

ActionCOACH Case Study: clerksroom



Stephen Ward

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Stephen Ward is an innovator in the legal marketplace but when his unique barristers' chambers began to plateau after a period of initial growth, he decided to take some expert advice.

Background

"Clerksroom is a barristers' chambers of which we are one of 350 in England and Wales. Fifteen years ago, in April 2001, we changed to a limited company and what makes our chambers unique in the marketplace is that we are a commercial organisation whereas, traditionally, chambers are a membership organisation. Most chambers just share expenses but we have different objectives and one of those is to make a profit for our shareholders.

"We are fundamentally different from other chambers, we look after our clients as a priority over our members. If our staff provide a great service to clients then members automatically benefit – it's all about the culture. Marketing should take care of itself if you are running your business in the right way.

"When we started Clerksroom, we had a 10-year plan which included two long-term goals – buy a building for our chambers and create a really pleasant working environment. Our five-year plan included some targets for growing the business to help us stay focused towards our long-term objectives. However, Clerksroom grew rapidly and in December 2003, only two and a half years into our plan, we moved into our new building. It was then that growth began to plateau and we just cruised along – the plan had lost focus as we had not set any new big objectives."

Meeting an ActionCOACH

"I first met my local Action Coach at a Somerset Chamber of Commerce seminar in September 2015 where they were giving advice about entering awards and we got talking. His first words to me were that ActionCOACH can take a good business and help make it great and what we needed in the first instance was to recognise that our business is a good business. Later he invited me for a coffee to have an exploratory chat. I told him how I was exhausted running the business as I was working all hours of the day and night, reacting to what the business threw at me. I'm a driven person but I was stuck on a treadmill with no exit strategy.

"Things moved very quickly from there. I attended an evening ActionCOACH event where their global founder, Brad Sugars, was speaking. He gave some great advice on areas to think about in our business and I agreed to an alignment session with John.

"I suppose the biggest barrier that any business owner is going to face at this stage is that taking time out of a busy working day to complete an alignment session feels completely counter intuitive as the time out of the business just means you are even busier when you go back to work. What you come to realise is that you need to spend this time looking at your business as it actually ends up being the start of how you can free up more and more of your time."

PlanningCLUB

"Following the alignment session, I decided to attend the ActionCOACH PlanningCLUB which is a two-day business modelling programme. It's a comprehensive overview of your business looking at vision, mission, unique selling points, finance, building effective teams and much more. It allowed me to compartmentalise the business into issues and challenges that I could streamline to take the business forward."

“ActionCOACH business coaching really brings in a culture of questioning and learning. Firstly, it helped me identify my own limitations – I am good at marketing, databases and teamwork but struggle with finance. Once you understand your limitations then you don’t have to be afraid of them. All I need to do is gain enough basic knowledge on those areas to enable me to communicate with someone from our team who is good at them and then we can move forward. That’s the rock that I go back to with ActionCOACH when I come across something difficult. Secondly, developing a culture of working ON the business not IN the business is so important. When you get to this point, I think you are ideally suited to attending PlanningCLUB. There are 70 areas of business that you can start to address giving you a structure to work on areas as you identify them as a concern.”



“I wanted to free up time - not just for myself but for the whole team. Our business is fast paced and it would be great to improve our working environment by allowing some flexibility through efficiency.”

“The two-day PlanningCLUB process is an audit of what is missing from your business. I ended up with 100 more questions than when I started which some people may see as a problem but for me it just helps to know what challenges I need to sort out. I’m an optimistic person so even though it may take longer than we thought, we’ve now got a clearer plan and what steps need to be taken and what needs to be learned. For example, reading Simon Sinek’s book ‘Start With Why’ helped me re-visit why we started the business and, strangely, to think about what we have achieved in a different way. We have achieved so much but sometimes you take it for granted - a bit like being married too long and not appreciating what a great relationship you have.”

First Improvements

“I’ve recognised that, like many business owners I suspect, I find running the business very lonely. Even though I have a great team and I talk to people every day, I’m not talking to people about the business of our business. ActionCOACH gives you the chance to share with not only your coach but also other business owners during group workshops like PlanningCLUB and GrowthCLUB.

“I found five particular areas that I struggle with and so my Action Coach has tailored our one-to-one coaching to those areas and that carries through to GrowthCLUB where many of the business owners he coaches come together and we look at our 90-day plans. Our Action Coach doesn’t tell you how to run the business, he identifies where you have a gap and he helps you plug that gap with learnings.

“Why have I done so well using a business coach? When you have a good business you think ‘well that is ok’ and you don’t necessarily want to get involved in challenges because you are doing ok. Many business owners understand the technical aspect of their company – an artist may be great at painting but won’t make money without a good agent, in fact, they may not even see why they need an agent at all. But ActionCOACH want to take good businesses to great and that invigorated me.”

Ongoing Coaching

“I now know that our initial fantastic growth that allowed us to buy our building came from having goals to work to and so we have set new objectives and challenges so that we don’t return to that plateau. We want to grow the business by 300% over the next 5 years. This isn’t just a financial goal, we want to grow to give us greater stability and the ability to invest in our people and culture to perpetuate the great people and great environment vision. Obviously, that will have an impact on profit that will make the shareholders happy.

“We need to achieve our original end of year target for December 2016 by the end of August 2016 so that we could bring our targets in line with the accounting year but, because of our focus, this target will actually be achieved by the end of March 2016. This comes from making more goal-orientated decisions ‘how does that help us meet our business goals?’ and from the incremental gains that become easier to plan with my new business knowledge from PlanningCLUB.”

The Results So Far

“We’ve gone from planning to borrow £30,000 to enable growth to identifying £130,000 of savings in the budget this year. December was historically a difficult month to obtain invoice payments yet December 2015 was one of our record months in terms of cashflow. We’ve gone from not having a handle on our KPIs to building bespoke Test & Measure Software that gives us real time conversion rates, lead source, geography of sale per transaction so that we can work out an accurate return on investment.

“My emails have gone down by 80% - just a small thing that makes life more manageable! I think when you have spent five months of planning and working on what you are trying to achieve for your business and spend time talking to your team about it, they begin to buy in to your plans and start to take ownership for more things that they might ordinarily email you about. It seems that by telling them the rules they are ready to play the game.”



The Future

“My long-term personal goal is to spend six months a year in New Zealand but shorter term, I wanted to free up time – not just for myself but for the whole team. Our business is fast-paced and it would be great to improve our working environment by allowing some flexibility through efficiency.

“I’m thoroughly enjoying my journey now with the business and my life is changing for the long-term good - both for me personally, my family and the company. I’ve gone from constantly travelling with hardly a day spare to clearing my diary and making one day a week free for marathon training.”

The Coach Perspective

“When I met with Stephen it was clear that he already had a very good business, having already achieved what many would aspire to. Stephen was working incredibly hard IN his business and had become ensconced in the daily grind rather than focusing ON the business. So the challenge was how to take his business to the next level whilst reducing his workload.

“This was achieved in a remarkably short time due to Stephen’s fantastic attitude and commitment to learning. Stephen quickly realised that if you want to change something, then you have to change something. If you always do what you’ve done... you know the rest. It has been fantastic to see the growth in Stephen, his team and in his business. His business is operating more efficiently and profitably whilst at the same time Stephen has far more time for the important things in life.”

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