



Customer Based Web Solutions – Proudly South African

A report about an internship at
Flatspin Websolutions CC
Cape Town, South Africa

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„I dream of an Africa which is in peace with itself. “

Nelson Mandela

Deciding what to do

“Long Walk to Freedom” is the autobiography of Nelson Mandela – winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace and one of the most famous men in Africa. His life and the history of the country made South Africa so interesting for me.

Especially Cape Town was in my mind long before we had to apply for an internship. I did not know much about South Africa. But what I knew and the history of the country – particularly since the end of Apartheid in 1994 – fascinated me. I was curious about the mood in a country that has experienced democracy for only ten years. I decided to apply at every company in Cape Town that crossed my path because I thought it could be difficult to find a multimedia company there.

And really it was quite difficult to find a suitable company with the little I knew. The decision to phone the contacts I found proved to be a good one. I found more and more multimedia companies in all kinds of work fields.

Applying

In the end I phoned eleven companies. All of them received my email-application and a personalized access to my application website. I got the first positive reply from the third company I phoned – only 40 minutes after my call. The fast answer and the way the email was written excited me. All I knew about the company were a few pictures of the staff members, a portfolio on the homepage and that they answered fast and efficiently. There was only one thing that disturbed me about Flatspin: They were specialised in web development. I hoped to find a company in which I could experience a wider spectrum of tasks, such as print media.

Three weeks later I made my mind up. Some of the other companies had not replied to my application or had asked for more time. With some of the companies I was not even sure if they had a company address or were just a home-office.

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“You are in”

Flatspin offered me an internship during which I could take part in projects in a study related field. Richard Boome, Flatspin’s Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and I exchanged only a few emails to make an internship contract. He also gave me a contact to a previous German intern.

The company is based in Woodstock, Cape Town. Their portfolio shows mostly Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and travel industry websites. Not all the projects are online as they also have developed some intranets and various other projects.

I hoped to improve my skills in HTML and CSS coding. I also thought of some experiences in developing websites and database design. Furthermore I was interested in how a company with only six staff members would work – and was excited at the possibility to experience the differences to the German work ethic.

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Flatspin – Cape Town

I had a warm welcome at Flatspin. My PC and my own email address (melanie@flatspin.net) were already set up.

After my first meeting I found my name written on the board behind various projects. All staff members add to the job whiteboard in regular meetings together. The result is a collection of the actual projects on this board. So everyone knows what is going on and who is responsible for which tasks.

Inside Flatspin



Flatspin's Headquarters in Woodstock

The first contact for new clients is Richard. He is Flatspin's "front-man" and responsible for keeping the smiles on the clients' faces. A first meeting with the client-to-be gives Flatspin an idea of what the client wants and Flatspin opens for him the magic box of web-development. That means that Flatspin shows the clients ways to enhance their concept: Improving usability and marketing aspects, additional features to consider for the planned website and how to use the internet medium in an optimal way.

After the quote has been accepted by the client, Michelle Janse van Rensburg starts designing

the front-end. She completed a three-year diploma at City Varsity in Multimedia Design and has been the only designer at Flatspin for two years.

Most of the websites have dynamic content. The clients are able to change and update their content using a Content Management System. This "Site Management Interface" (SMI) was developed by Kendall McDonald and is constantly updated with new features. Craig Barker and Hendrik Groenewald are usually responsible for back-end development, database design and customising the SMI.

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Everyone working on the project communicates directly with the client. So the client is involved in the whole development process and influences the result.

Richard, Craig and Kendall founded the company in 2000 as a Closed Cooperation (CC). In a CC all of the voting stock is held by a few shareholders, such as management or family members. It is also called a private company.



Standing, from left: Hendrik, Simon, me, Craig, Agbor, Michelle, Richard, Michael
In front: Kendall and Dean

While Richard deals with the customer relations, Kendall is a general manager and Craig the head developer. They were working on their own till Michelle and Hendrik joined the team. Ayanda Jack started as a design trainee in 2003. During my internship Dean Hendricks as designer and Chris Pitt and Agbor Kandeh as developers made the office a busy place. We had to move together to create the three new workplaces.

Last but not least Flatspin always employs some students as interns. Simon is a student from the University of Cape Town and Michael studies

in Dresden, Germany. Both worked as developers.

