

CASE STUDY



The Chillibreeze Story

Freedom, flexibility and a flat world



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By USHA GANESH

Thomas Friedman would have been happy to see the Chillibreeze business model. The company epitomizes the principles underpinning his bestseller, “The World is Flat”. The virtual content firm and its design division set in the idyllic locales at Shillong in Meghalaya were abuzz with activity. Content was a booming industry and Chillibreeze has done well over this time, building itself with virtual energy...block by block, with writer after writer adding to the vast network that the company was proud of.

Chillibreeze has several other unique features. For one, it has proved without doubt that the world is indeed flat, that opportunities would knock on doors as far apart from each other as Bangalore, Chicago and Shillong. It also embodied the principles underlying path breaking work like The “Joy of Work” and “The Future of Work”. Simply put, each of us worked best in the space we were most comfortable in and thereby created output that was the best that could be produced. “Flatteners” like telecommunication technology and the Internet ensured that we could achieve this utopian dream.

History

Why India? Why Bangalore? Why a bootstrap venture? Here are some of the answers. Ralph and his artist wife, Joanna had travelled to India several times on work and vacation

before 1999. They had several Indian friends who helped them make that decision to move to India. The early days were difficult; paucity of funds was only one of the problems. Funds, one could argue, was the easiest to solve with a good business plan and the venture capital route. But Ralph was very clear that it had to be a bootstrap venture, which was built as they grew. He genuinely believed that it made a company stronger - a belief that has only been reinforced since then.

Chillibreeze emerged as the content division of Stylus Systems in 2004. The first employee at Chillibreeze was a disaster. Perhaps because the firm worked best with self-motivated individuals, Chillibreeze was having a far better experience with freelancers. One of the best, a medical doctor, was about to have a baby and was seeking a job that offered her the independence to work from home. She accepted a full-time job with Chillibreeze and set things in motion for the division. As she puts it, flexibility was what attracted her to Chillibreeze, but the freedom was what made her stay. Others followed. Most joined as freelancers in the network and were handpicked to form the core team with a full-time commitment to the firm.

Even as Chillibreeze was taking shape within Stylus, Ralph was frustrated with the high levels of attrition in the

industry. He could see the enormous investment in people being wasted as they came in and said they wanted to move on. He had toured the north east of India on vacation in 1998. This was arguably the remotest destination in India to set up shop in, not far from China, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal. Determined to find a solution to the attrition problem, he decided to find out if he could set up shop there.

Ralph and Joanna felt that jobs could be brought to the northeast, where there was a sizeable English speaking population. They had a vision of being pioneers in bringing jobs to this region and building a model global company here. Stoically dealing with poverty and rampant unemployment, most people in the northeast are employed with the government. To say the least, it was a challenge to create a high performance work culture or be truly competitive in such an environment.

The Business Model

CONTENT DIVISION

Ralph started out with a vision that involved leveraging the power of the Internet and the talent for content generation that led to energizing and fulfilling careers for many. The vision also involved using the business to create positive social impact. Much of what one sees of Chillibreeze today has evolved with time and experience, and mirrors this vision.

This has been imperative as Chillibreeze uses state-of-the-art, original and paid for software. Customers often outsource part of their design division to Chillibreeze – the team at Shillong is like an extension of these client companies.

The content division is really a vast network of over 200 writers working from different parts of the country that is being anchored by a core team. The core team itself evolved as the network grew and there was a need to have on board top quality coordinators to handle projects, sales and writers. Today, the core team works on the strategy and marketing, regulates and builds the systems, and networks with clients and the network of writers. The systems were all developed on the go. The culture has attracted other like-minded people to the firm. The core team ensures that new recruits display the same traits – independence, a drive to excel and honesty.

A model such as this would really work only if the company developed the talent and skill to filter good writers and keep them on. Chillibreeze has a very good system to separate the good writers from the average, and its editorial team works very hard to check plagiarism.

This model helped Chillibreeze garner more talent than they would have if they had hired writers as full-time employees. Not only has it proved to be financially efficient, it also allows the company the scope to work on a variety of assignments. Further, it also allows for decisions to be made quickly and through consensus.

