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Delivery FOCUSED

Moving with the needs and demands of the property market, boutique property developer Devwest has an effective strategy to achieve success in a competitive environment.

Images by David Phillips

Tony Hatt has always had an entrepreneurial spirit. The founder and CEO of Devwest built the property development business up from scratch, using his past experience and skills as his anchor. Originally operating only in Western Australia, today Devwest's presence has expanded to include projects in South Australia and Asia.

Raised in Woomera, South Australia, Tony lived there for 10 years with his family before they packed up and moved to Melbourne for a three-year stint. He completed his high school education to grade 8 there, but decided it wasn't for him, so at 17 years of age when his family

relocated to Alice Springs, Tony also went and started a plumbing apprenticeship. That was in 1967. After the required six years as journeyman, Tony took over the plumbing business from his boss at the time.

"Consequently, for the next 15 or 20 years, I did plumbing," Tony recalls. "However, while I was doing that, I was also developing sheds on the side. I did the first beehive, the little lock-ups, the sort of three-metres wide by 10-metres deep little sheds. Then I went into slightly bigger projects."

Tony dabbled in developing caravan parks, which required his plumbing expertise, before entering the hotel game. "I built a hotel in Alice Springs and ran it

with my brother Chris, and we also built a number of houses as well. I left in 1987 and went to northern Queensland for a couple of years fishing, as plumbers do, while I kept up with my plumbing by working for an oil and gas company, doing the detailed computer drawings for them."

In 1989, Tony moved to Perth and took a break from being self-employed. He joined Petrochem and worked on major piping jobs including a stint in Hong Kong before returning to Perth. "I told myself I needed to start working for myself again," he says. "I didn't want to work for other people, so I just started up slowly doing some redevelopments in the western suburbs in Perth. Just prior to >





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that, I went back on the tools for a little while, went bush, and started doing reroofing and extensions on station properties and that sort of thing, similar to what I did earlier in Alice Springs.”

After settling in Subiaco, Western Australia, he began to do larger projects such as apartments and commercial-retail tenancies. Devwest was born. “We’ve always been more of a boutique developer. We tend to operate ‘under the radar’ to some extent, and we quite often find that we compete with some of the ‘big boys’ out there—and they only realise it when we get the site! We have a very niche business and a firm company strategy to ensure we have development opportunities and investments spread across a wide variety of asset classes. By doing this, we do not feel we are too exposed to any one particular market sector. Diversification is an important part of our strategy.”

This approach, coupled with rigorous site selection criteria, has helped the business to futureproof itself from unavoidable market fluctuations. Devwest is typically the first one in and the first one out of new market spaces.

“We’ve done that in South Perth, we’ve done that in Burswood, and we’ve probably done that to a certain extent in Subiaco, which is our base. West Perth is another major area we are in, and we are venturing back to my hometown of Adelaide for an exciting project soon.”

Tony has two business partners, twins Chad and Damon Ferguson, who both hold director positions. “When I was working for Petrochem, there was a gentleman that I befriended, and 15 years later his twin boys came to me for some work experience,” Tony says. “They did that for a couple of weeks and later came back and said, ‘We’d like your job’. I replied, ‘If you want my job, then you get

paid when I get paid, and that’s when the projects finish’. So I gave them a project down south in the Margaret River area and consequently now we’re all partners. That was 13 years ago.”

Linked with Tony’s strengths in communication and people skills, the Ferguson twins excel in the legal and finance sides of the business. This nicely balances Devwest’s operations and has enhanced its success.

According to Tony, the people in the Devwest team are the most important element of the business. From the front desk staff to the project managers and consultants, everyone plays a vital role. “We have probably got one of the best teams around that I know of. If we weren’t a cohesive group, it wouldn’t work. We would never be where we are today if we didn’t all have the same vision, the same energy, the same input, and the same ownership of the brand. If they didn’t have an ownership of



who and what Devwest is, then we wouldn’t be who we are. They are the most valuable attributes we have in this company.”

