

Longevity through Relationships

Pickles Auctions is a family business that thrives on longstanding internal and external relationships. The strength of the company stems from the way it values its people and customers.

Images by Scott Ehler

Having been with Pickles Auctions for 19 years, Bruce MacLennan, CEO, has taken on various roles and responsibilities throughout his tenure. He started with the company as a trainee auctioneer and valuer, working his way through various roles at the Sydney branch in Belmore. “The business grew rapidly: we went from three branches when I started to 17. In early 2001, I took on a newly created role to manage all the branches across the country.

“Since then, we have continued to grow and we’ve built a strong operational team in the business to manage this growth and maintain our service levels. Three years ago, I took on the management of the marketing team and then the IT team at the beginning of 2013. In February 2014, I was appointed as the CEO.”

The rapid growth of Pickles Auctions has been one of the greatest challenges the company has faced. “When I started with the company, there were 100

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employees; today we have over 700. We now have 22 branches, and this year we are on track to turn over in excess of \$2 billion. The diversity of what we’re covering and managing has really grown, not only in terms of volume but the expectations of our clients and buyers. We work with nearly all of the major state governments, national fleet, and finance and insurance companies across the country. I think the challenge for those of us who have been here for a long time has been learning to adapt to the rapid changes in our industry, our clients’ requirements, and the way that has changed our business internally—it has stretched us all.

“I’m not unique in terms of my length of service; there are a lot of people in our business that have been here for a long time. We recently held a senior management conference with all our branch managers and our senior head office staff; there were 60 of us in the room, with 680 years of experience at Pickles, which I think is unique for any business.”

The key to longevity for Pickles Auctions’ staff comes from the family business environment that the company was founded on. “Everyone knows the owners, who are the Pickles family. Tim Pickles has been our managing director for the past 15 years, and he’s now our executive chairman. Everyone has a pretty close relationship with Tim. Tim’s dad, Peter, started the company 50 years ago, and he’s been our chairman up until February this year; he’s still a very engaged owner. I think the main drive and differentiator in terms of what we’ve achieved in the marketplace, what we’ve been able to do as a business in terms of retaining staff and servicing our clients, has come from that family feeling in the business.

“Knowing and working alongside the owners of the business has been critical in establishing our culture. The staff understand and know who they’re working for; they know what is important to them, and they understand the importance of the company values—because they are a reflection of what is important to >



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the owners. Our values of integrity, excellence, innovation, and teamwork are real; they are driven through the organisation and referred to often and held up as the benchmark of behaviour when you are at work.

“I’m quite comfortable in saying that we have been successful in driving these values through the organisation; the proof is in our growth and the longevity of our staff and client relationships. Not for a second do I think we get it right every time, and we tell the staff that sometimes we may fail, but overall I think we do an incredible job.

“What we’ve done in the past is grow through opportunities that are real and hard, in terms of clients and vendors asking us to go and set up somewhere based on a contract or based on a need that they have. That’s really been the vision for the business over the

past 15 to 20 years, to be truly national. That’s been our strategy, which has been successful for us.

“The challenge for us going forward is looking at how we maintain and grow our culture, how we maintain the great name that we have and the footprint we have, and then how we diversify—how we continue to offer new, innovative services to our current clients and businesses that we haven’t dealt with before. I think that’s going to be the challenge for us: how do we extend our offering without moving too far away from our traditional business?”

Bruce notes that technology has been instrumental in the growth of Pickles Auctions. “We have a couple of key systems that we’ve developed in house that are very innovative and which have really set us apart from our competition. These systems gave us a great springboard to attract and manage

clients nationally. We’ve learned the hard way how to develop systems internally, but we’ve seen this as pretty vital to making sure that we’re controlling them and are able to adapt and customise our own systems. Right now, we’re at a stage where we have a massive amount of IT work that is upon us, and we can’t see that ever changing.

“One change that we’re trying to push through the organisation is that IT is not separate from the business; it has been treated like that in the past. The business says, ‘We want this’, and then hands it off to IT. We’re actively engaged in a process now of making sure that there’s no longer the distinction between ‘IT’ and ‘the business’; it’s ‘the business’, and IT is an integral part of this. That’s a real cultural shift. It’s not a unique challenge for any business, but it’s certainly something that we’re grappling with.

“In the past 12 months, we’ve made good progress at involving IT at the front end of discussions and engagements with clients and system changes. I think the challenge for us is to not see IT as a cost centre going forward but to see it as a massive enabler for our business. If we can leverage the skills that exist in our IT team, we can achieve better results for our vendors and buyers.”

One of the key successes of Pickles Auctions is the way the company builds and maintains its internal and external relationships. “We clearly defined six sets of relationships that we see as very key: the staff, shareholders, community, buyers, our vendors, and our suppliers. All these relationships have to be held in tension, but as auctioneers we are agents for the vendor. What’s been driven into all our heads from day one is that we are here as agents for the vendors, the people who supply items to sell.

“How that works practically is that we have to listen to what they want, and we have to work out how to solve the problems that >

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they've got and to achieve the results that they need. Our sales teams have been exceptional at doing this; they have proved their ability to understand our vendors' businesses, their needs, and then come up with real solutions, which has set us apart. It's about building close relationships, both personally and professionally, with our vendors to help understand what they need, and actually involving them in the process of delivering and achieving the result. We have relationships with some really big fleets: Toyota, Lease Plan, ORIX, and many others; they're long-term relationships which are very collaborative. I think this approach has been really key to our success.

"Similarly, we team with our suppliers to get the maximum value from these relationships. Macquarie Telecom is a good example of where we have built a solid partnership with a supplier. On the surface, they provide us with data warehousing,

mobile communications, and networks. They do a great job for us in these critical spaces, but we are more involved than this. We meet to discuss issues, outside of hardware and data, within each of our businesses and look at ways that we can help each other. It is a natural part of what we do."

As Pickles Auctions continues to grow, new opportunities are emerging that the company would not have been able to pursue in the past. "We now see that there is massive scope for our infrastructure and for our experience to be utilised in the marketplace in areas that we haven't been operating in. I look at the Tiger Asset Group partnership as a really strong opportunity for us and a great way for us to grow both of our businesses in the insolvency space.

"We do some insolvency work, but would like to do more. The guys at Tiger have a unique skill set and are targeting a space where

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we haven't been particularly strong. They looked at us and saw that we've got the footprint and the strength on the ground that's going to complement their business. It's early days, but it is an exciting venture."

Bruce is enthusiastic about the future of Pickles Auctions as new opportunities present avenues for growth and development of the business. "We recently bought a stake in an IT company in New Zealand that provides automotive software. We see great opportunities like this in associated spaces where we can continue to find ways to offer better services to our current vendors and suppliers, as well as ones that we don't currently deal with. We're looking for opportunities in our marketplace, which is quite broad when you talk about auctions and valuations, because it could be any type of asset or any type of gear. So I think the potential growth areas for us in the future are quite wide and diverse, which is very exciting." •

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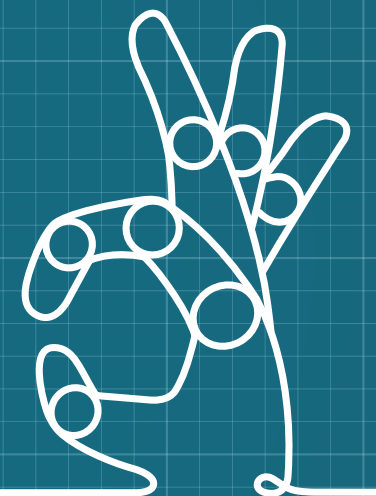


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