Managing Director Philip van Rooijen on company culture at Trifleet Leasing

Page 15
‘Being small is just a state of mind’

Philip van Rooijen, Managing Director of Trifleet Leasing, talks to Tankcontainer Magazine Editor Leslie McCune

LM: What is Trifleet’s position in the market?

PvR: ‘Striving for excellence, in everything we do’ describes us best. We focus on the quality of our tanks and services.

Trifleet is the fifth largest tank container lessor worldwide and we are an owner-managed company leasing out over 11,500 tank containers (excluding financial leases). In 2015 we achieved gross revenues – purely from tank container management – of over €30 million.

By the standards of our customers, many of which are multinational corporations, we are small. We employ only 35 people but those people are spread over six locations - in addition to our main office in Dordrecht (Main Port Rotterdam), we work from Houston, Singapore, Hamburg, Shanghai and Paris. Together, it makes us a player that is small in size and that matters in our industry - some would call that ‘lean and mean’.

LM: But doesn’t being the fifth largest lessor worldwide make you a big player?

PvR: Size matters most because major companies tend to do business with other major companies of a similar size. We believe that it’s about what you can achieve for your customers that is important.

I look at us through the eyes of our customers that are part of larger organisations. Compared with those, we may not have a big staff but we use this to our advantage.

Being small is a state of mind; it just makes us work harder.

We take decisions fast; we use state-of-the-art IT and enterprise resource planning to make a difference for our customers.

To achieve this, we help make all our 35 people – regardless where they are in the world – part of a close team working seamlessly together. We emphasise the importance of our internal communication, development possibilities for our staff and business efficiency.

Furthermore, we extend our team with a worldwide network of agents, depots and surveyors. With this we make sure, that our tank containers and services are available across the world. We try to act like a major while still being as agile and committed as only smaller-sized companies can be.

LM: What meaning does Trifleet’s relationship with Textainer have in this context?

PvR: It has a similar meaning as with our other partners. Textainer offers us a view to what happens in the dry container markets and enables us to handle big numbers.

Since our incorporation, we have worked with tank container investors, and developed a close relationship. Working and investing shoulder to shoulder, you can do more and spread the risk.

Textainer’s culture and values are comparable to ours. We believe in the same approach of markets, the same way of working.

LM: Is company culture an important topic for you?

PvR: We believe that company culture drives differentiation. Last year, we celebrated Trifleet’s 25th anniversary and launched our new brand promise ‘Committed to Sustainable Excellence’. Those are not just nice marketing
words for us. It is a promise that we developed looking into our values and our ambitions.

We have always been striving for excellent tank containers and services. We noticed that this is in our genes, but that we had to make it more visible to our stakeholders. Of course, not everything we do is always excellent. We are humans and make mistakes. It is the way you deal with those mistakes that sets you apart. We are alert and always question ourselves before we take decisions, make offers, or start communicating: ‘Is what I’m doing really excellent?’

If you challenge yourself on this every day, you also develop a higher level of commitment to your work, your customers, your suppliers and your colleagues. You try to do things first time right. This is an important element of our identity.

**LM:** Are you suggesting that success is simply a question of culture?

**PvR:** Culture is the basis of success. Our colleagues deliver it. There are many reasons that make our staff stay with Trifleet, be committed, and work as a team. For example, we have professional programmes in place for training and education, to provide our staff with the right tools, expertise and skills, to be a committed tank manager.

Right now, we are working to move our training programmes up one level and structure these into a Trifleet Academy. With this we want to provide our staff with information, training, and coaching to do an excellent job, take the right decisions and feel comfortable in their area of responsibility. Furthermore, as part of the academy, our people will be offered a look into the disciplines and skills of their colleagues in other departments. In doing so, we build a better companywide understanding.

It is not easy for us to offer job rotations as big companies can, but it is essential that our employees continuously develop their skills and qualifications. For us, culture supports our staff delivering our brand promise.

**LM:** Your brand promise is “committed to sustainable excellence”. Where does sustainability come in?

**PvR:** For me, in simple words, sustainability is in particular the bridge between today and tomorrow. You always have to ask yourself: ‘Is what I’m doing today also good for tomorrow?’ If the answer is ‘yes’, go for it.

Sustainability is about the quality and safety of the tank containers that we lease and the processes that support those leases. It is about commercial decision-making that supports future company development. For instance, we scrap old tanks rather than selling them.

Sustainability also covers the transparency and ethics of the way we do business. For many years, Trifleet has lived by a code of conduct developed with – and for – our employees. The code is basically about running a sustainable business. It is also a reflection of the expectations of our customers.

Just last month, we launched our new “Supplier Code of Conduct”
in order to share our ideas about sustainability with our partners. We encourage them to discuss this code with us. After all, we are all in one value chain. We can’t deliver on our brand promise, if suppliers don’t support us, and if customers don’t appreciate it.

LM: Are these codes of conduct the guarantee for more responsibility?

PvR: Our industry still has a chance to develop an environment – laid down in written guidelines – that proves our responsibility to our stakeholders. The recently launched ITCO Corporate Responsibility (CR) code of practice is a good step in this direction, as it was developed by our industry and not imposed on us by others. However, we must be willing to commit to it and develop it further, and mature as players in a sustainable market.

What concerns me is a potential inflation of codes if a company develops these just to protect the company and the management from claims. Corporate responsibility is not about form but about substance and too important to be left to lawyers.

As an industry, we need to find a sustainable way to handle all these codes. To achieve this, Trifleet incorporated the knowledge that we have about global standards such as the Global Reporting Initiative.

We did an internal sustainability audit, started improvement processes. We actively participate in the ITCO CR Workgroup, study our customers’ codes, and develop our own values. Our goal is to have an always up-to-date, aligned approach that we discuss with our partners.

LM: Is sustainability a driving force for the technical specifications of tanks?

PvR: Sustainability is a key factor for technical specifications. Already today, tank containers have a lifetime of over 20 years, they are part of the cradle-to-cradle approach and the material is reused by up to 90%.

In addition to safety when building and operating tank containers, the quality, health and environmental aspects have always been a focus in our industry. Furthermore, there is the everlasting quest for building lighter tank containers and in doing so reduce emissions.

Last year Trifleet was the first lessor to offer the new lightweight Oddy swapbody tank containers on lease. These new swapbodies not only reduce transport costs, but also the environmental impact.

Another initiative is Tankwell’s composite swaptank container, which has been constructed with an innovative fibre-reinforced vessel.

As a lessor we want to stay tuned with these developments, although today we still have some doubt as to whether our customers are prepared to pay the extra cost for this added value.

LM: Is the purchasing power of your customers increasing or decreasing?

PvR: We all know that we have a challenging time in our market. The world economy is not doing well, the number of tank containers in the market keeps increasing to levels above demand and the low lease rates are difficult for most fleet owners.

Of course, in times of overcapacity, our clients’ purchasing power increases, just as it was lower during the tank container shortage a few years ago. Trends do fluctuate and do not last forever. New demand will develop and our clients will increase their production accordingly.

Trifleet uses these times to think about future scenarios and look at market and technology trends. You don’t have the time to focus on those strategic aspects when your business is rocketing. We wish to manage this now and avoid losing time when the market is growing again.