Working climate

The twelve staff members are working together in only four offices. The company's headquarters in Woodstock have two more rooms. A boardroom is used for meetings and presentations with clients. In the room next to the kitchen the job whiteboard is placed. Staff meetings and lunch take place around the big table there.

The structure of communication at Flatspin is quite open. Everyone is allowed (and expected) to ask and inform each other personally. Intranet and internal mail make this communication easy.

All PCs are in the same network with a server. Everyone has his own login to the intranet and can access

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the server permanently. Important information and the backup of all pages are stored on this machine.

In meetings important decisions are made and deadlines are set. Internal meetings are not recorded in writing. Everything important is only written on the board and everyone has his own to-do-list. But during the work it is easy and welcome to ask for help and discuss solutions. Normally clients get a conclusion of the external meetings as a quotation or a short email.

The decision-making process is fast, sometimes too fast. Some decisions are made without asking everyone involved in the process or are communicated badly among team members. The reasons for these problems are usually tight deadlines.

Everyone is responsible for his own work and communicates with the clients he works for. I can not remember one situation where I did not understand the reason for a decision. Most of the time my suggestions for decisions related to my work were accepted.

Especially the staff meetings are motivating and the exchange of information improves the work and everyone gets an „all have something to do feeling“.

The working climate is extremely relaxed but always productive. The talk in the offices is often about work but personal matters like the activities of the last weekend. Cooking and eating lunch with the whole team is a ritual that brings the staff closer together. As a year-end-function the whole staff was invited to Ratanga Junction – a theme park in Cape Town.

I was amazed that even in this friendly working environment the work always comes first. I felt that everybody is excited and motivated most of the time.

A reason for this might be that Flatspin is a young and innovative thinking company: the average age is 27 years. Richard, Kendall and Craig, the three heads of the company, are 30 something. The other staff members are more or less 10 years

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younger. Thus it is quite possible that you met your boss or colleague at a club or concert in town.

Customers / Projects

The majority of clients are travel-related companies and NGOs. Normally one client means one project. But Flatspin has also a client with 14 websites online and some loyal clients with temporary projects.

Flatspin's main field of work is building websites. The main income results from new clients. Maintenance is only about 25% of the work. Flatspin offers a full service for static and dynamic websites. Every site has special design and an individualized SMI. Search-engine optimization is a part of the service as well as support with the site marketing.

Other projects are always welcome. In the past Flatspin had set up some extra- and intranets. User- and rights-management can be included as well as reporting tools. They develop other browser based web solutions like individual developed software and multimedia presentations (e.g. with Flash), too. A touch-screen presentation for an exhibition at the Jewish Museum of Cape Town was a huge project during my internship, for example. Flatspin offered the museum a database to capture all the data for the exhibits. A user-friendly interface for the visitors gave them the ability to search for special items and browse through the exhibition.

Although Flatspin is busy with new projects all the time it always gives clients with running sites good service and innovative ideas to improve their online presentation. W3C validation of older pages took part in the period of my internship. Heavy table layouts needed to be validated to W3C standards. Often the sites needed to be reworked completely to get them through the online validator. Newer pages are already developed with layers to ensure the basic accessibility.

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Product / Brand

With easimail Flatspin entered a new online service. The browser-based program is a powerful tool to create professional newsletters. Every client from easimail gets one or more individually designed templates for the general look of the newsletter. Easimail is able to manage recipient lists: dealing with subscribing and unsubscribing, divide groups of different kinds of subscribers or just collect and edit personal data of the subscriber. The articles for newsletters can be inserted and edited with an user-friendly HTML-editor. They are split into different styled groups in a certain order. The client has to login to access all these functions. Easimail also offers the ability to collect a history with email-bounces and can view a statistic that shows how often a hyperlink in a newsletter has been clicked for example.

Outside Flatspin

As the new media market in South Africa grows the competitors become more and more prevalent. But due to the fact that start-up companies come and go Flatspin has no information about direct competitors.

Word of mouth and advertising brings the clients to Flatspin's door. Most of the clients are based in the Cape Peninsula but Flatspin also has international clients. A direct fight against competitors seems not to be necessary.

Flatspin is not dependent and does not have any co-operations. The yearly turnover is about 600 000 South African Rand.

„Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.“

Nelson Mandela

Working in South Africa

Environment

About 30% of South Africans still can't read or write. The Internet users have extremely different skills. As the living standards are in a wide range, the hard- and software devices are completely different. A lot of old systems are used in schools and private, lower-class households which are the vast majority of the population. In comparison to this is the wealthy (and mostly white) community, which are equipped to European standards.

