



THE ROAD MOST TRAVELLED

High roads, low roads, dead ends and fast lanes – be it customers or reality show contestants, modern Britain loves to talk in journeys. But Steve and Cat Smith have miles under their belts, both figuratively and literally, including a fascinating passage to India before coming home to Scotland.

Their travels in recent years have had more to do with business opportunity than spiritual enlightenment, although you suspect the husband and wife team behind Pixel Image seek and absorb inspiration from all around them wherever they are in the world.

Pixel Image is responding to the changing property buyer journey, with the need for digital connections that help to illuminate emotional ones and trigger a purchase.

The Edinburgh-based company has a range of software systems that help housebuilders to sell new-build property off-plan. Pixel Image is embedded in the Scottish housebuilding community, but with plans and ambitions to head south too and digitally partner with the English new homes market.

Mr and Mrs Smith – common name; singular people. This is proptech cultivated from a rich field of experience, not geeks in a basement surrounded by empty pizza cartons. “We’ve had those pizza moments as well, to be fair!” says Dubliner Steve Smith, now very much an adopted son of Edinburgh, driving digital initiatives, but crucially, like his Scottish wife Cat, acutely aware of the specific requirements of the housebuilding industry.

Theirs is a refreshingly collaborative approach to the challenges of building and selling houses and what innovation can bring to the marketing mix, rather than some of the self-styled disruptors who criticise housebuilders as slow adopters and assume putting prop in front of tech makes them ‘must have’ revolutionaries.

“We have a deep understanding of how housebuilders work, what technology adds value and crucially how it impacts on budgets and targets. It needs to have been robustly road-tested and it needs to be relevant,” says Steve Smith.

Pixel Image has thoroughly researched the proptech market to find where the competition really lies in its sector. It discovered nobody had its unique

combination of market knowledge, technology and housebuilding industry experience and how to apply it to that business environment.

“Much of proptech, like other disruptors, is trying to find a home. Those that add value and recognise and respect the core values of the industry will survive. But I see a distillation in the market place and many realising they are more ad tech, with bigger budgets available, than proptech. We believe in evolution not disruption.”

Both Steve and Cat started on drawing boards, with architectural and housing backgrounds, even first meeting in an architect’s office in London, before the first of many global journeys together.

“When computer aided design (CAD) came in, we both signed up to City & Guilds and were smitten by it. I was more the programming side and Steve 3D,” says Cat Smith.

The couple both worked for the Miller Group, with Steve at Miller Homes and Cat at Miller Partnerships. This was the early 1990s with technology in its infancy and housebuilders employing watercolour artists to paint housetypes for planning and marketing purposes – easels not pixels. How quaint that sounds today.

“I wrote a report on the future of computers in housebuilding, which included plot and finishes selectors, 3D, virtual reality, goggles – all the stuff we do today. It was too early, but when I left Miller to set up Pixel Image in 1996, Miller became our first client,” says Steve Smith.

Unlike Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie, Mr and Mrs Smith are not assassins working for rival agencies, but they have their crosshairs fixed on the same target – housebuilders and their buyers. They share a passion for what they do with Steve the more visual of the two and Cat nailing the detail and process.

“It is important to remember, however much technology evolves, that housebuilders are not tech companies. There are reasons they move steadily, rather than too quickly,” says Cat Smith.

“We look to become digital partners, but with all facets of the business, working with housebuilders in terms of land buying, planning, design verification and sales and marketing, applying the most cost-effective interactive systems for selling off-plan and



3D content where it is most needed. Using different companies at each stage is a waste of resource and we understand the development process and the business model.”

Steve and Cat had barely touched down back in Edinburgh when we spoke, spending the last 10 years in India, having set up an office for the business in Pune, tapping into a rich seam of well-educated, IT-minded young people in a city known as the Oxford of the East – high quality, lower costs.

