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Swedish Powerhouse

From its humble beginnings, to attracting more than 10,000 customers across various industries, Energi Sverige is a leading energy trading and advisory business, with big plans for future growth.

Images by Jens C Hilner

Ulf Dahlin, CEO of Energi Sverige, has a strong background in economics, having worked as a stockbroker and options broker with Swedbank. He was with the bank for eight years before establishing his first start-up business. “I worked in banking until 1992 when I started a new firm together with my father-in-law. It was a wholesaler of flowers, pottery, and things like that—importing flowers from Holland, Ecuador, Kenya, Israel, all over Denmark, through a lot of intermediary stores in Sweden. It was a completely new business, a completely new line of work, but it was a great education starting up the firm, dealing with contracts and government.

“Then I started up in something called Fyrstad Kraft, which was an energy business, in 1997. They didn’t know anything about stock exchange, which was why I was brought on board. We were building up a new type of company—managing risks and purchasing energy assets for our end-users and owners. We were

doing that in 2002–2003 before we had a merger with another company called Östkraft, forming Bixia; so I was responsible for the merger with that new company. In 2007 I got a new opportunity to start up Energi Sverige.”

Having been responsible for the establishment and growth of several businesses, Ulf was a natural choice for leading Energi Sverige. “I’ve started up other companies, even in the banking business, starting up new departments. The thread that runs through my career is building things; building up companies and making them grow. I had a lot of experience in what to do and what not to do. You make a lot of mistakes during the long run, and you learn about how not to do it again.

“The big challenge was that I was starting up alone; there was some support from our mother company in Denmark, but it was mostly money, which was nice to have. I was starting up with a vision to have a really digital firm in Sweden, not doing anything with paper whatsoever. However, our

customers weren’t ready for that in 2007; it’s better now, but there is still a lot of paper going through our business. We’re working on it and we want to be an environmentally friendly firm.

Building the company from the ground up gave Ulf plenty of opportunity to create the company that he envisioned; however, it was a challenge starting from square one. “When you’re starting up a business, you have a blank page and an opportunity to start up a new team. It’s important to know what type of team you want to build, which was a big challenge. I’ve led teams of only men, I’ve led teams of only women, and it’s bad both ways [laughs]. My rule is to have equal numbers of men and women on the team, equal numbers of younger people and older people, and lots of different types of people.

“It’s a big challenge trying to get these strong people to work together. One common thing with all the people we have on board is that they all want to be the best and they want to grow. That’s an important thing when I hire new >

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people. I don't care if they're 20 or 60; the important thing is that they have the drive to be the best, and they're hungry for more business."

Ulf's passion and dedication is something he wants to see emulated in his staff. "The central thing is that we always want to be the best. We need to be focused

on what we're doing, and what we're doing should be more than sufficient for the customer. We like to surprise customers on the right side of the scale.

"Everyone working here is well aware of being fair with the customers; they should always know what we're doing for them, they should have confidence in what we're doing, and they should trust us. Our core values are knowledge, quality, and power. They're important because everyone coming on board should know what to do and what's expected of them. We've had a couple of people replaced because they didn't match up to what was expected."

Ulf believes in taking a hands-on approach to leadership in order to ensure alignment with staff and company vision. "When we're interviewing new people for the business, I often hire them myself. We talk about the vision, what we're trying to accomplish, how we

think, and things like that. It lets us see how the new people respond to that.

"If they don't respond in the right way then they won't join us; it doesn't matter how good their education is or how good their record is. And that's an important part for us early in the process, and even when they are on board and starting up, they can go to their own bosses. But I think it's important that everyone goes through my office."

Sustainability is a key aspect of Energi Sverige's philosophy, and has been since its inception. "It's very important, and it started with us not wanting to have any paper running through our company. And we invest in new types of technology that are not commercial yet. That's important to us because, in the long run, we need to have a society that could survive on not using non-renewable resources all the time."

Energi Sverige has a good relationship with its parent company, receiving financial and operational support when needed. "We have a relationship with Energi Danmark, our mother company, on a level where we have agreements and contracts on what we are doing. So we outsource a couple of things, like our IT department and economic functions like payments to Energi Danmark through contracts.

"That's the way we handle it, and it's very important because the taxes in Denmark and Sweden are different and you have to have everything on paper—what you're doing, how much it costs, and things like that; it's not easy moving money from Denmark to Sweden and vice versa because of the government there, and taxes are 3 to 4 per cent higher in Denmark, which has been changing through the years."

As head sponsor for Sweden's biathlon team, Energi Sverige sees internal and external benefits to this supportive partnership. "That's very important to us because it's a sport that sees women and men competing at the same time, it's very popular with both men and women, and around 50 per cent of the Swedish population follow the sport every weekend. Also, biathletes work in the same way our company works—they're very focused, they have long-term strategies, and they have to deliver on certain events. And that's how we work towards our customers as well.

"We're very focused on that and we want to be the best, and so do they. We have a lot of branding through our typeface, which is on the rifles and clothing. We use them [the team] with our customers and we use them internally and externally. It's very important to the staff since we often take these athletes into our meetings where they can tell our staff how to be perceived and what they need to do to be the best."

It has been a rewarding journey for Ulf, watching Energi Sverige

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grow and develop into the success story it is today. "I'm most proud of starting up with just a 30-square-metre office and some borrowed furniture, then going to the government to get everything on board, all the licences, and then building the perfect team and growing the business to SEK2.8 billion during 2013, and even more this year. Also, there's the personal achievement of being appointed CEO of the Year last year. I think that's a great thing for me and I'm very proud of what we've done, but we're not finished yet; there will be more in the future."

The organisation continues going from strength to strength, with a host of different things in Energi Sverige's pipeline. "I think there's a big opportunity to get more

focused on our own line of business, particularly in the business-to-business market. I think in future there will be more business-to-consumer as well, which means we need to be in a brighter view, in more public places than we have been so far. That's one of our strategies for 2014, and our entry into the consumer market will become even more aggressive in 2015.

"We're doing well in business-to-business, our customers are staying, and a lot of our contracts have renegotiated to stay with us. That's important. We have plans to grow further in the next couple of years; we are delivering five terawatt hours this year, and our goal is to double that in the next three years. So that's our focus for the moment." •



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