Flatspin ensures that their websites are working with small screen resolutions and in old browsers. An example for the inexperienced users Flatspin has to deal with is a story I heard about a visitor of the Jewish Museum who did not know that you have to touch a touch-screen. He tried to navigate the screen presentation (mentioned before) just with pushing the screen – and did not learn by doing that the reaction only comes when he let it go again.

Working for African users means always thinking of the low education and experience and dealing with old hard- and software.

Proudly South African

Proudly South African is an campaign to promote South African companies, products and services, which are helping to create jobs and economic growth in South Africa. Proudly South African is supported by organized labour, organized business, government and community organizations.

The goal of the campaign is to do something concrete to support job creation. At the heart of the campaign is the Proudly South African logo. Companies who meet the standards set by Proudly South African can use the logo to identify themselves, their products and services (Proudly South African, 2005).

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Flatspin was one of the founder members of the Proudly South African as Flatspin is a South African company operating in South Africa. This membership attracts South African clients to use Flatspin's services. Over the years, South Africans and South African companies have become more and more aware of a company's impact on society and its people.

Being part of Proudly South African does not only mean that Flatspin is following the stipulated labour and environmental policies and practise. It also means that Flatspin is maintaining the high standard of quality stipulated by the campaign but also that they are committed to constant improvements to their products, services and business as a whole.

Being part

My work at Flatspin covered a wide spectre of web design. The tasks varied from recoding and changing content to designing and developing new sites.

As I started my internship Flatspin was busy with the overhaul of some older pages to make them W3C compliant. This kind of work was very suitable for me to get used to the structure of Flatspin sites and the work with Dreamweaver. With the online-validation it is not possible to validate sites on the local machine. So I had to change the files locally, validate them online and save the backup on the server. I understood the structure quickly and got an impression of how websites had been made in the past.

With the validation of the pages I learned to understand what causes errors. I started seeing the HTML code from a different point of view. After a few validations I was able to see the errors before I validated the page and developed some tricks to get rid of the complicated and unnecessary table structure. I validated for example www.policeaccountability.co.za and www.seychelles-hotel.info.

Some clients contact Flatspin to make necessary changes even if they are able to edit the content of their page with the SMI. That made it possible for me to work with Flatspin's own content management system SMI and I got an impression of how powerful it is.

But not all enquiries can be solved using the SMI. Static pages need to be changed in HTML. Flatspin uses the same file structure for every site. That makes it easy to find and change content on pages or even create a new page with the same layout.

I needed to report to different people depending on which project I was working on. Michelle was responsible for showing me the internal folder-structure and she was my first contact if I got stuck in my work. Later during my internship I worked directly

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with the clients and asked Michelle and Richard only for opinions and showed them the results.

Animated GIF

Flatspin actually develops a marketing strategy and is going to build a sales department to promote the products and services. As one action they place banner ads on websites. I researched the common way of advertising on web pages. After I got an impression of the actual state of the art I created an animated gif with ImageReady.

Overhaul article archive



IHRE Article Archive

I was working on several sites. In one case I had to rework the whole article archive of www.ihre.org. In a meeting with Emma Harvey from IHRE it turned out that the used structure was illogical. Similar articles didn't have the same layout and it was very difficult for the user to understand the navigation. Furthermore some new publications didn't fit into the column. We worked out a new concept.

I was free in creating the sections on the website. My main objective was that users of the archive understad the relations between

the documents and can access the content easily. In a brief meeting it turned that this was one of the major critics the client had about the actual site.

CSS

As I know how to style websites with CSS I was often asked to help with the style-realisation of some projects. One example was an application form for an existing site, which was implemented by Flatspin. Technically the application was working already, but the page on our server had to have exactly the same look as the

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client's site. I created a template for the use on our server so that it was quite easy to implement the whole application process without care about the layout.

Touch screen presentation

I took part in creating the touch screen presentation for the Jewish Museum. It was realised in Flash and HTML and made it possible to browse through the exhibition. If the descriptions for an exhibit did not fit on one screen the user should be able to turn the pages. The description-text was saved in the database. I had to divide the text sensibly and create as many layers as necessary. For the first time I used JavaScript to control CSS-styles: I made it possible for the user to control the visibility of the different layers.

