

# A man of letters

The recent code changes around the UK have given phone numbers a bad name. Now Henry Newrick says it's time we added some letters. **Victoria Greenhalgh** asked him what he means.

**W**e are sitting in the Institute of Directors. New Zealand entrepreneur Henry Newrick is attempting to turn my name into a telephone number.

He impressively fires off the list of digits that correspond with the letters of my name, and I wonder for the first time how it would feel to have a telephone number of 0870 VICTORIA. With the complicated changing of numbers in the UK and the

(easy-to-remember-words standing in for numbers), but his journey from past to present is no ordinary tale of climbing the corporate ladder.

Ruled by the whims of a maverick nature, he dropped out of a law degree in 1966 and threw himself into the world of publishing. His first success was founding the Student Guide to New Zealand and a series of challenging newsletters which



Henry Newrick – Natural Born Entrepreneur  
He believes DialABC will make his shareholders millions

threat of a further change in several years time, the simplicity of the idea is appealing.

Coming up with money-spinning projects is nothing new for a man whose business career has yo-yoed between peaks of outstanding success and the deepest troughs.

At the age of 11, when most schoolboys are still playing in tree-houses, Henry Newrick was already planning his first business opportunity. He founded a school newsletter and sold it for 1d a copy.

That was 42 years ago, and with a string of businesses now under his belt and a mention in Who's Who, he's still at it.

'I'm an entrepreneur, because I get bored very quickly,' says Newrick, rapidly. 'I'm excited by new ideas, and want to bring them to success, but then I need to move on to new projects.'

His current passion DialABC.co.uk, sells alpha-numeric telephone numbers

sent ripples through the traditional Kiwi publishing community.

Success continued with the founding of the National Business Review at the age of 23. This is now the leading business publication in New Zealand and worth an estimated \$30 million.

'That was over 30 years ago, but I use the same principles of marketing today. The mediums may have changed, but everything else remains the same.'

## In the US and New Zealand, letters are commonplace. I just couldn't understand why Europe stuck to numbers

Money-raising and marketing ventures followed, including forays into art publishing, while Newrick became recognised as the highest-paid advertising sales person in New Zealand.

His Midas touch, however, was running out, and in 1988 the bubble burst while he was turning a publishing company's \$15,000 overdraft into a £3 million annual turnover. It coincided with the crash of

1987, in which over 50 per cent of New Zealand companies went broke, and Newrick's was among them.

Undeterred, his relentless desire for new ventures took over. 'I could have laid down and played dead but I decided to stand up and take the world on again.'

So Newrick returned to what he does best. He founded a newsletter which ended up with subscribers in 40 countries, and was one of the founders of 'Pavement', New Zealand's leading cultural and fashion magazine. In 1994 he was headhunted to save a loss making publishing group in Singapore.

In 1995 he came to the UK as CEO designate of Caribbean Marine Recovery, a company that was planning to list on the AIM market. The flotation did not proceed when the company, which was to retrieve lost treasures from the sea, entered into a private partnership.

Five years later and having founded two Fine Art Publishing companies, he is now targeting the UK with dialABC.co.uk.

So how did this entrepreneurial whiz come across his new venture? 'I was making a telephone call in the UK, where I am also a citizen, and looking at those letters above the numbers, and wondered why hardly anyone here uses alpha-numeric numbers. In the US and New Zealand, they are commonplace. I just couldn't understand why Europe stuck to numbers.'

Without hesitation, Newrick called British Telecom, determined to find out why. The response of the telecom giant was just what Newrick, whose mind is generally ten steps ahead of everybody else's, initially thought. There was little history of their use since 1966 when the exchanges went automatic. There had also been no consistency in British phone handsets, until OFTEL recommended standardisation in 1996.

'They could see the potential in alpha-numerics, which has proved so successful elsewhere,' says Newrick. 'In the US, all numbers are kept in a central registry and are controlled by "respectable organisations". Until recently in the UK, it was only BT who dispensed the numbers, but now OFTEL has taken charge.'

'The time was right for an interface between the consumers and the telephone

companies and so here we are. Around 35 per cent of telephone numbers translate into words and that's the gold we are mining. Until now it has been expensive and time-consuming to get an alpha-numeric number.'

So why would a company be willing to part with cash to get a number that might be 0870 EASYJET or 0870 FLOWERS?

'They are personal and memorable and

each time you dial, you reinforce that name,' he enthuses. 'They are non-geographic and portable so that wherever you move around the UK, you can keep the same number. They should also appreciate in value just like the cherished car number plates.'

Newrick's wealth of business experience is being harnessed by this project which he claims could potentially make millions. 'There is no point pushing alpha-numerics at the public without making them aware of the benefits,' he says. 'In 1997, the Personal Number Company ran big ads for their alpha-numerics but they failed to educate.'

'07000 follow-me numbers also created interest but are expensive at up to 30p a minute. Our numbers are standard national rate and you pay a monthly line subscription. BT is currently charging 30 per cent more for the same service so we are offering a competitive deal.'

Since starting the project in June 1999, Newrick has dedicated himself to marketing and researching the many number combinations. He now has full-time researchers but can still reel off alpha-numerics as quickly as Carol Vordeman added up on 'Countdown'. 'We have some numbers such as 0870 PHILIPS which we will offer directly to the companies.'

In an attempt to reach the maximum

audience, Newrick has taken what he refers to as 'a blitzkrieg' approach using the Internet, on-line auctions, telemarketing and individual agents around the country. 'You can either go slowly or for hyper-growth. This business needs a fast momentum for it to take off. We're firing on all cylinders and are looking to place around 500 numbers per week.'

Since the March launch, the site alone has attracted 2,000 e-mail enquiries and on-line auctions are part of the strategy.

## People here have this fear of Americanisation and drive-in McDonalds

Earlier this month, there was much publicity about QXL auctioning numbers for DialABC but Newrick was not pleased with the results. 'Perhaps it was too early,' he suggests, 'and from now on, we will do the auctions ourselves.'

Combining his job as a publishing consultant in Poland with running DialABC from the Hove headquarters, Newrick is energised by his new ventures. 'Luckily, my girlfriend lives in Poland as I'm rarely out of the office before 2am at the moment.'

'However, I'm a man on a mission because I truly believe in this project. However big the company becomes, I intend to keep the core staff down to

around seven or eight and outsource the rest, because over-expansion is where growing businesses go wrong.'

Right now he wants to make the business strong in the UK before expanding into Europe. He is aware that as a US idea, alpha-numerics may take a while to catch on until people see the benefits. 'People here have this fear of Americanisation and drive-in McDonalds, but some parts of the culture are worth adopting and easy-to-remember phone numbers are one.'

Newrick has several other concepts brewing but is keeping them to himself for now. 'I think of new marketing ideas all the time.'

On saying that, he is inspired by another thought and grabbing a pad from his briefcase, scribbles it down. Some of his visions will come to fruition, some will fail and some will never make it off the page. But an entrepreneur like Henry Newrick will certainly be plotting out another success story before the ink has dried from the previous one. **BAG**

*www.dialabc.co.uk*  
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