

Same difference

ANTON POTGIETER AND JAMES HERBST
HEAD UP HUGE TELECOM, VERY SUCCESS-
FULLY, BUT THE TWO PERSONALITIES ARE
SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT.

words by **SAMANTHA PERRY** photo by **SUZANNE GELL**

Anton Potgieter started Telepassport in 1993 offering international call-back services. In 1997, he expanded the business into least-cost routing (LCR) and, in 2004, started moving towards a full managed services offering. A Cape-based entrepreneur, Potgieter's grandfather provided the funding he needed to get the venture off the ground.



DOLLAR SIGNS Anton Potgieter (left) and James Herbst are having loads of fun – and making tons of cash too.

Fast-forward to 2006 and Potgieter finally agrees to a meeting with corporate financier and dealmaker James Herbst. Says Potgieter: "I only agreed to meet him so I could say no to his face." Herbst, who doesn't like to take no for an answer, had apparently called about ten times, wanting to discuss buying Telepassport.

Fast-forward again to July 2008, and Potgieter and Herbst are now CEO and group financial director respectively of Alt-X listed Huge Telecom Group. They've just announced the introduction of a mobile advertising product (Eyeballs Mobile Advertising) and are in the throes of trying to block MTN's acquisition of the 59 percent of iTalk Cellular it doesn't own, which Huge announced it intended to acquire in November 2007. The group's maiden results, announced in May, were solid.

Complementary skills

Where Herbst is brash, Potgieter is more reserved (although not when he gets a bee in his bonnet, we're told). Where Herbst is overconfident, very vocal and outspoken, Potgieter is more considered and self-effacing. Not exactly a recipe for a great partnership, at first glance anyway.

"My first impression of James was that he's incredibly tenacious, professional and has an ability that I sometimes don't have to turn a deal positive. When I first saw him, he wanted to buy Telepassport. His first approach was, 'Where are you guys in terms of your big picture and what will it take to buy you?' I was really

impressed and went from listening to be polite, to asking when we could meet again."

Says Herbst: "Anton is a marathon runner – he's there for the long term. He's a slow-and-steady-wins-the-race kind of guy, while I'm the guy standing on a par five with a potential shot for two and I take it. I'm the risk-taker and can be very opportunistic."

Potgieter says he's pretty good at making money, while "James is helluva good at making money from that money."

"He's a good corporate financier and the best negotiator I've ever met. Heck, he got Telepassport out of me. I'm too honest, too straight-forward and a rotten poker player," he admits.

Both have an inability to take no for an answer. And both see their role and involvement with Huge Telecom as a long-term commitment. Both are also perfectionists. "There's a right way to do things and a wrong way; there's no middle ground," Potgieter points out.

Herbst loves to talk. Once he gets onto a subject he's passionate about, he'll happily bend your ear for hours. Potgieter prefers to get to the point, politely and charmingly, of course, but to the point nevertheless.

"James and I discuss everything," says Potgieter. "We touch base a couple of times a day when we're in the same town. We work on a double positive system – if one disagrees, we resolve it rather than override it. Once we're in agreement, we go off and do what we need to do separately. There's not a lot we do together. It would be a waste of resources because

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ANTON POTGIETER

we have differing approaches and skills and it's easy to see who should do what."

Says Herbst: "We have a deep-rooted mutual respect. If you start without respect, one [partner] will always undermine the other. One of the key things for me when getting involved with Anton was Anton. I've been in relationships before that ended in divorce. The second time around I wanted a partner who would not necessarily agree with me, but who would work with me, as opposed to having their own agenda. And it's working very well."

"Anton is far more analytical, far more of a visionary than I am. If anything, I bring a skill set that he doesn't have. He's far more well-rounded than I am," he adds.

Keeping it real

Both Herbst and Potgieter admit that they're having a lot of fun. Says Potgieter: "Our goal and vision is 100 percent aligned, we're 100 percent clear on what we're doing and where we're going. We're here to shoot the lights out of everyone; we're not here to run a mediocre company that generates reasonable returns. We're both working for fun and achievement. It's nice doing a good job and nice to see the value building. We're at the creative stage. It's like sculpting – the money is not the point." Based on

everything the duo have accomplished since meeting 17 months ago, they're having fun, but aiming to take over the world at the same time.

As Herbst notes: if the two of them had the same skills, it probably wouldn't work. That it does work is clear from Huge Telecom's most recent results. *Brainstorm* will certainly keep an eye out to see what these two get up to next. **B**



Huge Group statistics

LISTED: On the Alt-X on 8 August 2007

ORDINARY SHARES IN ISSUE: 106 760 000

REPORTING PERIOD: February to February

REVENUE TO 29 FEBRUARY 2008: R243 million

HUGE GROUP OWNS:

- 100 percent of Huge Telecom, which owns 49 percent of Telepassport.
- 25 percent of Eyeballs Mobile Advertising