High Tech + High Touch = High Growth

In 1998, Mike Robinson set out to create an online list of permitting resources for local businesses. Seventeen years later, his little directory has grown into one of the largest permit expediting companies in the US.

Permit Place™

The year was 1998. Monicagate was in full swing. Bruce Willis and his gang of space drillers were killing it at the box office. The dot-com bubble was at its peak, with dot-com millionaires still blissfully unaware that the end was only a few months away.

And in Seattle, Mike Robinson was busy putting together his own corner of the world wide web.

"I had worked for the city of Seattle and I was part of a team that helped develop their online permitting system," he recalls. "Part of my research was to do a survey of internet resources at the time and they were just trying to find out if anybody was doing anything online.

"I compiled my results and then took those results and put them online and called it Permit Place," he continues. "It was just a collection of links — like a Yahoo directory almost."

There's a hint of sheepish amusement in Mike's voice as soon as he says "Yahoo directory", and if you remember those you'd probably smile and nod knowingly yourself. When the bubble finally burst and most of the million-dollar web companies quickly faded into obscurity, though, that little collection of links managed to survive.

Not just that — Permit Place thrived and become a nationwide permit expediting company, helping other companies across the United States acquire the many different permits required by the government.

FROM DIRECTORY TO SERVICE PROVIDER

The evolution from directory to service provider happened fairly quickly. As people started asking more and more questions about the permit process, Permit Place's services grew organically to fill their needs.

Although it still has a robust knowledge base for anyone who wants to dive into the nitty gritty of getting permits, Permit Place now offers so much more.

"We're the only expediter that offers both entitlements and permit expediting," Mike explains. "We also do alcohol use permits, we do research into the permit history of a property, and we also offer due diligence."

As with any industry, of course, there's competition, but there are only a handful of large companies that offer anything similar to Permit Place's expediting services.

"There are lots of little local mom-and-pops all over the country and thousands of individuals that do this but only a couple of larger companies that do it."

Permit Place has also grown beyond its online roots. According to Mike, there are about 29,000 permit issuing places in the US, each of whom have their own rules and idiosyncrasies. It takes someone highly familiar with all of those little quirks and differences to successfully navigate the vagaries of government bureaucracy. That's when Mike turns to Permit Place's army of local experts.

"We have a group of about 80 independent contractors that we've been working with for a long time — we call them our 'local folks'," he says. "They're not like couriers or messengers; these are highly experienced expediters. They know the local processes inside out. They know exactly who to talk to."

ONE MASSIVE UNDERTAKING

The new company's first big project came along in the early 2000s. Citibank had acquired a local regional bank called Cal Fed, and Mike and his team were tasked with getting permits for about 125 old Cal Fed signs that were going to be converted into Citibank signs.

Now, putting up a new sign seems like a simple task at first glance, but Mike says it's a way more involved process than most people think.

"Every sign that goes on a wall that says Starbucks or Chase Bank or any of those things all have to go through a separate permitting approval process apart from the building itself," he explains.

"It goes first to the planning department to check to see that it meets the sign code regulations. Then, it goes to the building department to make sure that it is safe and that it won't fall of the wall."

With its multiple permit approvals and stages, the sign permits job was a real microcosm of the permitting process as a whole. That early experience with the complexities of securing permits helped prepare Permit Place for one of its biggest projects ever: securing permits for over 70 retailers at a brand new Westfield mall called the Village at Topanga.

"In Los Angeles there are 10 permits that need to get done, so at one point we were managing over 700 permits," he recalls. "Each one of these retail stores had 10 approvals that they had to get; it was just a massive undertaking."

Massive was an understatement. In addition to the over 700 permits, Mike and his team also had to coordinate with each of the retailers' contact persons as well as their individual architects and contractors. The tremendous communications and logistical effort involved was more than enough to convince Mike that they needed some help.

That help came in the form of WORKetc.

COMING BACK INTO THE FOLD

Interestingly enough, Permit Place was actually one of WORKetc's very early adopters. Mike had always made it a point to embrace useful new technologies from the beginning. When he first crossed paths with WORKetc, however, the app was still in its very early stages and had yet to fully mature into the complete business management cloud app it is today.

"We actually did have a couple of other online project management tools that we were using but they weren't robust enough either in the beginning," he says. WORKetc remained at the back of his mind, though, and when he checked on the app's progress, he noticed that it now had the tools that Permit Place needed.

As he explains it, WORKetc has been helping them on multiple fronts. Aside from project management, they also use it to manage their leads. They are also now able to put everybody, both the internal team and their clients, on the same page via the customer portal.

"We can give clients updates and our staff can have private notes and only share certain things publicly. That's been helpful."

The level of communication afforded by the customer portal slots in perfectly with Permit Place's drive to provide even more transparency in the future.

"We're definitely going forward with more transparency in terms of being able to share the information," he explains. "For example, once we submit a project email notifications would go out notifying the customer that the project has been submitted. It feels more like a service that you can touch and feel rather than a service that does not."

WORKetc's deep integration with G Suite was another advantage. Permit Place had already been using Google's productivity suite for their internal knowledge base, making WORKetc an easy fit.

