The TTG Interview

Little touches, grand plans

In six years Black Tomato has become a £14 million annual turnover company with global ambitions — and a very different way of selling travel. Daniel Pearce meets co-founder Tom Marchant

It's not often you walk into an independent travel agency and find a copy of Jane Austen's Pride of Prejudice on the coffee table, and the Housemartins playing on the radio.

But Black Tomato is no ordinary travel seller. Established as a high-end online business in 2005 by three 20-something ex-City boys — Tom Marchant, James Merrett and Matt Smith — the self-funded business has steadily grown year after year, helped by the simple premise of always showing their customer how much they are thinking about them.

As Marchant explains, that extends to everything from providing unique travel itineraries to thinking about the books and music their customers would like to take away with them on holiday, with iTunes vouchers and a recommended listening list sent out before the trip, as well as some recommended reading — hence the copy of Pride and Prejudice.

"That the trip should be good is a given — but the things customers remember are the little touches," he says. "Think about how you've found yourself legging through an airport and grabbing a book from WH Smith only find it's rubbish — or if you've got your iPod out when you're away and you haven't downloaded any music."

Being a friend

Marchant had been friends with Merrett since meeting at university in Newcastle and the pair met Smith while they were travelling through Australia in 2001. With an obsession for travel and a hankering to start their own business, their subsequent City careers prepared them for what was to come. And it was while working at Ernst & Young that Marchant realised the size and shape of the opportunity.

"I was surrounded by people who had decent disposable income and very little time to plan their travel. They were looking for someone who would do their planning for them, but who would feel like they were talking to a good friend — and we wanted to be that friend."

They were helped by a lucky break when they managed to be featured early on in both Q and Conde Nast Traveller magazines through a contact — which was ironic, as Tom puts it, because they were web-only and "didn't do brochures" to save on marketing spend. Much of the early growth came from word-of-mouth, press exposure and editorial content on the website.

From the beginning, they were determined to do things differently. "None of us came from a travel background, so we couldn't just flick a switch," remembers Marchant. "But the advantage was that we were coming at it from a blank canvas. We were saying from scratch: what's the travel service I'd want as a customer?"

Growing Tomatoes...

From its roots in Marchant's bedroom in 2005 to an office in Shoreditch, London, Black Tomato just can't stop growing.

Recognised last year by the Sunday Times Fast Track list as the 47th fastest growing business in the UK, turnover in 2010 was £11 million, and is expected to reach £14 million this year.

The opening of the New York office in March last year — with five staff to add to the 52 in London — will be followed shortly by an office in LA, and early next year a fourth office in Kazakhstan, a location that sounds like it was hand-picked to underline the way that Black Tomato likes to do things differently.

Black Tomato is a member of the Hays Travel Independence Group, which Marchant says has "taken away a huge administrative burden" from the business, as well as enabling it to use its Atol.
“Music and books aren’t expensive – but they are a small touch that really delights”

TOM MARCHANT

Clockwise from main: Tom Marchant; Inspiring Guiness brand; Epic Tomato, Beach Tomato and Black Tomato websites; and early-seller Finland

moment someone gets in touch, we start building that trip – I want people sat at home or at their desks thinking they can’t wait to get away. The music and book aren’t expensive – but they are a small touch that really delights.”

When customers get back there’s another pack called Back To Reality, which recognises the big low at the end of a holiday. “Before they go away we ask them what movies they like, what they’re in to – and we send them something to help ease them back into their life.

“The key thing for us is to show that we are always thinking about our customer.”

First-hand experience

But it’s not just little touches that take a travel venture from scratch to a £14 million business after six consecutive years of growth.

A look at Blacktomato.com underlines that this is a highly personal, delicately researched travel portfolio. Although now running to 52 staff and a growing international business, Black Tomato is still small enough to be able to offer a genuinely personal service.

“We won’t send anyone to a destination where we haven’t been,” says Marchant. “Everyone here travels extensively – we work with a lot of tour operators and DMCs that have got to know us well.

“Queensland, for example, gets our audience, and they know that if we are going to send people there we need to make sure we are sending them somewhere that is right for our clients.

“A crucial part of what we want to be is to lead – part of our brand is to introduce new destinations that resonate with our audience.”

That’s partly the thinking behind the annual top 10 destinations it runs on the website, and Marchant is proud to have picked out destinations such as Panama and Finland before they moved further up the tourism chain.

A typical Black Tomato customer is looking for unique travel experiences and is in a hurry to find them, says Marchant, citing the example of a recent safari to the Okavango Delta in Botswana, which simply had to be made now due to the highest waters in 30 years pushing animals into a dense area – and proved amazingly popular with customers.

Black Tomato isn’t all about wealthy customers – Marchant points out it provides entry-level travel at £500 – but with average booking of £11,000 per couple it’s clear where the business is positioned.

But it’s not as easy as all that to keep them happy, says Marchant. After “half a dozen” customers cancelled their trip when Lehman Bros went down in 2008, he says it focused the company on making sure every customer got full value for their spend.

You can have a relatively cheap trip that offers great value and you can have a very expensive trip that doesn’t. Value is the ability to access something that no-one else can.”

Building authority

For now, Marchant has openings in LA and Kazakhstan to deal with, although he won’t rule out further international expansion, with Asia in particular in his sights.

But this is also a travel business which is stretching into whole new areas that reinforce the brand messaging.

The launch of Epic Tomato in February this year – a dedicated adventure travel business – was preceded last year by the rise of Beach Tomato, a high-end beach specialist venture which is now moving into selling beachwear with the launch of Beach Tomato Shack.

Meanwhile Pinch, an online magazine offering a new editorial platform stretching away from travel into art, design and – you guessed it – music and books, launched in December. “For me it’s logical – our audience likes good writing and likes to feel a connection,” says Marchant.

I Part of the plan when we launched was to make sure we could position ourselves as an authority.”

In at least one respect, I’d say it’s a case of mission accomplished.

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13