Print-CSS

Exciting was the styling with CSS for print. The application for home loans is a static document with dynamic data of the client. The consultants from MortgageSA (www.mortgagesa.com) will use the form in their intranet to create personalised quotations for clients. They print the forms and fax them to the client. I used a freeware tool to change the print settings of the browser and created two different style sheets for the screen and the print version. The document contained a lot of information and I needed to clean it up: I used iconography and created blocks and bullets.

Designing a newsletter template

The easimail clients became more and more. I checked the product page (www.easimail.co.za) for usability and bugs. Under the clients' section on this site are some back issues of newsletters online. I designed the Christmas newsletter template for IBN (www.IBN.co.za) and supported different clients with using easimail.

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Set up a dynamic page



Cape Concierge - Insider advice for the independent traveller

Cape Concierge is a new Cape Town based travel agency. They specialise in advice for the individual traveller and offer personal service for the complete holiday. The concept is based on individual care for the customer.

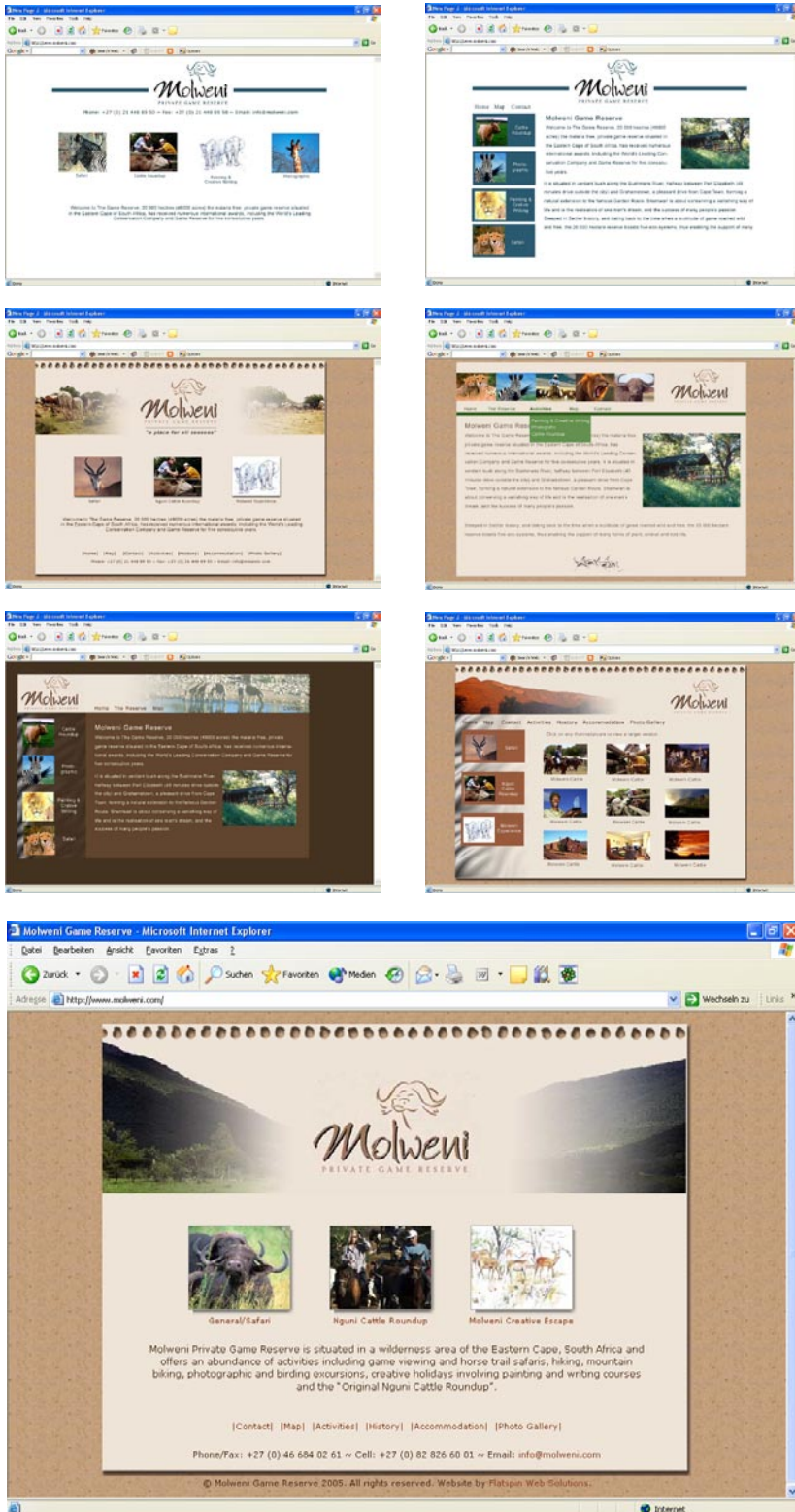
The website should become the gateway for international customers. I joined the project after Michelle's design was ready to be realised. The site I developed was the first completely with layers realised live-and-running website from Flatspin. I developed the page compatible for four different browsers and W3C compliant. A template for the general layout of the page made it easy to create all detail pages. The permanent elements are included

