

Mark Banfield & Associates Consulting (MBAC)

MBAC is a leading niche consultancy practice specialising in health technology. Director, Mark Banfield discusses the importance of health technology and market research.

MBAC was initially formed in 2003, with a focus on transforming the “back office” of medical device companies into a competitive advantage—a unique selling point in an increasingly commoditised market.

“At the time, there were no other consultants working in the sector who were not either accountants or attorneys, so perhaps the appearance of a business consultant, focusing on the sector and specifically within the operations environment, may have been premature.

“This led to me re-entering corporate employment but all the while, I took the time to regroup and re-evaluate the value proposition of MBAC. I continued to develop relationships within the industry and while formally employed, always attempted to utilise a consulting approach within the organisation.

“This involves being an agent of change, finding innovative solutions, adding value in niche or underserved areas of the business and executing projects that added value to the organisation,” explains Banfield.

During this time, he also had the opportunity to contribute to the work of the South African Medical Device Industry Association (SAMEDI) through participation in various SAMEDI committees and it was around this time that he completed an MBA, with a dissertation on the Economics of Regulation of the Medical Device industry.

“I resumed consulting full-time in 2013. In the intervening 10 years, the market had become a lot more open to the value that consultants could add to medical device businesses and of course, I had used the intervening time to develop a much rounder, boarder scope of skills



Mark Banfield, Director

and deeper understanding of the healthcare sector and its challenges,” he says.

Banfield explains that the business initially developed in two directions: business development and market research. Business development entails assisting local distributors and international suppliers to find new markets or products, business process re-engineering, reimbursement and market access strategy and developing tools to assist medical device companies to improve efficiency, reduce risk and raise customer satisfaction and loyalty.

Market research became increasingly important in a sector, which had previously used a trial and error approach to launch new products. While many companies still use this approach, Banfield says a number of companies are now needing to conduct feasibility studies, test potential customer views and attitudes towards

new technology, understand the competitive landscape or test commercial viability ahead of investing in new product launches.

“More recently, the focus has turned to assisting companies in meeting requirements for Medical Device Establishment Licencing. This is very exciting. Regulation of the medical devices sector has been a long time in coming to South Africa and is intended to protect patients and users of medical devices from inferior products entering the market.

“It is surprising to most that, to this point, there has been no oversight of medical devices beyond those regulated under the Hazardous Substances Act or ICASA, as it is assumed that this was in place.

“The value proposition of our business is to assist companies in the health technology sector, particularly in areas where they lack capacity or knowledge, to identify and rapidly deploy solutions that will make a real difference in the business. This involves a project approach in which there is defined scope, duration and cost,” he explains.

The importance of health technology

Banfield expresses how ubiquitous technology has become in our daily lives, saying we’ve seen some of the most phenomenal advances in technology in recent years.

“We also have to appreciate the way in which technology is used and how different technologies converge into a single device. Think of the cell phone for instance. It is now much more than a phone and yes, it has also become a medical device in some respects. Health applications for disease diagnosis and monitoring are some of the most exciting areas for the development of phones, to say nothing

of apps which integrate with physical medical devices,” he says.

However, for Banfield, the most important aspect of health technology is not only about which rare diseases or deformities may be treated but how technology can bridge the gap between health needs of a population and the way healthcare is delivered.

“There are simply not enough healthcare practitioners to meet the needs of all people in South Africa. We, therefore, have to use technology in a way that makes a real difference in people’s lives. This includes both direct service provision, as well as monitoring and education,” he explains.

Nanotechnology, robotic devices, new molecules, biotechnology and genetic engineering are all very exciting and offer tremendous opportunities for treating diseases or correcting deformities.

However, Banfield says that while they all come at a high cost and on a macro-level, it is sometimes difficult to find appropriate mechanisms for funding this technology, it is crucial to continue these developments because each of them may have the potential to scale to the extent that it affects the health of the population.

Decision support through market research

Delivering actionable market research is critical to meeting the requirements of their clients.

“We spend time in understanding the client’s needs so that the research addresses their specific research questions.

“By the time we are approached, the client has usually arrived at their own hypothesis, which is informed by any number of factors. We have to validate all assumptions and consult with the client to really understand their underlying research needs. It is not always what the initial brief may have indicated,” he says.

Their approach is to use a blend of primary and secondary research.

“We don’t use any stock reports and each assignment is approached in the same way. Any client assumptions or provided information is validated and bias is identified and corrected. This, along with the brief, forms the basis of our research questions and preliminary hypothesis and, consequently, the scope of the project.

“Secondly, we use desk research to fully explore the research topic and identify areas which require further primary research. Primary

research methodologies also vary widely, depending on the nature of the research questions, but may include face-to-face structured interviews, online questionnaires, telephonic interviews using discussion documents, direct observation and constant fact-checking.

“We have found that, besides the actual research methodology, one of the most important aspects is to provide the results in different formats. Some clients want a report but very often, they want to discuss the outcome of the research and to facilitate the operationalisation of the results. This is a particularly pleasing part of market research and often leads to an in-depth engagement with the client,” he enthuses.

Organisational development solutions

The company implements three organisational development solutions: Quality Management, Service Delivery Infrastructure and Employee Engagement.

Banfield says that it is only now with regulations on medical devices coming into effect that companies in the sector have been required to implement a Quality Management system.

They are assisting a number of clients to meet their obligations and are preparing for formal ISO 13485 certification in the next few years. While it is a lot of work, he says it is simultaneously very rewarding.

“In the coming months, we will be seeking formal accreditation to implement ISO 13485,” he adds.

Secondly is their association with ORAX Service Delivery Infrastructure and the implementations they have done in the medical device sector.

“The system, for the first time, brings high-end ERP capability in an integrated cost-effective system, which places the customer front and centre of all activities within the business. It changes the discussion with sales representatives from budget achievement, to their efforts. It makes information available to all sales, service delivery and back office stakeholders in a secure and efficient manner, that positively affects efficiencies and customer experience.

“Along with CRM and accounting, it integrates the additional functionality required in the healthcare environment such as product traceability, barcoding, training, document management, HR and Payroll,” he says.

Considering that the majority of medical device companies in South Africa are SMEs, the availability of such an integrated platform to manage the business is highly attractive and cost-effective.

“Thirdly, but arguably, the most important, is employee engagement and performance. The underlying philosophy is that if you get the structure of a business correct and people are appropriately resourced, directed and motivated, engagement and performance will follow.

“Where the system fails, there needs to then be remedial action available to business, which can be easily and effectively applied, while simultaneously protecting the business and employee rights,” he says.

Unfortunately too often, these elements are neglected until such time as problems arise.

“We have thus developed a model in which performance and remuneration are linked, training and employee development are integrated into business planning and that HR tools are provided to assist the business to have all employees operating that optimum efficiency and productivity.

A question of leadership

For Banfield, leadership is an honour and a deep responsibility.

“If you step up to lead, or others choose you to lead and you accept, the needs and objectives of the group you lead have to be paramount. I also believe that there has to be good within the objectives of that group. I am dismayed by the lack of leadership or malfeasance in many spheres of business and politics in South Africa. Nevertheless, I am extremely positive that there will be a correction and that we will reclaim the high ground and that true leaders will emerge.

“As the Chairman of a non-profit organisation, I note the increasing prevalence of governance and ethics issues, which were taken for granted a few years ago. These now have to be managed and cultivated within all organisations.

“An effective leader has to possess attributes and skills, which, when brought together in a particular way, is leadership. Different circumstances will determine which blend of attributes and skills are required and which should dominate.

“An effective leader has a range of skills they can draw on, which is best-suited to the situation,” he concludes. ▲

