



# HARNESSING IT

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## INTERVIEWS

Alan Wilson

MANAGING DIRECTOR

**BONVOYAGE**  
TAILOR-MADE TRAVEL ★ USA & CANADA

**Taylor Made**  
COMPUTER SOLUTIONS

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INTERVIEWS



In a series of interviews with Taylor Made Computer Solutions, directors reveal what they perceive to be the issues if IT is to deliver key objectives.

**The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.**

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**WHEN ALAN WILSON co-founded the travel business Bon Voyage in 1979, he remembers spending half their lives trying to get hold of airlines on the phone. And as for booking overseas hotels, they had to send telexes and faxes and “hopefully in the not too distant future someone would deign to reply.”**

Listening to him talk, one gets an idea of the huge changes that technology has brought about. Certainly, early adoption of IT gave Bon Voyage a competitive advantage in the early days, says Wilson. In the mid-eighties they were among the first in the UK to be fully computerised for live reservations with major airlines like Pan Am, TWA and American Airlines.

“All of a sudden, we were able to make reservations in seconds,” says Wilson. “The more bookings we made, the less it cost and we achieved quite a heavy volume of business. IT, together with the newspaper advertising, is what got us going.”

He’s referring to the fact that Bon Voyage, then a general travel agent, was an early pioneer in the use of classified advertising to promote holidays, enabling them to compete against the High Street names at the time. “The phone never stopped ringing,” Wilson says.

Then came the advent of the internet. Wilson says he initially wondered if it would catch on, since in those days most people didn’t have it at home. “But it didn’t take long to realise that it was a threat, one we needed to make an opportunity out of. The penny dropped that we would have to become experts and rely on our knowledge about destinations rather than rely on being order takers from adverts in newspapers.”

This was behind the business transforming from travel agent to travel consultant and tour operator,

successfully carving out a niche in bespoke, tailor-made luxury holidays to the United States and Canada.

About ten years ago they developed their own in-house system, called Elvis, which handles “absolutely everything,” from ‘talking’ to airline reservation systems, to handling requests for maps, to trial balance accounting.

“Elvis simplified our thinking,” says Wilson. “The great thing is, somebody could say ‘if only Elvis could do this’ and we can evaluate it. If it makes sense we can bend Elvis to our will.”

Interestingly, IT has not made the booking process faster. “In the past people would phone up and book there and then with a credit card,” says Wilson. “Now, we need to engage them and build relationships that one day might lead them to make a purchase. But that process enables us to get to know much more about the customer. For example we might know they like to sit next to the window on the upper deck of the plane.”

Despite the fact that so many holidays can be booked online, he believes it’s important for a specialist to retain the personal touch. “Email is great and 70% of conversations with clients might be done that way, but there will be one to one communication at some point, whether face to face or on the phone. It’s a bit like hiring a solicitor; you want personal contact at some point.”

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Similarly, it's important to have physical premises that customers can visit, and there's a lounge-style area at the front of the company's call centre. "Some of our customers who are spending £20,000 or £30,000 like to come in and have a chat so there is footfall five and a half days a week," says Wilson.

In addition, he adds, there is always someone on duty twenty-four hours a day, which enables Bon Voyage to resolve any out-of-hours problems encountered by customers. He says: "It's not often that something goes awry, but we did once have somebody arriving at completely the wrong place, having missed out some steps of their itinerary;

they were in San Diego where they should have been in Los Angeles. Having somebody on duty all the time means we can resolve problems like that regardless of time differences."

The company has a gold award from independent customer review service Feefo, where it has scored 4.9 out of five. That kind of publicity is very effective, Wilson says, because Bon Voyage is unable to vet or edit or remove customer comments. "Good or bad, every customer review appears," says Wilson. "Some companies might see this as a risky strategy - we see it as a great opportunity to let our customers speak on our behalf."

Although Feefo measures just the booking experience and not the holiday, Bon Voyage do

follow-up to obtain feedback about the actual trip too. "Our strategy is to over-react to any complaint and use it as a building block for the next booking," says Wilson.

As for marketing communications, with fewer people reading their emails generally, a challenge is ensuring that communications are relevant and not seen as junk. Social media, particularly Facebook, is doing well in this regard, although it has taken some time to get the benefits from it, says Wilson.

