PiggyBee

Share your trunk

David Vuylsteke is the brain behind PiggyBee, an online platform that matches supply and demand for the transport of parcels. "The idea behind my concept fits perfectly into the sharing economy", says David. "In fact, we make sure that trips that are going to happen anyway have a little extra meaning."

David Vuylsteke is an entrepreneur in heart and soul. He started by renting out sound & light equipment, and in that capacity, he often travelled with music bands. In 2001, he started an online business for the sale of that kind of equipment: in those days, that was already pretty disruptive. In 2010, an event triggered the creation of his online PiggyBee platform: he needed a product from South Africa but couldn't immediately find anyone nearby who could bring it to Belgium. "Then I realized that we needed a system to make use of trips that are already planned. Because if I could ask all travellers between South Africa and Belgium if they would bring that package, then I would definitely find a solution."

When did you launch the system?

In April 2012 the first version went online. I chose the name PiggyBee because it refers to piggyback. The system is very simple and accessible. Through the website piggybee.com you can ask for something to be transported, or indicate that you want to take something with you. It fits perfectly into the idea of the sharing economy: call it crowdshipping or peer to peer shipping. For me, the essence is: 'share your trunk'. We want to ensure that people can send a parcel or have it carried by others who would have travelled that distance anyway. In the beginning, I focused on international journeys, but the system works locally too. The potential is enormous: just think how many people make a long trip for their work or for private reasons, and how many people commute to work daily. They could also carry an extra parcel for somebody else. Now we have around 2,500 users.

Do you have many competitors? And are you looking to expand abroad?

I was one of the first to start up this kind of platform. Now there are about 5 'serious' competitors using the same idea. I don't consider this concept as competition for the traditional parcels services. We want to deliver parcels between individuals, for whom delivery is not necessarily urgent, and who want to be assisted in a cheap and simple way. It is a different target group and a different approach from the DHLs and FedExs of this world. Perhaps we could dream up some complementary form of collaboration between us. In any case: DHL is already testing a system of 'crowdsourced delivery'. And of course, I consider B2B logistics as a potential next step for PiggyBee.

Wasn't it difficult to set up this kind of new business in Belgium?

No, actually. I started out from the ideal: 'let's launch and then see what will happen'. I didn't come up against insurmountable technical or legal problems. But there are a few things I should mention. It's no problem to transport things within the Schengen area, but outside, it is quite a lot more difficult. And in Belgium, we still don't have a legal framework for paying the 'man in the street' for the services that he provides. The authorities will have to develop a system where any citizen can be paid as a freelancer. That does exist in the USA, and it is said that 40% of the population actually uses it. A phenomenon that you have to contend with here in Belgium is the strongly negative reactions to anything new. For example, look at all the flak Uber has been taking in Brussels. It seems like we do not have the right mindset here for new market developments.

Is not it understandable that people are suspicious? Maybe you are pinching people's jobs. And can you be sure that the system isn't being used by crooks?

You can never guarantee zero risk. But we monitor every individual transaction and screen everyone who joins the system. Furthermore, we are currently setting up a rating system where providers can build up a rating, which gives reassurance to users, and the providers can trade on the status they have built up. Anyway, the sharing economy is not a substitute but a complement to the current systems. Our target group is different from those who use traditional parcels services. On the other hand, I can see opportunities for collaborating with more traditional channels and generating extra business. We still need to find a practical solution for the 'last mile'. For example, someone who has brought something from New York, and lands in Zaventem, but is not going to the end-user; then that person would have to deposit the package there (or somewhere else) or be passed on to the next link in the chain. That might mean Uber, or people who are travelling via carpooling. But if we think about it some more, the train companies and airlines should be able to respond to this type of transport by helping to promote the system. It isn't competition for them: they already have the passengers and the packages would never be transported via the cargo system. So there are plenty of opportunities... as long as people and businesses are open to them and understand the huge benefits they could make out of the sharing economy.

What are the other essential success factors in this form of sharing economy?

To start with, there must be trust in this form of business. It is still new, and so people are still very critical about it. That is normal. Once people's mentality changes, this way of doing business will be very successful, since not only are you expanding the target group enormously, but you can also work on recurrent business. And you can achieve the critical mass more quickly, to recoup the investment faster and make the system grow. Next, you can create a clear legal framework, in which everyone can operate. And then the more rational benefits of the sharing economy can gradually start to permeate: good, reliable service for a low price, which also has a positive impact on the environment since we - in the case of PiggyBee - make extra use of existing trips for transporting parcels. We all have room in our suitcase, so 'share your trunk'.