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Proof of how positive thoughts can lead to enormous success

# SMARTS

IDEAS FOR MAKING WISER USE OF YOUR TIME AND ATTENTION

DOING GOOD

## SAVING THE WORLD, ONE BRACELET AT A TIME

After 23 years in corporate Neil Robinson quit his job. He wanted some time to evaluate his life and purpose, and choose what his next 20 years would look like. What he found was more than a cause, but a mission to do good and change lives. **BY NADINE TODD**

### TAKE NOTE

A little can go a long way. You don't need a big idea that will have a huge impact. You need a small idea that will impact lots and lots of people in small but significant ways. That's how you affect real change.

### VITAL STATS

**PLAYER:** Neil Robinson  
**COMPANY:** Relate Bracelets  
**WHAT THEY DO:** A 100% not-for-profit social enterprise that has raised R40 million to date.  
**VISIT:** [www.relate.org.za](http://www.relate.org.za)

**I**F YOU'VE EVER bought a beaded bracelet that supports a cause (for example: United Against Malaria, Operation Smile SA or PinkDrive), chances are it was a Relate Bracelet. If you bought it at Woolworths, Clicks, Sorbet or Foschini, it most definitely was. A 100% not-for-profit social enterprise, Relate Bracelets is run like a for-profit business. Its CEO, Neil Robinson, is adamant about this. He joined the business in 2014 when founder, Lauren Gillis, was looking for someone to turn her non-profit into a sustainable enterprise that did not rely on donations. With a strong background in marketing and communications, and the desire to do something that had a purpose and would change people's lives, Robinson was her guy. Here's how he's using passion and purpose to make a difference.

**I've found that the universe gives you what you need, based on the energy you put out there.**

I had quit my job after 23 years in corporate, predominantly selling tobacco, alcohol and pharmaceuticals. I worked with exciting brands, had a great career and was doing well financially, but I saw how the stress of corporate life was affecting the health of my friends and colleagues. I'd also been involved in mandated CSI projects for our BEE ratings, and I felt more fulfilled by that than my 'real' job. It was time to quit and take stock of my life. I signed up for an MBA and planned to take a year or two off. The universe had something different in mind. That Monday a business coach I'd worked with forwarded an email from Relate Bracelets who were looking for someone who could take the business to the next level. He thought it was perfect for me. It wasn't what I had planned, but it was what I needed. Two months later I had joined them.

**They had this incredible idea, but they needed to do all the for-profit stuff to make it work.**

From my side, I wanted to find a way to put money into the hands of people who desperately needed it, not just shareholders. I wanted to use my experience to help better other people's lives. My previous experience of the non-profit world was unsustainable business models or corporates throwing money at causes so that they could tick a box. This also isn't sustainable. But Relate was behind the third door. A non-profit that wanted someone with hard business experience to take Lauren's vision to the next level. What I really liked

about the Relate trust was that they had that vision and philosophy and I could take it, run with it and grow it, realizing the trustees' vision. To make a real impact, Relate needed corporate and retail partnerships to get local and international reach. We also needed to continue acting as a public company, with transparency and accountability being of paramount importance.

**We needed a model that was scalable and powerful, and that aligned our goals and initiatives with our potential corporate partners.**

A partnership needs to be based on mutual respect and understanding. To approach our partners, we needed a model that worked for them as well. Relate fits the bill. Through our bracelets, we support 400 *gogos* living on tiny pensions, 30 students and 90 causes, while our retail partners allow us to provide this support by getting the product to the consumer. Consumers also have a simple way to support causes they believe in, while visibly showcasing those causes by wearing the bracelets. Sometimes the biggest and most complex problems have relatively simple solutions if you can find a way to align multiple interests.

**"In ten years' time it might not be bracelets, it might be something else, but the model and philosophy of the business will always remain the same."**



**Our model is simple:** For every bracelet sold, one third covers manufacturing and material costs, one third is donated to one of 90 charities we support and one third is what we call our 'investment' portion. Through this portion we donate equipment, time and money to support skills development. At any given time we have between 25 and 30 young adults working for us. They are all from disadvantaged backgrounds, and they earn a salary finishing the bracelets, packaging and shipping them, while receiving skills training for their future careers, such as certified caregivers, truck or ambulance drivers, hairdressers or soccer coaches.

**We're on a good business journey. Our partners should be too.** Woolworths is one of our biggest partners. We need to work with ethical brands to maintain our own mandate. We've said no to partners, and we don't take donations; they're not sustainable. We want people to work for a living. We want to employ people and have the social and psychological impact that this achieves.

**The youngsters we employ come from challenged backgrounds.** They have their matric and yet they struggle to write a motivational letter in English due to poor educational standards. By getting a job and training, their lives are changed. The *gogos* create big balls of beads that we use for our finished products. Their pensions are R1 500 and we're able to on average add between R400 and R600 per month to their accounts. It doesn't sound like a lot, but in the right hands a little can go a long way. Many of them look after Aids orphaned kids as well, and they need a chance in life. We need to break the cycle of poverty.

**It's important to remember that the smallest things can make a big difference.**

We're changing the world one bracelet at a time. We believe bracelets will always be around, particularly because we're not selling a bracelet, we're selling a model — a wearable tattoo. In ten years' time it might not be bracelets, it might be something else, but the model and philosophy of the business will always remain the same.

**The US is a big market for us.**

The causes are local, but the manufacturing costs come back to South Africa. As that market grows, our local reach will grow. We're also in Australia and the UK. Our model is simple and powerful. We may

be growing internationally, but we act as a business to create jobs and opportunities in South Africa.

**We have a higher purpose.** The more we sell, the more lives we can change. That's what drives us. When it works well we have four pegs of the square: Great retail partners, great media partners, great consumer engagement at store level — and us.

**Don't ever get complacent.** You need to look beyond the bracelet to the cause. If every South African tax payer bought one bracelet a year for between R40 and R50, that would be R250 million annually. It all adds up. **EM**