

Gamble pays off for Nosheen as Research.bm marks fifth birthday

By Jonathan Kent

Nosheen Syed is the first to admit that she took a major gamble when she abandoned a successful career in market research in North America to head up a Bermuda start-up company with no clients and no staff.

That company was Research.bm and as staff and clients prepare to celebrate the firm's fifth birthday this week, Ms Syed can say her gamble paid off.

The company now boasts a clientele including many of the Island's top companies and Government ministries. It hires a diverse group of around 30 part-timers to staff the only locally based research call centre in Bermuda.

Ms Syed explained yesterday how she started from scratch and the philosophy behind the successful development of the company over the past five years.

"It was certainly the biggest risk I've ever taken, but sometimes in life you have to take risks," Ms Syed, who was head-hunted after holding senior positions with research firms in Ottawa, Vancouver and New York, said.

"The first thing I wanted to do was to look at competitors and what they were doing and improve on it. I saw there were companies who were doing market research, who were also advertising agencies."

Ms Syed said if the same company was promoting a client and assessing how that client and its products were perceived, then there was clear conflict of interests.

So she decided that Research.bm would focus entirely on market research.

Next she noticed that rivals were regularly outsourcing their telephone poll work to call centres based in Canada.

"We asked people whether they would be more likely to take a call from a local person, or someone from overseas," Ms Syed said. "When the answers came back, it was clear that not only would people be more likely to take a call from a local person, but they would also be far more likely to give a full, honest and accurate answer.

Our client retention is 100 percent so it is clear there was a hunger for market research done in a professional way.'

"So for us, there was no option, because we did not want to compromise on quality."

The people who make the calls from the company's headquarters in Sterling House are professionals in other fields, including police cadets, bankers, civil servants and accountants, who work their shifts for Research.bm during weekends and evenings.

Most of the company's clients come from the private sector, including CellularOne, M3 Wireless, Logic Communications, TeleBermuda International, CableVision, Cable & Wireless, Transact, SBI, Northrock, Digicel and Quantum. But Government is also a major customer and there is also some work from non-profit organisations.

The company doesn't just use the phone to glean its information. It also uses mail and online surveys for its quantitative research.

"We also use intercept studies, where they are appropriate - that is talking to people directly, in person," Ms Syed said. "For example, after they have just been served at a bank we can ask them about their customer experience. Or if we're asking people what they think about the bus service, we can go and talk to people waiting at the bus terminal."

Research.bm also does "qualitative research" through focus groups and personal interviews. The aim of the focus groups is to ask pertinent questions to elicit responses that explain the motives and desires behind their



Nosheen Syed: Research.bm CEO.

habits. The carefully crafted questions are part of what is called "projective technique".

Clients can witness this group discussions, watching them through a two-way mirror, and hear how their company is perceived. Customers are also welcomed to see callers carrying out a telephone survey.

"Mystery research" is another branch of Research.bm that is particularly popular with banks and restaurants.

"We have more than 100 'mystery shoppers', who will go out and shop for a product such as a mortgage," Ms Syed said. "They can find out the negotiated rate and see who gives them the best service and report back telling us which mortgage they would have gone for, if they'd really been looking for a mortgage.

"We also have people who go out for a meal for us and report on the food, the service and the overall experience.

"We never tell the mystery shoppers which company they are working for, however."

Ms Syed, who has 14 years' experience in market research, is educated in psychology and statistics and is a certified group moderator. She is backed up by a staff including research associate Pippa Knap, office manager Tina Lima, field team supervisor Peter King, senior data analyst Susan MacDonald, junior data analyst Leslie Steede and administrator Jecoa Tucker.

Looking back over the past five years, Ms Syed said: "We have taken the North American market research model and we've brought it to the Island. We are not an advertising agency, but we can work with advertising agencies to help our clients. Our client retention is 100 percent so it is clear there was a hunger for market research done in a professional way."