

Parrot Analytics CEO on the value of a heavyweight board

In a press release that garnered scant media attention last December, the chief executive of Venezuelan media giant Cisneros joined the board of Kiwi startup Parrot Analytics, which is changing the way demand for TV programming is measured.

The chief executive, Adriana Cisneros, joined a number of other industry heavyweights already on the startup's board, including former Sony Pictures Entertainment president David Bishop and Bruce Tuchman, the former president of AMC Global and the Sundance Channel Global. The latter two directors have also put their money where their board fees come from and invested in the company – a 0.33% stake and 0.46% respectively.

Another board member is Kiwi Adam Clark, one of the founders of M-Com, a global leader in mobile banking and mobile payment solutions, which was sold in 2011 to Fortune 500 financial services technology company Fiserv for an undisclosed sum. He's taken a 0.53% stake in the analytics startup.

Ms Cisneros said in the press statement that over the past year she had made sweeping changes at her own company after it became clear conventional ways of measuring content popularity were vastly outdated and deficient.

That sparked a fascination with big data analytics and led her to the door of Parrot Analytics whose global demand measurement system helps the world's television and production companies find out who is watching or talking about their shows across geographical markets and to compare specific programmes against their competitors within a market.

Parrot Analytics chief executive and co-founder Wared Seger says it was surprisingly easy to attract that calibre of directors and important when trying to navigate a path in Hollywood.

“Aside from the connections and the doors they can open for you, it is the credibility. Your product doesn’t change, the technology doesn’t change, it is exactly the same thing you were presenting to the industry yesterday – it’s just that today the person presenting it, if he or she says ‘this is a gamechanger,’ then people listen as opposed to some Kiwi doing it.”

When he presented the company’s technology platform and vision of connecting creators with consumers the directors got it straight away, he says. “They ended up going in every single case ‘I want to be involved in this, how can I help out?’. It’s not just about our board, we have a lot of advisers and friends, colleagues now, in the industry at the highest level who just want to be part of the journey.”

Utopia (which was actually a TV series)

Mr Seger says his company's utopia is to understand what people around the world are demanding to watch and to become the go-to place for creators to find out what that is.

In what has become a highly fragmented landscape, the analytics cover all channels from traditional to streaming and even offline. In just one example of its work, Parrot Analytics recently ranked the six most in-demand digital original reality series worldwide in March 2018, with *The Grand Tour* heading off *Queer Eye for The Straight Guy* both in the US and internationally.

But the next step it is now shifting to is *predicting* what is going to resonate with a particular audience in a particular market rather than just *measuring* that, Mr Seger says.

“That’s where a lot of the artificial intelligence work comes, which is now possible because of the years of historical data we have built globally. That enables us to train these models to understand the nuances of local content preferences and to be able to better predict ahead.”

While the measurement system is applicable to other types of content such as film, music and video games, the company is content to stick to its

\$US800 billion TV niche for now.

Mr Seger says he's had approaches from stakeholders in the music industry, in particular, to understand global demand for various artists. "We'll probably keep doing that in parallel just as one-offs here and there as we finetune the platform but the core focus is television information," he says.

The challenges

Parrot Analytics was co-founded by Mr Seger and Chris Riddell and launched in 2014 with a big client, BBC Worldwide, already inhouse. Today its client list includes some of the world's biggest names in the TV production and content supply chain – from Warner Brothers to Fox and Dreamworks and, in this neck of the woods, TVNZ.

Mr Seger won't reveal revenue though says the startup is growing at a fast clip as evidenced by it winning the 2017 national Rising Star Award in the annual Deloitte Fast50, which recognises early stage companies who don't yet qualify for the index.

He says they're about to "cross the chasm," a reference to Geoffrey Moore's marketing book of the same name on technology adoption, which argues there is a chasm between the early adopters of a product (the enthusiast and visionaries) and the early majority (the pragmatists).

As with many high-growth companies Parrot Analytics is not yet profitable but Mr Seger says that is not even a goal at this stage.

"The goal is to have an impact and increase your footprint and, if profitability comes with that, that is fantastic. It is almost you don't want it to come because you want to reinvest profitability for growth rather than sitting on it to achieve profitability."

A jetlagged Mr Seger says the most difficult challenge of running a global company from New Zealand is the travel. He spends most of his time travelling and most of his time in Los Angeles when not travelling. The technology nerd found it stressful at first because as a creature of habit he

didn't like the lack of pattern in his daily life. "I like to have a rhythm, which is impossible to do when you travel as chaotically as I do."

Even though the world is now technologically connected, nothing beats being able to drop in and have a coffee with a client or potential partner in person, he says. And even the most passionate team about an industry finds it hard "to live and breathe the nuances" when not living among that industry, he says.

"In our case it is Hollywood. While everyone loves TV shows and movies and is superconnected to what is happening in the news, it is a challenge when not embedded in the industry."

But the near 30-year-old is committed to keeping the company based in New Zealand, although it has regional hubs in Los Angeles, New York and London. Most of the 30 staff are based in this country.

"I would still be travelling even if we don't have the team here. It is a global industry, we have clients on pretty much every continent out there right now, so it wouldn't reduce the travel too much," he says.

The advantages to being in New Zealand include "it is still the greatest place to be on earth" and he's been pleasantly surprised by the startup's ability to attract world-class talent in the data science engineering space.

The biggest challenge, Mr Seger says, has been creating a new category and convincing people there was a solution to their problem, rather than simply competing against an existing product.

"All the macro trends we banked on a couple of years ago are in our favour in that, that challenge is almost solving itself for us – the industry is rapidly coming to terms with the fact that existing business models need to change," he says.

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