have our ups and downs. But we understand each other well enough to be able to shortcut communication, which really helps. Our relationship is built on trust, mutual understanding and occasional frank conversations. Most things are sorted with a quick phone call. And underlying everything, the Evergreen team talks English, not ‘tech’, with us, is good at what it does and genuinely cares about DBM.’*

Continuing the marriage simile, we can’t resist asking about seven-year itches and lovers’ tiffs. *‘A couple of years ago,’* says Davis, *‘there seemed to be quite high staff turnover at Evergreen. I guess that’s inevitable, particularly in IT, but it created challenges. Several times, I’m sure accrued account knowledge left with departees, rather than remaining accessible. This sometimes caused delays while they figured out what had been done.’*

A trusted partner

In fairness to Evergreen, whom DBM clearly value, Davis accepts that they’ve now changed their account management procedures. That the Charfield-based team remains a trusted partner speaks volumes. Maybe such real-world hiccups are simply the business counterpart to marital frictions such as which end of the toothpaste tube gets squeezed. *‘Minor moans aside – it’s frustrating when this happens or when updates occasionally affect something else that we then have to pay to fix – they’ve done a great job. This has included automating key business processes, things that may sound minor, but which actually make a huge difference to our day-to-day operations and cash flow. The business-enhancing improvements include automating aged debtor reporting, invoicing and statement generation, and linking everything to our Xero accounts package.’*

Davis is being understated here, a fact revealed by his unconcealed delight as he recalls the day after the first automated statements went out: *‘I checked our account and saw loads of money. That was lovely; probably the “Wow!” moment of the last nine years.’* Maybe his struggle to identify such moments reflects how much of Evergreen’s input has been incremental changes. Arguably, none are ground-breaking. But taken together, they’ve delivered website functionality that’s crucial for DBM’s growth in a fast-changing, challenging marketplace.

Addressing the challenge of Brexit

In mid-2018, Davis Bell McCraith isn’t just preparing its crucial pre-Christmas season. Richard Davis and his team are also addressing the challenge of a

pre-Brexit luxury landscape that's brought massive uncertainty. *'As with many luxury products,'* says Davis, *'customers are waiting to see how things shake out in 2019. Meanwhile, we must be very focussed and prioritise sales, customer service and nailing costs. Evergreen's contribution is vital to all these.'*

'We also face the challenge of addressing the updating of our website. We've persevered for years with a site that undoubtedly works. But we also have a nagging suspicion that we should improve its responsiveness and update it. Ideally, Evergreen would have a ready-made bolt-on enhancement. In practice, and I suppose it goes with them being a custom solution provider, we'll need to bite the bullet and go for a bespoke update at some point.'

Capital expenditure is a sensitive issue for any business. And with a bespoke redesign likely to involve a five-figure investment, this will need serious thought. What was an easy decision for Davis was moving to a retainer arrangement. *'It's a big outlay each month,'* says Davis, *'but I like the control it gives me.'*

A story of incremental improvement

So the evolving story of this marriage is one of incremental improvement (on both sides), occasional tears and ultimate success. Can Richard Davis quantify the return on his investment? *'It's hard, but here we are nearly 10 years on, running a successful £1.5m multi-transactional business, that's three times the size it was, on systems originally developed in 2009. It works. Without going into commercially sensitive numbers, I'm sure we've had a decent ROI.'*

And how does he sum up the differentiators that set Evergreen apart – and have kept the partners together for so long? Despite occasional differences – *'I've yelled at them a few times'* – the marriage simile remains apt. It's clearly a relationship where both partners commit for the long-run, work through issues together and celebrate many good times.

Looking back with his privileged perspective, has anything about Evergreen particularly surprised Davis? *'I know they're a bespoke developer, but I can't help thinking there must be a place for some modular, off-the-shelf products; I'm sure it would help their clients – and enhance Evergreen's appeal too. I'm not suggesting that they should be the next Wix, but I can see several places where this would have been, and could be in future, of value to us. And maybe others?'*

Defined by bespoke capability

Of course, Evergreen has always been defined by its bespoke capability. As he reflects on this, Davis recalls the Winesafe website, for their separate wine

investment storage business, that Evergreen built. *'It says everything about their capability that a friend, in financial services at the time, was bowled over by Evergreen's industry-leading work. As I recall, he said, "If we had something like this in the financial world, I could retire." Evergreen is very good at what it does.'*

Praise like that more than balances Davis's occasional grumbles. So do his multiple recommendations of Evergreen and the fact that DBM and Evergreen are still together Richard Davis again: *'Despite our occasional spats, Evergreen's website and back-end systems serve us well; we get on, we're sharing a mutually rewarding journey and we respect each other.'*

It really is like a good marriage

In fact, as the partnership approaches its tenth anniversary and looks forward to a rewarding future, it really is like a good marriage. No doubt both teams will drink to that in 2019 – maybe even with something special from the Davis Bell McCraith cellars.



Richard Davis,
DBM Partner

'Evergreen stood out as being functional, enthusiastic and well-priced.'

'They are big enough to handle what we wanted to do, but small enough to make us feel important and they speak English rather than "tech".'

'I've been with Evergreen for 9 years so far [2018] and they are integral to our business and part of our long-term plan.'

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