Devwest ensures it invests in the regular training and development of staff to encourage them to expand

their skill sets and to complement their roles within the business and personally. Tony remembers his Petrochem days when a man once said to him, “I’d rather teach a tradesman how to draw than try to teach a draftsman the trade,” and this has stuck with him ever since.

Since its formation, Devwest has been involved in many exciting projects. Tony says he has thoroughly enjoyed the process of turning old buildings into new ones, a memorable one being the old church in Subiaco that he redeveloped and is number one on the heritage walk. Furthermore, the business won various awards, doing well in both the design and the construction criteria.

Another highlight for Tony has been the relationships that have been developed over the years and the positive impact Devwest has left on communities. “I have made a lot of good friends out of our business,” he notes. “We’ve also done quite a lot in the immigration area, especially in the early days in Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and now China. We’ve been going back and forth to China for the past six years, and that is proving very good with our business in that a lot of the people who have come on board with us have since >

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migrated or are migrating to Perth and other areas of Australia.

“With that, they’re bringing their families, children, extended family, and also their wealth, which is helping Australia with all

sorts of projects. When you think of the projects that we do, they all employ a lot of people through the design process, through the construction process; and then with people who move into the projects, that all relates back to money on the ground in the community.

“If you look at some of the projects we have done, the council could earn perhaps \$300,000 a year in rates and taxes, then income spend in that suburb or town might equate to millions of dollars per year more. So that’s what our developments do.”

As well as staff, Tony also views the company’s stakeholders, suppliers, and partners as members of the Devwest family. He prioritises those relationships and ensures he keeps everyone in the loop about what’s happening in terms of upcoming projects and operations. In the development and construction

industries, there are always risks involved, so Tony makes sure he is transparent and upfront with everyone on each unique issue.

“We say to people that every project has a start and a finish; however, the end result is the product of the upfront planning and analysis and the quality of decision-making when challenges and issues arise throughout the project’s delivery. Problems and challenges are inevitable in our game, and trying to hide them does not result in the best outcome. We’ve learned over the years that people appreciate being informed about issues upfront. Disclosure is an important part of the trust-building process, and that’s how we get through it and those ‘in between bits’ that are crucial to the finish.

“The riskiest part of every project is the start. When undertaking initial due diligence on a project, there are a myriad of issues that could prevent the project from



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proceeding. This being the case, we always use our own capital and time during the initial due diligence period. Our investors know this, and I think it is one of the reasons why they trust us. As you would expect, some projects have performed better than others over the past 20 years; however, we have never lost any investor capital and we would like to keep it this way. All projects carry a level of risk; our investors know that and we spell it out to them. Like our consultants, our investors believe in what we do and they’re part of our big family.”

Above all, Tony would like to leave a legacy behind with Devwest. “It’s not just the buildings; it’s the people, it’s the families, it’s the children,” Tony explains. “I can’t wait to see the company legacy pass through to the upcoming generations. If managed correctly, it can be a generational thing that doesn’t stop; it just keeps going.

“I look at people like Richard Branson who have taken the

families along as well. They haven’t given them a golden spoon. They have made them work and earn their position in the company; it doesn’t just come because Dad owned the company or Mum owned the company. You’ve got to earn your place, and if the guy next to you does a better job, well, then, they are the first one to come up the ladder and they will be the ones that get paid a bit more. You don’t just get it because you’re born into it; you’ve got to earn it.

“I came from a family who were all government workers and I was the first black sheep, as they said in those days. It’s an education every day in what we do here at Devwest. That’s what I love about it. I get up in the morning and my wife, Cheryl, says, ‘Can’t you stay home and have breakfast with me?’ but I’ve got to get to work; I’m excited, so I’ve got to go. Sometimes she understands me and sometimes she doesn’t, but that’s who we are and what we do. We just love it.”



“Norton & Smalles have had a long association with Devwest. It has always been a pleasure to deal with Tony, Damon, and Chad and we wish them ongoing success.” - Chris Smalles, Managing Partner, Norton & Smalles

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