"We're also looking at continuing to develop our knowledge base so that people can answer their questions more quickly," says Mike. "The information that we've already gathered over the last 12 years, we're planning to put all that on the web."
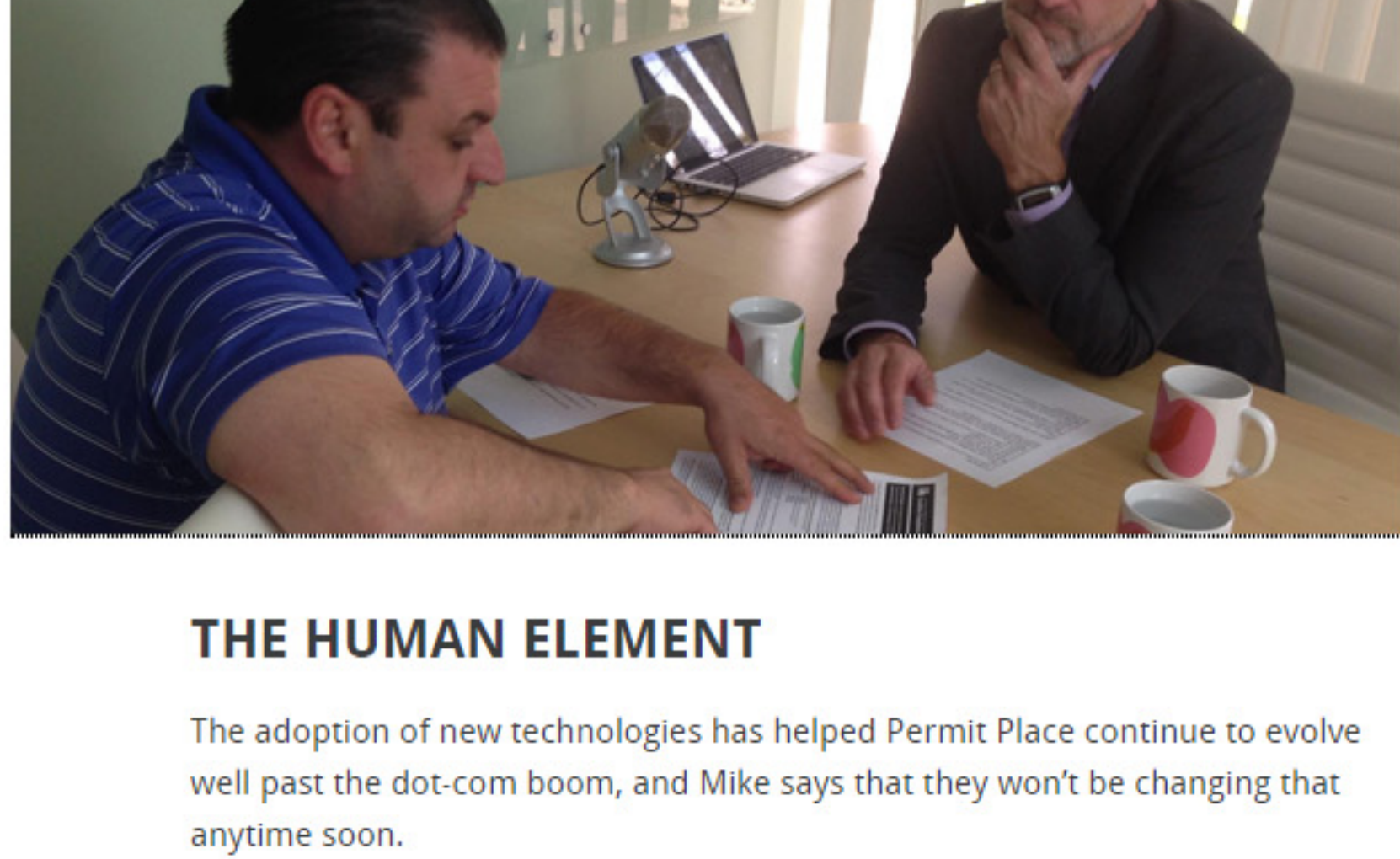
THE HUMAN ELEMENT

The adoption of new technologies has helped Permit Place continue to evolve well past the dot-com boom, and Mike says that they won't be changing that anytime soon.

"I've been doing this since 1996, in the early, early days, and a lot of the cities back then didn't even have internet use policies or wouldn't accept digital signatures or anything like that," he recalls.

"We've seen a whole adoption of change in the industry, and there have also been a lot of new technologies that are starting to allow certain cities to accept certain projects online. They're still not 100% all digital but they're now adopting new technologies to allow for digital submissions".

Despite the clear and sustained focus on technology — in both his company and in all of the numerous other entities involved in the permit business — Mike knows that it's all just incidental. What's more important are the people that use those technologies.

"As we become more high tech the service providers have to become more high touch," says Mike, "because that human element is what keeps us connected."

"It's not so much about the technology that we use but about the information that is shared," he continues. "You still need someone that knows the project to be able to communicate it to the stakeholders."

"At the end of the day, it's still all about people talking to people."

Lessons Learned

- A simple idea can blossom into big business. You just need to keep it watered with elbow grease.

- Be transparent with your clients. Always communicate to them where you're at with a project.

- The more high tech service providers become, the more they need to be high touch.