



L to R: Dee Tahim with Stephanie Williams and James Pennington of the National B2B Centre.

Online Fabrics on a roll thanks to the web

In the late 1990s, Dee Tahim was handed the reins of his family's fabric business.

The business was established in 1975 by his parents. The company, which is based in Coventry, was selling a good range of fabrics to a number of local customers and a few other clients across the region.

But, as a young entrepreneur, Dee was determined to grow the business and to give it a national presence rather than operating on just a local basis.

He also wanted to tap into other markets as well as the Asian community which had been the dominant factor in the firm's client base.

"I was around 20 or 21," he said. "And I was asking myself: what do I want to do?"

"My parents had done a great job with the business, but I wasn't sure whether I was up for running a local business on the same scale. I wanted it to be bigger."

He added: "I also knew that the

fabrics industry was getting even harder and harder. Competition was everywhere."

Fortunately for Dee, the internet was just beginning to take off.

The Worldwide Web

Not long after he'd taken over the company, Dee took the company online and the business has never looked back.

With the assistance of Coventry-based Computime, the firm developed a website that could be utilised for a number of purposes.

Firstly, it was a source of information on the business and, in the same breath, a very useful marketing tool.

It was also an ideal sales tool as an e-commerce facility was included on the site allowing customers to purchase direct from www.online-fabrics.co.uk

The Results

In a nutshell, business has gone through the roof.

Online Fabrics now has a database of more than 16,000 customers which range from individuals to big corporations.

And while the Coventry showroom is still fairly busy, the number of enquiries and orders being taken from the website are outstripping the shop.

Along with his wife, Mandeep, and sister, Rita, they are selling a huge variety of materials including silks and satins right across the UK and also to foreign markets such as Australia and the USA.

Customers also include theatre groups and dance schools, who use the fabrics to create costumes for productions.

"Using the web has helped us to gain more customers but also has helped us to keep our clients happy," said Dee.

"If an order is placed online, we send a confirmation email, then another email to say it has been despatched.

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The fabric order is then delivered the next working day. This is very important to us and our customers.

"We also have a customer database which enables us to mail shot our customer informing them of any new products or offers that we may have.

"The affect the internet has had has been amazing and has moved the business forward massively. Previously, we were selling predominantly to the Asian community, now we are selling to a much wider audience."

Revamp

The website has just been revamped by Computime to give it a fresher, more modern feel.

A live chat facility has been added to allow customers to ask questions that do not feature on the FAQ section of the site.

That means if they have any queries, they can get them answered immediately and are, therefore, more likely to place an order straightaway.

"It's as much about customer service as it is about increasing orders," said Dee. "Fortunately for us, the website is helping us to achieve both."

The Future

"I can definitely see me doing this for the next 20 or 30 years now," said Dee.

That's a major statement for a man who wasn't sure whether he wanted to run the family business a decade ago.

And it's all thanks to his commitment to embracing new technology to take the company onto another level.

Martin King-Turner, of the National B2B Centre – the West Midlands' e-business centre of excellence, said: "This is a familiar story to us now. Companies that believed they had a ceiling because of geography are finding that they can take on the world thanks to the web.

"Dee's foresight in adopting e-business in 2001 is paying off now and he is still committed to utilising the very latest in technology."

Do you want to discover the benefits of an online shop? Do you want to reach new markets with your products and services?

If you would like advice on setting up your online shop contact the National B2B Centre using the details below.

Setting up an online shop

- A website provides a business with another sales and marketing channel, capable of reaching a global marketplace
- To set up a simple online shop you could begin with eBay - visit <http://pages.ebay.co.uk/storefronts/seller-landing.html> or if you are selling new items you could use eBay Express at <http://www.ebayexpress.co.uk>
- An eBay shop should be complemented by an e-commerce facility on your own website selling your products; to help you do this you should select a website developer or attempt it yourself using free open source tools
- There are a range of open source e-commerce tools that can be used to develop your online shop free of charge; ZenCart is one example and you can find more information at www.zencart.com
- To enable global search engines to find your online shop, the website content should be developed using keywords and page descriptions
- Your website keywords and page descriptions should be matched to the search terms people will use to find your products or services but remember to differentiate and use keyword phrases to beat the competition
- For help optimising your website for search engines use the tools in the B2B Centre's e-Marketing Toolbox at http://www.nb2bc.co.uk/toolboxes/marketing_online



The National B2B Centre

Helping growing businesses make smart e-business decisions

Warwick Manufacturing Group, International Manufacturing Centre, The University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL

W www.nb2bc.co.uk E info@nb2bc.co.uk T 024 7657 4384 F 024 7657 4287