Pixel Image has worked on around 300 projects in India, as well as work in Dubai, with Pune also servicing their UK client base. Worldwide, Pixel has been involved in more than 2,900 schemes.

However, the sheer weight of British business opportunities prompted the return to Edinburgh with their two children, bringing back with them not only great cultural memories and voyages of discovery, but a determination to keep a keen eye on the Indian market and looking to step back into it when the time is right.

But now they are back in the New York-loft-style apartment they designed and built in Edinburgh, but still seeking inspiration from exploration and their surroundings, however familiar, be it a Fringe performance at the Edinburgh Festival, or walking the Royal Mile.

When it comes to a new build property, there remains for many a distinct lack of visual engagement. You are buying off-plan and therefore physically not seeing the bricks and mortar of your single biggest purchase. So to optimise that virtual visualisation, coupled with the opportunity to customise, is not about clever digital gimmickry; it makes copper-bottomed commercial sense for both builder and buyer.

“There has been a huge change in how consumers buy products, be it through Amazon or Netflix, or buying a car.





"Tools to look around a house, customise it and visually understand it are vital. Our software gives customers the confidence to make the decision to buy," says Cat Smith.

Pixel Image's Home Selector technology allows potential buyers to explore new developments from all angles and visualise how the space will look when complete. Its Finishes Selector means users can personalise and specify their choice of finishes, which can then be integrated into the housebuilder's supply chain and procurement team.

"It is a huge waste of a sales adviser's time presenting buyers with kitchen options, or showing them through drawers of carpet tiles," says Cat Smith.

Research suggests it can take eight hours for a buyer to decide on their off-plan kitchen with a sales adviser, reducing the financial benefits to the builder of offering upgrades because of operational inefficiencies, when potential purchasers could be doing that in the comfort of their existing kitchen, interactively and intuitively, narrowing their preferences and becoming a much more engaged and qualified buyer.

"You have to have real confidence in the end product to buy off-plan, which is why many will go second-hand, as they can physically see what they are buying. Give them the digital tools and graphics to instil that confidence in the delivery of the promised home and that would be a massive fillip to the new build market," says Steve Smith.

The five-star Balmoral Hotel in Edinburgh is home to Pixel's customised Home Selector for The Crescent at Donaldson's by CALA Homes (East). The interactive sales suite in the hotel has helped drive off-plan sales of the apartments totalling nearly £8m to date. You can experience virtual visits, 3D imagery and interactive maps, while filtering by plot, price and aspect. You can also put on a VR headset and fully immerse yourself in the scheme.

"Working with CALA on this iconic development and helping to communicate the ambitious architectural design has been a fantastic collaborative experience and testament to the power of 3D visualisation and the value in doing more digitally," says Steve Smith. Other clients include Springfield Properties and Mactaggart & Mickel.

"Our digital assets are particularly effective on consortium schemes or near other new build developments, where our clients can stand out against more traditional marketing tools, giving them strong brand positioning and a competitive edge."

Of course, all this digital collateral is not just effective for selling today. The data collected gives housebuilders a bank of information about the profile and preferences of those buyers and indeed those who don't buy and why, which, in turn, can be fed into SEO, lead generation and social media targeting, de-risking future developments armed with the knowledge of what purchasers want from actual buying and browsing history.

"Unique data collected on every site, genuine insight rather than anecdotal, getting to know your potential customers better, what is popular, what is not, and what needs to change. Other industries worked this out a long time ago," said Steve Smith.

The acid test of how housebuilders have embraced technology will come when you 'add property to basket and proceed to checkout' by purchasing online. But, figuratively, if not yet literally, that is what you are doing when you buy off-plan having ticked all the boxes.

The technology is out there, but the challenge is to instil potential buyers with the confidence to truly believe, having made all their customised choices, that what they 'see' is exactly what they will get.

As for journeys, Mr and Mrs Smith learnt a long time ago there is no traffic jam on the extra mile. Expect plenty more pixels yet. [sh](#)