"We could not understand why other businesses were saying it was so good but then we hit on the idea that you have to give something to get something; for example we now give away maybe a report on how best to drive in America in exchange for getting you on our mailing list."

They also use Instagram and Pinterest and are heavy users of Google AdWords, with around 300 campaigns going at any one time. "If someone had told me twenty years ago we could market to customers pretty much for free I would never have believed it," Wilson says. "And the idea that we could place an ad that we didn't pay for unless someone showed an interest in it would've been a ridiculous notion."

But while production of traditional glossy brochures has reduced, Bon Voyage still use print communications, mainly for small brochures that "paint a picture" of what a bespoke holiday might look like.

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Meanwhile, the company has “absolutely embraced” a move to the cloud from having its own servers. “We looked at the cloud for about a year until we were convinced it was the way for a company of our size,” says Wilson. “It’s efficient and it’s every bit as secure as we could ever have been. The cloud should be bullet proof, that’s what they tell me.

Basically we didn’t rush into it. I don’t think we have ever been seduced into buying software without evaluating it. We considered it over a period of time and we decided it made more sense to go off-site.”

Such is the importance of IT that it is a subject for board-level discussion. Even at a micro level. “There’s always something that comes up for discussion,” says Wilson. “Is putting this or that on the screen going to increase sales? Should we put a certain prompt up?”

Some aspects of the IT, such as cyber security, are outsourced, to a company “vetted down to the nth degree”, because Bon Voyage didn’t want their developer having to get embroiled in the everyday IT nuts and bolts when he should be developing.

Talking of security, Wilson says card fraud is an issue for every retailer and they are no exception. “You get to recognise the signs. Most bookings are planned way in advance; people don’t book expensive holidays three days ahead. So when people try to book at very short notice that’s a warning sign.”

Even so, they once sold a holiday to someone who was using a credit card in a real person’s name but, as it later turned out, registered to a fake address.

The fraudster took their holiday, paid for by someone else’s card, then vanished. Wilson says it’s all a learning curve, saying: “With IT, every time the horse has bolted you know to put something in

place to stop it happening again.”

So what’s next? For one thing, virtual reality will become increasingly mainstream so that it can be used on the website to give customers a really good idea of what to expect at their destination. “Imagine being able to immerse people in a lake view so that they can’t wait to get there in real life,” says Wilson.

In theory, couldn’t an entire holiday be presented in virtual reality? “I think of technology as a great time saver but putting it in place takes twice as long as you think it would. So we have to consider what’s viable in terms of the value of that piece of business.”

Another ongoing project is to better track and analyse how customers find the company. “We try to categorise how customers hear about us so we know if we are spending money in the right places,” says Wilson. “Asking ‘how did you hear of us?’ doesn’t always provide the right answers because the fact that they booked with us ten years ago is not what prompted them to pick the phone up today. We want to know what sent them to us this time. All these questions beget more questions.”

To this end Bon Voyage have a tracking system that generates unique phone numbers for particular online promotions so that they can tell which advert or which particular page of Google has prompted a call.

“Technology can enable us to profile anyone who contacts us,” says Wilson, “so we can spend on relevant tempting material that will make them move one step closer to us.”

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I N T E R V I E W S



**Established in 1994, Taylor Made Computer Solutions are one of the largest and most highly-ranked IT service and support organisations in the south, currently employing over 110 staff.**

Taylor Made are the first technology company in the region to have gained a third consecutive gold award from Investors in People. Taylor Made are also ISO 9001:2008 certified.

The company has been ranked in the top 10 managed service providers in Europe the Middle East and Africa (EMEA) in a leading annual industry survey from MSPmentor since 2012.

Taylor Made are a Microsoft Gold Certified Partner, HP Preferred Partner and a NetApp Silver Partner.

#### **Services include:**

IT support, IT strategy, IT consultancy, hosted telephony, project management, Securo online back-up, hosted solutions, remote management and monitoring, cloud solutions, disaster recovery, remote access, outsource engineering, security, service desk support.

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**Taylor Made**  
COMPUTER SOLUTIONS

CamsHall Estate, Leroux House, Fareham PO16 8UL.

**Office** 01329 239 900 **Support** 01329 226 900 **Email** [enquiries@tmcs.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@tmcs.co.uk)

[www.tmcs.co.uk](http://www.tmcs.co.uk)