It has been a challenge though to retain talent as the work that Chillibreeze puts out is essentially freelance. And with a booming content outsourcing market, good writers have no dearth of assignments and often have to refuse work from Chillibreeze because of paucity of time.

DESIGN DIVISION

There is a different model for the design team. Here it is the more traditional office and fixed hours kind of model that one sees. This has been imperative as Chillibreeze uses state-of-the-art, original and paid for software. Customers often outsource part of their design division to Chillibreeze – the team at Shillong is like an extension of these client companies.

Joanna anchors the design team, which now has 23 members who do animation, architectural graphics and graphic design work.

The design division displays the same warmth and trust one sees in the content division. Eager to learn, they share some interesting anecdotes of the first big customer that the division saw. He came down from Philadelphia to train the team to do DTP for his printing company. The entire team turned up in their Sunday-best to find the client walk in to office in shorts. They learnt a lot from him on that trip and even taught him some things – like how to chew betel nut. Today, the team continues to work and grow with this client. The design division is now preparing to spin off from Chillibreeze. In a fitting tribute to Thomas Friedman, it is aptly named 360Flat.

The Chillibreeze Culture

Most Chillibreezers have some common traits. They are independent, they want flexibility, and they are creative and hungry for work. In Chillibreeze, they find a firm that respects their time and work and pays them fairly. What hits you first about Chillibreeze is that everyone sounds like the owner. It does not take you long to work out that there is a strong sense of ownership here.

Ralph and Joanna are always receptive to new ideas; anyone can come up with a brainwave and is empowered to at the very least work on a pilot or sample. This trait has seeped into the company DNA – the core team members exhibit the same openness to ideas.

Another building block at Chillibreeze is fairness to its freelancers. This is a refreshing change as regulars in the content outsourcing business would endorse, in stark contrast to the nightmarish time they have with other firms they supply content to.

The company also follows a strictly non-discriminatory policy. Even though there are no hierarchical levels in the company, everyone knows their places. The management realises that everybody is different and treats each team member differently, keeping in mind their unique strengths and weaknesses. Most importantly, no one plays the blame game. It is all about team effort, for good and for bad.

Unlike other firms which have had a social impact as a by-product or which have contributed to society as part of their corporate social responsibility initiative, Chillibreeze had social impact as an integral part of the vision statement.

Ralph's latest experiment is with collaborative writing. He wants to attempt it both in-house with the core team when doing up their website as well as with external writers for a collaborative e-book on social entrepreneurship.

Strategy

It would appear that the company seemed to thrive on providence more than planning. But there is a clear and conscious strategy for key elements of the value chain.

There is a clear marketing strategy. Use the Internet and unleash the power of reaching out to virtually millions of potential customers. Stylus, O2i and Chillibreeze have consciously never pitched for business outside the Internet.

There is a clear HR strategy – the company believes in finding bright people who are reliable and letting them grow the company. Again, the company's recruiting policy has evolved with the system. As they give work to freelancers, the core team is constantly on the look out for the best among them. They are alert to track those that seem to have the spirit of Chillibreeze...the discipline, passion and enthusiasm as well as a proven track record.

This process has helped to nurture a high performance work culture. There is a palpable buzz that encourages everyone perform and set high standards. The teamwork ensures that everyone is responsible for success. As a reward, the ones that have delivered results have been inducted into the core team.

Social Impact

Unlike other firms which have had a social impact as a by-product or which have contributed to society as part of their corporate social responsibility initiative, Chillibreeze had social impact as an integral part of the vision statement.

The company struggled to get the basics right in Shillong. Whether it is getting their Internet connection up and running or upgrading the skills of their team, comprising mostly locals with negligible work experience, Ralph and Joanna invest an inordinate amount of time with an almost religious zeal powered by the belief that they want to bring jobs to the northeast.

Chillibreeze has also empowered many women through its writers network. These women are highly educated and have chosen to take a break from the workplace to make a better home. Despite technology advances and the widespread prevalence of the Internet, opportunities to work from home are limited.

Way ahead

Chillibreeze is built so that there is never a dull moment. Even as all the above initiatives are getting consolidated, the company is venturing into e-publishing. Again the focus is profit plus social impact. Neither Ralph nor his core team is sure that this is a sustainable model in the long run, but they are sure that they have the winning combination in their credo – freedom, flexibility and a flat world.

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