AnyVan’s Angus Elphinstone: The man who moves anything from elephants to S&M chairs

A
ngus Elphinstone was working on a house removals business when he learnt that a quarter of all vans and lorries travel empty because they’re driving back from a job, and half of the rest have only a few items on board with plenty more room available.

“It was during the recession, and I could see at the same time that people wanted to save money whilst moving their things, whilst transport providers like myself wanted to make more money from existing jobs.”

It proved a lightbulb moment. The 39-year-old went on to set up AnyVan, a tech platform that matches customers looking to move items, with transport providers already going that way: “saving miles travelled and the ability to offer cheaper pricing for customers.”

AnyVan

Founded: 2009

Staff: 320

Turnover: £85m

Headquarters: Hammersmith

During the start-up’s early days, AnyVan adopted the slogan ‘we move anything, anywhere’ and, Elphinstone laughs, “two million or so moves later, we can safely say some people have definitely tested our resolve on that!”

The firm has moved chickens, pianos and paintings – "we can probably say we're the only business that can link horse semen, celebrity homes, trapeze equipment and a coffin," the founder muses.

AnyVan has also moved an elephant with its keeper and a vet across Ireland, a six-foot tall cabinet engraved with the Kama Sutra, a yurt, a vivarium with live inhabitants, a giant penis statue, an ice-cream van, and what Elphinstone delicately dubs a "dungeon gynaecological bondage chair". Most of the moves are carried out by small firms and single traders – AnyVan now has 90,000 drivers and companies signed up.

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It all started in 2009. "Creating a technology platform without a large amount of experience was a massive risk," Elphinstone says, "but there weren't many competitors with viable tech solutions to compete against, so it was relatively straightforward."

Initially, he used £150,000 cash from a private investor, hired an office manager and outsourced the design of the platform to an IT specialist.

The first main issue was a 'chicken and egg scenario': without jobs being listed on the site, van and lorry drivers would not sign up, but AnyVan couldn't list jobs unless they had drivers willing to take them on. So Elphinstone convinced drivers to sign up (for free) to increase their revenues from dead mileage – "it wasn't a hard sell," he adds – and built the

site from there.

“Doing so meant that when we launched to our customers, the liquidity of drivers was fluid enough to fulfil the work.”

Nowadays, AnyVan will allocate around five jobs for each vehicle’s journey – someone wanting to move an oven to Aberdeen will pay about £200, with the driver receiving 25% from that job plus several others along the route.

AnyVan raised some £6 million in its first few years, but relied on organic growth at the start. It had around 45,000 customers by the end of its first year and Elphinstone worried about a larger logistics firm aping his concept.

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“With technology, it’s super hard to patent any ideas,” he adds. “You’re perpetually concerned about when the next competitor might crop up and attempt to eat your lunch. Things we had to consider were reputation, product and operational complexities.”

Growth slowed during lockdown, but AnyVan has now organised over two million moving jobs. It’s had to battle the driver shortage and freight issues in recent years – although Elphinstone adds: “We use our tech to consolidate jobs and keep costs to fulfil each job low, so we don’t need as many drivers and aren’t as affected by the driver shortages.”

AnyVan has now raised a total of £131 million, mainly from Vitruvian private equity, and expects business to boom. Turnover hit £85 million last year; Elphinstone expects that to soar to £130 million this year.

“We want to double down on technology and accelerate our lead in the market,” he explains. “We are primed and funded to accelerate our expansion rapidly across Europe, targeting a market that is underserved and highly inefficient, making it ripe for disruption and rapid growth.”