

Predicting the future

The South African company BrandsEye is a pioneer in opinion mining. This company analyses social media users' conversations to accurately predict the future.

South Africa-based opinion mining company BrandsEye is on a path of rapid global expansion. Headquartered in Cape Town and soon opening offices in London, Dubai and the US, the novel start-up uses a proprietary mix of search algorithms, crowd-sourcing and machine learning to mine data from online conversations to predict future outcomes.

Having already accurately predicted the outcomes of the UK Brexit vote as well as the 2016 US presidential election, BrandsEye is proving that meaningful, predictive insights can be gained from thorough analyses of online interactions. **Founder Craig Raw** explains how the company successfully predicts the future.

What did you do prior to starting your own business?

I've actually spent very little time not running my own businesses. Prior to BrandsEye I spent my time building the digital agency Quirk, which we sold to Nasdaq- and LSE-listed marketing communications company WPP in 2014. Quirk was an amazing experience with many learnings I'm trying to put into practice now.

Where did the idea for BrandsEye come from?

In 2006, before social media, came blogs

and with them customers got the ability to talk to brands and each other about their experiences. At Quirk we wanted our clients to be able to take part in this conversation and so we built a tool to find and interpret it. That tool became BrandsEye.

What motivated you to turn it into a business?

Quirk was actually never intended to be a digital agency, but a software business. Our timing was off though – back in the early 2000s websites were the only successful internet product. When we created the tool that became BrandsEye, we saw a chance to build a great software business and realise that vision. And as an engineer, I was really intrigued by the

technical challenges of understanding the wealth of online conversation.

When did you officially start operating and how did you make your first sale?

I wrote the first version of the software in 2006

but we only started operating in 2007. BrandsEye operated out of Quirk's offices for the first few years, and officially became its own company in 2011.

Our first sale was to one of Quirk's clients. It was a very niche product initially until the rise of social media. I think we started out with some great clients who were prepared to experiment with us!

Even if you have a great product, the market is not always ready when you want it to be.

HOW BRANDSEYE MINES OPINIONS:

1. FIRST IT DRILLS

BrandsEye continuously seeks, gathers and stores mentions based on predefined criteria across online, social, print and broadcast media.

2. ALGORITHMS THEN SIFT AND SELECT
Sophisticated machine-learning algorithms evaluate each mention to ensure relevance and the discovery of useful metadata.

3. THE CROWD VERIFIES SENTIMENT AND TOPICS

A statistically random selection of opinions enables a 99% confidence level with a 1.75% error margin. This is fed to the group's crowdsourcing platform, the Crowd. The Crowd will accurately verify and rate both the sentiments contained in the opinions and the topics driving that sentiment.

4. FINALLY, THE COMPANY VISUALISES THE DATA

Data is "brought to life" in a customisable interface with a wide range of analysis tools.

How did you get funding to get started?

BrandsEye's incubation inside of Quirk for the first few years meant it was in a fantastic environment to allow the real innovation to occur. Most of the time, the really good ideas only emerge after you've been working in the space for a while, and external funding creates pressure which can

The Opinion Mining Company.

BrandsEye (Pty) Ltd, Registered number: 2011/000295/07
Directors: R. C. Stokes, C. K. Raw, E. M. de Villiers (UK),
G. Adams (US) and J. P. Kloppers

Cape Town +27 21 467 5960
Johannesburg +27 11 017 4250
Dubai +27 14 372 1352

contact@brandseye.com
www.brandseye.com



Craig Raw
Founder of BrandsEye



Jean-Pierre Kloppers
CEO of BrandsEye

In June, BrandsEye founder Craig Raw and CEO Jean-Pierre Kloppers were announced overall winner of the 2017 FNB Business Innovation Awards, held in partnership with Endeavor South Africa. "Winning this means we get to take a step further in globalising our offering," Raw said at the time. BrandsEye will be sponsored by FNB to attend the Endeavor International Selection Panel to be held in New York, USA, this September.

Q & A:

limit that in the quest for commercialisation.

In BrandsEye's case, our idea of understanding social sentiment through crowdsourcing emerged from using Quirk's interns to do this work!

What have been the three biggest difficulties you've had to overcome?

First, you have to be doing something truly unique within your market, and for an internet business you have a global market to consider. To achieve this, you will need to take risks and experiment with ideas that some people will consider non-starters.

Many people still consider our crowdsourcing approach to understanding sentiment somewhat crazy and unworkable at scale, even though we've proved it countless times.

Second, getting your message out into an increasingly cluttered and distracted market is challenging.

Third, you need to have self-belief. BrandsEye has had many periods where we have been searching for the next level of growth. Belief in our vision and value has

been needed every time. Even if you have a great product, the market is not always ready when you want it to be.

Biggest lesson learnt?

Keep innovating. Businesses that stop innovating are dying – they just don't realise it yet.

How tough is competition in your sector, and what differentiates you from others?

BrandsEye used to compete in the online reputation monitoring (ORM) sector, which is largely commoditised and very competitive now. However, our ability to accurately understand online sentiment and the topics that drive it give us an unparalleled view into the world's largest source of public opinion. We call this opinion mining, and here our clients are different – think chief financial officers and not chief marketing officers. So our challenge is not competition, but rather getting the market to understand this new capability.

What is the best business advice you've ever received?

Right now that would have to be author Peter Drucker's quote: "Business has only two functions – marketing and innovation. All the rest are costs."

What was unexpected?

The immense amount of support and assistance from senior business people around the world. I am consistently surprised by the opportunities these connections afford us.

How do you stay motivated?

Running your own business is challenging but also very rewarding – there is simply no substitute for going after and achieving your own vision in whatever you do. Second, BrandsEye's crowdsourcing approach puts money into the hands of people who have few other options to earn it. This continues to be a source of motivation for me.

What are your non-work habits that help you with your work/life balance?

A good family life is critical. If you lose that along the way, you've lost. I also love kitesurfing and mountain biking to stay fit and in nature. ■

editorial@finweek.co.za