

# On the fast track



MARC RATCLIFFE

**MRWED has stayed the course, weathered the GFC, and, all the while, delivered quality training.**

**Jayne Munday writes**

AS THE leading trainer of trainers, Queensland-based MRWED has come a long way since starting off as a one-man operation 10 years ago.

The brainchild of entrepreneur Marc Ratcliffe, the company is a registered training organisation which specialises in the delivery of the Certificate IV and Diploma of Training and Assessment.

Since 2000, the organisation has supported more than 12,000 students in training and assessment qualifications.

With operations across the eastern seaboard and a strong presence overseas, MRWED has recently moved to new headquarters to cater for a significant jump in demand.

***"I think many people have put a line through 2009 and said 'that was a shocker'."***

Now located in Morayfield, near Caboolture, the administration centre acts as a multi-functional base for the award-winning business as it continues to increase its foothold in the market, both domestically and, increasingly, internationally.

## READY FOR LAUNCH

Ratcliffe says he first got operations off the ground in 2000 by holding courses in a few places a year in different locations.

Come 2005, there was a shift in strategy to open new centres across Australia, including Sydney, Melbourne, Newcastle and Adelaide.

"This was the right move and a bold move. While it was a big initial investment it allowed us to control costs in the long run," Ratcliffe says.

"We do not have presence in Western Australia in a great way, but our five centres are humming along nicely."

The main driver behind MRWED's phenomenal growth is its narrow focus and specialised offerings, Ratcliffe believes.

"One of the things that work in our favour is that we offer a mandatory qualification. So there is a need to be trained.

"Word of mouth has also seen us grow — with more than half of business coming from referrals — but it is the demand in qualifications which has really fuelled growth in the company," he says.

Ratcliffe says a fierce commitment to continuous improvement has allowed the business to remain on top.

"We always plan to be ahead of the pack, such as using social media, more ICT in the office space and innovative marketing.

"We specialise in this [training], and have a narrow focus. So any improvements will be incremental on our specialised offerings; ensuring they are the best," he says.

#### OFF AND RUNNING

While MRWED initially focused on laying foundations in Australia, Ratcliffe says the company has widened its scope over the past three years.

By strategically re-packaging its courses, it has been able to successfully translate services to Singapore, the United States, India, Tanzania, Mali, Indonesia and, most recently, Papua New Guinea.

"We have been partnering with organisations right around the world. Singapore has been the longest international market for us — since 2006," Ratcliffe says.

In 2008, MRWED made its move on the Indian market.

"This was a lot more strategic. But I think this is the next big place for training and I really want to crack this market further. India is really yearning for education opportunities," Ratcliffe explains.

#### EASY RUNNING

Nutting out an area of speciality is one thing, but receiving industry recognition for the hard yards is what really propelled MRWED to the forefront of the business scene.

According to Ratcliffe, 2009 was the most awarded year for the company.

In addition to being ranked 391 in the 2009 *Queensland 400* (and 373 in 2010), MRWED has won various awards in the past year.

The business was ranked 8th in the top-10 places to work in Australia by *BRW* magazine in the same week Ratcliffe was named one of the Top 10 Young Trainers of the Year by US publication *Training Magazine*.

Clearly pleased with his personal win, Ratcliffe says victory is not just about commercial success, but the outcome for candidates.

"It's judged on your influence on the team. In 2008, our work internationally — such as Indonesia — saw profound changes in people's lives. I think this is what got me over the edge," he says.

MRWED was also the winner of the 2009 Australian Business Award for 'Enterprise', for its outstanding commercial success and sustained growth.

It also scooped wins at the Excellence in Business Awards for the Caboolture region, including best macro business.

Essentially, in 2009 MRWED won recognition on all four levels: international, national, state and local.

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Proving it is no industry lightweight, it also performed well across various facets of business.

"Some businesses only perform well in one area — we also had both elements of 'in classroom performance' and 'overall business performance'," Ratcliffe says.

#### HARD YARDS

Despite a solid business plan and stream of accolades, MRWED was not immune to the global financial crisis (GFC).

Ratcliffe says he knew when the GFC had hit, and admits he was worried because training is generally one of the first things to be cut back when the economy slows.

"It was not until September that we really felt it, so I guess we rode it out well," he says.

While government stimulus packages were beneficial to some, Ratcliffe says the stimulus was very bad for MRWED.

"The stimulus money for training went to the states," he says.

"Previously, people could choose their trainer, but after June we were competing against free training.

"Queensland had priority courses, but after June, we were not deemed priority.

"On the wider scale it was good for the economy, but there were many isolated cases and we were caught up in this."

While it was a tough quarter for MRWED,

Ratcliffe says things are starting to bounce back and 2010 is already proving better than the same time last year.

#### HOME COURT ADVANTAGE

When questioned on what makes the Sunshine State such a promising launching pad for business, Ratcliffe says Queensland really gives the impression "it is possible".

"Queensland businesses have always tended to punch above their weight, and the climate means there are more productive days," he says.

While it is still only early days of the new decade, MRWED is looking forward to yet another positive year.

"I think many people have put a line through 2009 and said 'that was a shocker'.

"Now, confidence is returning and people

are prepared to invest in themselves.

"Businesses are also wanting highly motivated staff, and companies like BHP and Rio Tinto are investing in training so they will be ahead when the market picks up and business takes off again," Ratcliffe says.

A former Brisbane secondary school teacher, Ratcliffe certainly put in the hard yards before going out on a limb and launching his business.

The name itself pays tribute to his sole efforts upon inception, with MRWED translating to: Marc Ratcliffe Workplace Education and Development.

Now celebrating 10 successful years in the business, Ratcliffe shares his top tips for SME owners.

"Like anything, you have to love what you do. If you don't really enjoy it, you will start seeing problems. Whether you are an owner like myself or franchisee, you have to be committed to a product and believe in it.

"Continue to invest in yourself and don't close down. Running a business can be lonely at times. Make sure you continue reading, interacting with podcasts and attending conferences. People can see your confidence, so invest in yourself and your people.

"Don't risk more than you can use. We employed some calculated risks around expansion. But make sure you do your research and get solid advice," he says. **Q**



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