with ASP. Most of the pages have static information. The SMI was adopted for the requirements of Cape Concierge by Craig. I implemented the database content to the front end in ASP with Dreamweaver.

Daisy Irons and her husband are the founders of Cape Concierge. I enjoyed working with Daisy. She had lots of good ideas for her website and was always excited about the possibilities I could offer her. The final website is a result of long meetings in our office and on the phone. Daisy gave me the content and double-checked my work. I was responsible for creating a style guide and realised the layout. Due to that brilliant communication we were able to develop a site that contains a lot of content but the look is still clean and harmonious. Hidden tools like a currency converter, the weather in Cape Town and the ability to enlarge the font size give the site a real value. At the second day online Daisy received her first response from the site. Since this day she is busy with the response from her site and is planning new features already.

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My own project



My next project was the website for Molweni Private Game Reserve. I took part in the first meeting and was responsible for the design and the development right from the beginning.

Molweni used brochures to promote the Game Reserve as a holiday destination. This brochure and the logo were the base for the design. I got a CD with some design drafts of the brochure and lots of pictures from the Game Reserve. First of all I selected relevant information from the CD and researched the Internet of other Game Reserve Sites. The result was a list of Game Reserves, an overview of the activities they offer and lots of ideas for the design.

I decided to use natural colours even though the logo of Molweni is blue in the original. I sent three different drafts with two screens each to Tamsin Bush who was responsible for the project at Molweni.

Two versions further Tamsin was happy with the look and I could start developing. A SMI was not necessary as the content is not meant to change in the near future. Elements that are used on every page are achieved with 'include' files with ASP. All styles are defined in a separate style-sheet. I have not used any tables for layout reasons and the page is W3C compliant.

Development process and result - Molweni Game Reserve Website

Programs

During my internship and all these projects I was working with Access, ImageReady and additional tools like FTP-Programs and Font Browsers. I used Adobe Photoshop to create design drafts and I got familiar with Macromedia Dreamweaver as a Script Editor and for the work on layout.

I was positively surprised by the file management of Dreamweaver when more than one developer was working on the same project. The developers have a local copy of the site data from the server on their local machine. It is possible to check a file out and work on it while being sure that the others cannot change the file in the meantime. If someone needs to work on a file it is possible to send a message via Dreamweaver to inform the person that has the file checked out.

Review

During the six months at Flatspin I got a great overview. I was involved in the daily work of maintenance, complete website projects and some exceptional projects for print. Flatspin gave me the ability to work as a full team member in all these projects with full responsibilities. I improved my skills in programming, Photoshop and Dreamweaver and my awareness for design.

Web design is not the most exciting discipline in multimedia and Flatspin is not one of the big players in the web design branch either. But exactly that made it possible to learn so much. I could use lots of the skills I had from my studies and furthermore it was quite interesting to see a small company working and growing. The direct contact to the client, the tight deadlines and the personal consultation Flatspin stands for are values that are difficult to achieve for bigger companies.

Due to the skills I got in the basic studies at the University of Applied Sciences in Darmstadt I was able to understand the point of most of the discussions and could start working quickly. The theoretical knowledge of design and computer sciences has been useful to understand and improve the daily work.

I enjoyed working and meeting directly with clients – which I was able to more than I expected. To see the reaction of a client and receiving feedback makes it much more interesting to work hard.

After my studies I do not want to work in web design but I would love to work in a company like Flatspin. I was surprised how little the differences to the German way of work were. I am now sure you can find motivated teams all over the world.

The internship made me sure of my wish to deal with people in my future job. And I know now that it does not matter where I work – who I work with is the point.