

Global Growth

**An Interview with Dean Wilson,
Chief Executive Officer, International Division, Active International**

EDITORS' NOTE Dean Wilson joined Active International in 2002 and in 2016 became Chief Executive Officer of the International Division. He has worked in the media industry since graduating from Leeds University in 1994. Prior to joining Active International, he held various commercial roles at Television Sales and Marketing Services Ltd., Channel Four Television Corporation and ITV Digital.



Dean Wilson

What have been the keys to Active's success and will you discuss the entrepreneurial culture within the firm?

One of the critical success factors for us as a business has been independence and our private ownership. As a result, we have been able to adapt and change and make quick decisions as the market has evolved. We have shareholders and investors who are connected to a fast-changing landscape in the media environment. They make quick decisions on our direction and what we're able to do. They are entrepreneurs at heart, having built this organization from nothing, so they always have a hunger for building the next thing. These have been key ingredients and consistent factors in our growth story.

Will you discuss the firm's evolution from its origins in barter and how do you define the business today?

Our origins are rooted in trade and buying underperforming assets and inventory from customers. That still remains a critical part of our core today. Some of our long-standing clients still use us primarily for that and it's a key part of their business model. It provides them with a competitive advantage, so that isn't ever going to go away.

What we have done over time is broaden our services and solutions. One of the key elements that encapsulates where we are today is that we're really able to provide commercially agile solutions to our customers. We have the underperforming assets solution and know how we can help businesses with these. However, we have also been able to provide solutions to airline companies and hotels to refine how they use their inventory and assets with the customers we bring them. We've been able to trade with other companies in professional services, and other categories like energy.

The breadth of businesses we have gotten involved with has widened over time. If we look at our roots, trading with the media providers is still a critical part of who we are, but how we

serve our clients beyond that benefit has evolved from just underperforming asset assistance to a much broader range of products and services. Today, we're in a position where most of the teams talk about commercially agile solutions and helping our customers achieve more of what they want for their businesses. In this fast-paced environment where things are changing quickly, they're looking for Active to provide them with ways and means to create extra value for their businesses.

Will you highlight Active's global footprint and which areas offer the greatest opportunities for growth?

Within international, the Canadian and Mexican businesses are strategically important in Active having a strong offering to our customers in North America. Our Western European business is also really robust and we have enjoyed tremendous growth in the U.K. and in France. We have a business in Spain that has been growing for several years and we're reaching a critical tipping point there where we can become a bigger business. We have also opened a second office in Hamburg.

Further afield, in Asia-Pacific, Australia has been a country where we have been able to establish strong credentials in the marketplace and we're now well positioned for several years of decent growth. We're now looking at ways to invest and expand in Australia and use that as a base to see what else we can do in that region.

Do you need to have offices within those markets in order to serve clients most effectively?

In most of the main markets, we have a local team with local leadership on the ground that is supported by an international management team. I am based in London with our international CFO; we have a global sales director based in Dusseldorf; and we have a global media director based in New York along with our VP of Finance.

We have a team that helps connect and support all of the offices, but it starts with the managing director and a local team because the majority of the customer, media and agency relationships that are crucial to the smooth running of our business are held locally.

Eighty percent of all of our revenues are local to each market. We have some global clients in multiple territories, but like most networks, the majority of the billing and income are local.

Our businesses are locally run and are culturally sensitive alongside an international team that provides strategic direction, alignment and support. A key aim for my team is to connect the offices together, promote collaboration and represent our international interests in New York effectively.

How well understood is Active's business today?

Our industry has definitely grown up and is more widely known and understood across the world in general. The U.S. and U.K. are mature markets and there is a high level of awareness of our industry. For other markets, it has been a journey. In Spain, it's about educating, meeting customers and explaining our business model and what value we can bring to them, and as a small B-to-B business, that will be a work in progress for quite some time.

France and Australia are in between – they are now well-established and well-known markets and are making that journey towards wider acceptance like in the U.S. and U.K.

Different cultures adopt this model at different rates, so more of the developed countries have the mindset of being quite accepting of different business models, so they got there quicker.

Some of this relates to how long we have been there educating the market and some of it is cultural but, overall, we're in a great place towards acceptance.

Are you generally working with clients at multiple layers within the company and, as Active has become more of a financial solutions-based company, has that changed the level at which you need to have the client relationship?

Absolutely. Thirty years ago, our key stakeholder for our proposition was the Chief Financial Officer, but today we definitely have as much engagement as we can throughout an organization. The CFO may be our advocate and sponsor, but we want to know the general management and have a relationship with them so they understand the value our brand brings to their brand. Just as importantly, we want to have an engagement with the people who are responsible for the media and marketing budgets because they are the people we work with the most day to day to have a successful relationship.

The most successful relationships we have are with those companies where we have multiple touch points in finance, general management, marketing and marketing procurement. ●