

SmartWater – using nanotechnology to beat crime

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Alan Carr, Policy and Partnerships Manager (Low Carbon) at Birmingham Science City

What's invisible, impossible to remove and hated by criminals? SmartWater, of course.

As arguably one of the most effective innovations of modern times, it was a privilege to welcome Phil Cleary, SmartWater CEO, to provide one of the keynote speeches at Venturefest West Midlands last month.

Phil engrossed the Venturefest audience with an overview of how SmartWater – which is headquartered in Telford – was founded. It is a true story of brotherly cooperation, as he and his brother Mike co-founded SmartWater in 1993. Phil, a former police officer was responsible for brand development and Mike focused on product innovation, ensuring that the product actually worked from his garage.

Using a robust form of nanotechnology, SmartWater encrypts data with water as the application medium. There are potentially billions of datasets available, making a huge number of applications available.

The success of SmartWater is something that all SMEs can aspire to. Phil and Mike had a great concept – but also needed knowledge, passion, funding, patience and tenacity. This led them from Mike's garage to an internationally renowned product.

SmartWater's traceable liquid technology is unique as a security tool and has helped to secure hundreds of convictions for crimes ranging from armed robbery and burglary to the illegal trafficking of endangered species. Its uses include:

- Preventing metal theft, such as railway cables, as every piece of metal can now be traced back to its source
- Tracking mosquitos and malaria to help push them away from communities – by using SmartWater to analyse their faeces
- Combating poachers of tusks and horns, which can now be soaked in a unique SmartWater signature.
- Preventing war memorials being stolen for scrap by donating a SmartWater solution to all war memorials for free and by running a memorial database.
- Stopping the trade of artefacts by Syrian or Iraqi criminals via a joint US-UK initiative announced in March

Whatever the project, the whole ethos of SmartWater is to bring accountability back to crime, making escape a lot more difficult.

SmartWater is an international success story from the West Midlands – but how does a local SME aim to replicate the success that Phil and Mike have had? The advice from Phil at Venturefest was simple. “If you don’t have a marketing plan, it doesn’t matter how good your product is.” He asked the audience to imagine if the amazing solution that Mike had created had never been marketed properly – and the potential that would have been wasted.

The moral to this brilliant invention is this: the combination of a great technology with a robust marketing plan paves the way to success. Along with several years spent in a garage.

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