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PRIVATE PROPERTY

Aleit Swanepoel was well on his way to capturing the lucrative wedding market when we last spoke to him in 2007, but what he's achieved since then with the Aleit Group is truly impressive. Through a recession, at a time when most people in the wedding and eventing industry were seeing the effects of corporate budget cuts and reduced consumer spending, Swanepoel has seen only opportunity.

He's refocused the business's wedding market, built the eventing division, opened a tertiary education institution, gone into food and beverages, launched a magazine, grown a travel company and expanded Aleit online shopping. "All of these things have been a natural progression for the company - our presence in one market identifies opportunities in another. It's how the Aleit Group has always grown," he says simply.

Survival lies in flexibility

That's not to say that the business didn't feel the effects of the recession. It did, as Swanepoel explains, "Wedding budgets were cut drastically and South Africa lost its status in the international market as a cheap destination. In 2007 some 70% of the weddings we did were for international clients, and that had to change."

It's the kind of thing that would sink most businesses, particularly those positioned to service an international clientele. But survival lies in flexibility and Swanepoel has that in spades. He repositioned the company for the high-end South African market - something that happened easily as he'd established a reputable brand by that stage - and he took the wedding services overseas.

"We also focused on growing the corporate eventing side of the business, expanding into the international market there as well," he adds. Today, eventing accounts for 55% of the business.

Diversifying into new revenue streams

Swanepoel also identified several opportunities to develop new revenue streams related to the wedding and eventing industry. Stir Food was launched in 2009. "We saw the opportunity to custom-make food for our high profile clients but we also service non-Aleit events which is why we branded it differently," he explains. In the same year and for similar reasons the Aleit Group also launched Shake and Serve Bar and Staff, while in 2010 Aleit Travel was launched in association with Gilt-Edge to service clients' car hire, itinerary, flight and hospitality booking needs.

The establishment of the Aleit Academy in 2008 is a mark of the extent to which Swanepoel influences, if not leads, the local industry. "It allows us to train staff to the standard that we need in our own company and helps raise the standard of qualifications in the industry," he says. It's also filled a gap in the market for a combined food, service and event management institution that offers great hands-on work experience. The Aleit Group employs around 80% of the academy's graduates.

There are undoubtedly challenges to running such a diverse group, but Swanepoel takes these in his stride. He says philosophically, "One of our biggest challenges is people copying our trends and our business model and although I find that maddening sometimes, there's nothing you can do about it. There will always be competition. You just have to make sure you stay ahead." This is where he focuses his considerable energy. □



RINGING THE CHANGES

The Aleit Group has remained a leader in the wedding market, and serves as a case study for how to diversify a business successfully without losing focus.

Aleit's secrets to staying ahead

- » Remaining true to its vision of being a boutique service company
- » Being personally available to staff and clients - Swanepoel attends every wedding and most events, even if it's just to drop in and check on things
- » Fanatical devotion to service - Swanepoel takes any complaint extremely personally
- » Spotting trends and challenges early on and changing tack
- » Identifying and maximising opportunities in related areas of business.



"If there is one thing I have learnt during this journey, it's that entrepreneurship can be a lonely road to travel. You need to have passion, perseverance and persistence. Our turnover grows monthly, and it's because we never give up."

- MABAKA MONAKGISI, MBS AIR CONDITIONING AND REFRIGERATION, PROFILED IN 2011