

## **How an accounting software package helped a media consultancy go global and buck the trend**

'PR and marketing' - it's all goatee beards, triple-barrelled surnames, and a never-ending merry-go-round of lunches and launch parties.

Looks like the industry hasn't been doing its own promotion too well. Think technology and twelve hour days and you're probably closer to the truth.

Established in 1995 by a journalist, LEWIS is now the sixth largest hi-tech marketing and media agency, independently owned, with a corporate yet creative approach to promoting its clients, which include Cognos, SAP and TDK.

To use industry jargon, it's bucking the trend quite remarkably - and no, that's not just good PR.

In the current climate, where its competitors are cutting back and making redundancies, growth at LEWIS is double the industry standard, at 50%, and the company also met its revenue target of £6m for 2000 - 2001.

With 100 employees in 14 international offices and over 60 clients, the majority of which run cross-border, LEWIS certainly has its work cut out to ensure that its finances run smoothly. In addition to offices in San Diego, Paris and Munich, to name but a few, over the last year, it has opened offices in Boston and the Benelux, and has no plans to stop there.

The company has always been proud that it has never relied on external funding, be it investment, loans or overdrafts, to fund its ambitious plans - as far as it was concerned, sound financial management was simply the best way to achieve its objectives.

The finance team is renowned for its ferocious financial management. It liaises regularly with the account teams about invoices and payments. It even took this approach back in 1999, when the company used manual spreadsheets in Excel and a proprietary Filemaker Pro database.

However, as the company started to enjoy explosive growth (especially on a global scale), the bean counters scratched their heads as to how they could possibly manage such growth while controlling the finances as tightly as when the company had first started out.

"One of the employee benefits is the opportunity to do international secondments; however, we've clearly had to manage cashflow tightly in order to have somewhere for them to actually go," said Martin Franks, financial controller at LEWIS: "We decided to take our own PR advice and make technology work for us."

LEWIS evaluated a number of accounting software packages, including Sage and Exchequer Enterprise.

Franks explained: "We needed the package to be flexible enough to bill and report internationally, including euro compliance and international VAT requirements," continued Franks. "We chose Enterprise since the package would clearly be able to adapt to our evolving needs.

Exchequer's innovative approach was especially demonstrated by future plans to launch e-business and paperless modules as well as offering a fully Web-enabled version."

The company uses general, sales and purchase ledgers, as well as multi-currency and reporting modules. This has made statutory VAT reporting, which varies from monthly to quarterly requirements, practically a case of 'click and submit'.

In line with the speed of the industry it operates in, the LEWIS implementation took just two weeks. LEWIS now manages all company finances from the UK and produces all continental invoices in euros, unless otherwise requested - clearly beneficial to clients' accounting departments.

Franks produces graphs and reports using Enterprise for the weekly management meeting which hosts partners from all departments - so the reports have to demonstrate all information relevant to each function, be it new business or IT, in an easily understandable and universally digestible format.

These reports act as a company dashboard, allowing all factors to be seen at a glance and acting as a basis for key business decisions.

For Franks the benefits were instantly obvious. "The majority of our clients pay their fees quarterly in advance, easy enough to set up you'd think. But don't forget the expenses and the one-off projects, not to mention photo shoots for a front cover requested by a publication just as they're going to press.

We're aware that, just like us, our clients need to manage their own finances just as tightly - we wouldn't want to bill them for a media training session three months down the line, as it wouldn't inspire confidence. Can you imagine managing over 60 client accounts, as well as our suppliers?

Using Enterprise means that my time can be spent on thinking and planning strategically, and researching the feasibility for all potential new offices. That means we can grow with our clients and keep our staff happy," he explained.

The next logical move for the LEWIS finance team is to consider using Exchequer's paperless module, to follow the example of its clients, and get completely 'e-enabled'. This will eliminate the large number of invoices sent out each month, and save costs considerably on processing and postage costs.

Accounting may not be the most exciting part of the media machine, but you've got to get all your ducks in a row before you can think about paying for all that champagne dahhling...