

Is affiliate marketing entrepreneurship's dark horse? Pro performance marketer David Hart shares his journey

 By Russell Jarvis

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David Hart is a forty-something entrepreneur from Durban. Nine years ago, he discovered affiliate marketing - the referrals-based commission earning model that gives him the freedom of being an independent business owner.

While affiliate marketing may be something of a dark horse, in South Africa it is a lively and interesting space to be in. From Zando in fashion to Faithful to Nature in natural foods, there are a bunch of local affiliate programmes with appealing prospects for budding entrepreneurs. Low start-up costs and an increasingly connected world are as good reasons as any to investigate the potential of affiliate marketing to build a viable income.

In 2012, David signed up for an online travel agency affiliate programme. When he started out, he was referring about 300 flight bookings every month. Today, he refers an average of 2,000 bookings per month through his two websites: sa-airlines.co.za and Domestic Flights South Africa.

I spoke to David to find out more about the performance-based sector, his journey as an affiliate marketer and some tips for success.

How did you get started with affiliate marketing?

When I started out I in the early 2010s, I focused on Amazon's affiliate programme and I launched the first website in South Africa to offer the Kindle e-reader. From there, I wanted to see if there were any programmes in the local scene and that was when I found Travelstart's. Even though Travelstart's affiliate programme was unknown at the time, the good commissions, affordability and dedicated support was convincing enough for me to sign up and it has taken off.



David Hart



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With so many affiliate programmes to choose from, what made you choose a programme in the travel category?

Having done my share of globetrotting in my younger years I have always been enthusiastic about travel. If you decide to go the affiliate marketing route, I think it's important to choose a category that resonates with you beyond earning potential. I also liked the fact that Travelstart is a local company and I'm a firm believer in supporting local businesses. They have a dedicated support team who are there to help affiliates, offer free tutorials, world-class technology and real-time reporting.

How long did it take to start earning money?

In the early days, it was quite slow and, being a novice in the travel business, I was up against some big competitors who had an established brand and base of customers. I also learned some harsh lessons early on when Google penalised my AdWords account. It was around this time that I shifted my focus to organic traffic acquisition.



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The real income appeared in 2014/15 when my websites' search engine visibility improved, and I began to realise the true potential of being an affiliate marketer. I quit my day job and put all my time into my websites and since then I have grown my flight sales by 40% year-on-year and increased my earning power by 68%.

Let's talk start-up costs... is it reasonable or expensive to become an affiliate marketer?

Travelstart has invested a lot of time and money to make their programme one of the best in Africa. With the exception of time, start-up costs are reasonable and joining the affiliate programme is free. Once you've joined an account manager supplies online marketing creative, white labels, iframes and many more marketing tools. Domain registration is inexpensive (around R99 per year) and hosting will set you back around R99 per month depending on the provider.



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Which lead/traffic generation tactics do you focus on?

Initially, I put all my resources into ads but six years ago I changed my approach to focus on organic traffic acquisition – I believe organic traffic, while time-consuming, is the best way to build lasting website visitors and keep marketing costs down.

Is affiliate marketing your only source of income?

Yes. Initially, I kept my day job in order to pay the bills.

Lastly, when you're not working on your website, what are you getting up to?

The flexibility and lifestyle affiliate marketing gives me is awesome. I can spend most of my time at home or working from wherever suits me, and I never miss out on supporting my children at school functions and sports. I don't answer to anyone and I set my own working hours. As long as I put quality time into maintaining my websites and keep up to date with Google, life as an affiliate marketer is rewarding. Who else can say they earn money while they sleep?

ABOUT RUSSELL JARVIS

A seasoned marketing and communications specialist, Russell Jarvis started his own consultancy in 2017 after eight years at online travel and FinTech companies. He is based in Cape Town.

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