

An entrepreneur with a social conscience

By Max Marx

“Gees. A blur!” That’s the reaction from **Stafford Masie – inventor-entrepreneur, dreamer, financial services sector disruptor, angel investor, lecturer and founder and CEO of tech company Thumbzup** – when asked what a day in his life looks like.

I first came across Masie at Henley Business School Africa, where he was part of a panel of judges assessing the presentations of participants in the Bankseta’s International Executive Development Programme - a programme designed and facilitated by Henley to take leaders in the financial services sector on a journey that would birth them as disruptive leaders.

Masie is a very busy man. He is the inventor of the Payment Pebble and Payment Blade - devices that are receiving global attention and have captured the imagination of both small and micro enterprises as well as large corporates in the retail sector.

The Payment Pebble, which plugs into a mobile phone, is a mobile point of sale terminal enabling merchants to process payments remotely. It enables small and micro entrepreneurs to accept debit and credit card payments from customers, whether they’re selling goods from a spaza shop in Diepkloof, for example, or straw mats to tourists in remote regions of South Africa.

The Payment Blade is a cost-effective smartphone that works with the Payment Pebble to accept payment by any means – whether customers want to pay by swiping, tapping, using SnapScan, QR codes, barcodes and (soon) even bitcoin.

Since launching the Payment Pebble in 2012, Thumbzup has been on an incredible growth trajectory. The company has offices

in South Africa, Australia and Hong Kong, and the Payment Pebble and Payment Blade are now being launched in various South East Asian markets. Masie is presently also exploring the US market. In December 2015 thumbzup disclosed that Visa had purchased an equity stake in the company.

Masie, who grew up in Eldorado Park – where his family, like so many others in the community, faced socioeconomic challenges – does not think of himself as a born entrepreneur. He became an “inventive” entrepreneur as a result of a personal conviction.

We failed tremendously, over and over again, and eventually I thought it couldn’t be done. But I was driven by my conviction and eventually we found a way

He gets his unrelenting drive from the knowledge that there is no fallback – no financial safety net if he does not succeed. He credits his success to his father, who instilled in him the value of independence and gave him the opportunity to see another side of life.

In the early 1990s, Masie’s father sent him to Israel.

“My father wanted to get me away from Eldorado Park where young men get swallowed up by the social norms. He gave me an opportunity to explore other parts of the world, which exposed me to different opinions and points of view and broadened my perspective,” he says.

“When I returned to South Africa, I couldn’t be ‘the coloured gangster guy in the township’. I felt I had to do something with my life and saw the opportunity that connectivity and the internet present in connecting humanity, giving people a broader interpretation of life and unlocking latent human capital.”

After some years at Telkom and Dimension Data, Masie started his first business venture – a systems integration software development and hardware deployment company. He grew that business and then sold his shares and joined software and services company Novell.

Shortly thereafter he was recruited by Novell’s HQ and moved to Provo, Utah, in the US in 1997. Stafford spent seven years in the US and then returned to South Africa in 2004 to assume the role of Novell SA country manager.

Perhaps he is best known as establishing Google’s South Africa presence, as country manager, a position he held from 2006 to 2009.

The story about how Masie became an inventive entrepreneur and developed the Payment Pebble and Payment Blade devices – technologies that are seriously disrupting the financial services sector - has its roots in human tragedy.

Masie met a woman who lost a child because she could not pay her municipal account. It was not that the woman didn’t have the money to pay, but because she was confined to bed due to complications



Stafford Masie

during childbirth, she could not go and make the payment.

When a municipal worker arrived at her door to disconnect her water and electricity, she had the money to pay him there and then, but he did not have the means to accept the payment. As a result, her child died of exposure.

“It’s because of that encounter that I am driven to invent solutions that can ease humanity’s burden and change people’s lives. I never again want anyone to lose a child because they can’t make a payment.”

The development of the Payment Pebble was no easy road and the first three years was extremely challenging for Masie and his team. He considered giving up several times. “We failed tremendously, over and over again, and eventually I thought it couldn’t be done. But I was driven by my conviction and eventually we found a way.”

Today, the Payment Pebble is the market leader in mobile payment devices in South Africa.

“What is so gratifying about the Payment Pebble is the impact it has had on businesses. We’ve had tens of thousands of businesses adopt it in South Africa – businesses that before were trying to survive financial exclusion. Our device facilitates financial inclusion, is inexpensive, easy to use, plug and play, robust in its feature set, completely mobile, rugged, uses very little data and works with its own Thumbzup-designed app. It was built to survive the African environment.”

There are big plans to launch the Payment Pebble and Payment Blade in Malaysia and Indonesia. “None of those markets present challenges to us because we’ve overcome them in South Africa,” says Masie. “That’s the message I am trying to share with other

South African entrepreneurs. If you find success with your product in South Africa, which is a really tough market to crack, you can make it anywhere.

“So find success here first and global applicability is a greater prospect.”

After establishing the Payment Pebble in South Africa, Masie tested its applicability in the Australian market. “We chose Australia because it’s one of the most mature and regulated financial services markets in the world. Once we had proved we could survive in both the African and Australian markets we knew our products could succeed in any market around the world.”

Masie says Africa forces one to focus on things that matter.

“The next Twitter, Facebook and Google are not going to come from Africa. But the next Google of water purification, the next Twitter of healthcare and the next Facebook of financial services is going to come from here. Why? Because those things truly matter and Africa is ripe for invention and innovation that is humanity and conviction driven.”

Masie adds that, if entrepreneurs want to invent products that tangibly change people’s lives, then South Africa couldn’t be a better market. “It’s a market that will test your conviction, your passion, your tolerance for failure and the applicability of your solution beyond any limits you’ve imagined. But if your product works here, no venture capitalist in the world will frown upon what you’ve invented.”

With the invention of the Payment Blade, Masie and his Thumbzup team have embraced a global challenge. “It’s every business owner’s challenge right now to decide which payment mechanism to have in-store, because technology has enabled myriad ways of paying, whether it’s swiping

or tapping your card, paying with QR code or barcode, with bitcoin or through contactless mechanisms.

“No financial services institution has been able to offer what the Payment Blade can - a transversal solution that gives merchants peace of mind knowing that they never have to worry about which payment technology a customer will present in-store.”

Masie says technology, connectivity and opportunity have the capability of unlocking the enormous well of latent human capital that remains untapped in South Africa. He is not a supporter of disruption *per se* but of disruption that takes humanity forward.

“The democratisation of technology is enabling that. Technology’s true purpose is to unlock abundance. There are so many problems in the world today that I believe will be resolved, not because governments or venture capitals are investing, but because people become connected. We will be able to solve some of humanity’s biggest challenges if we focus on solving these problems together.”

Since the Industrial Revolution, business thinking has transformed significantly, says Masie. First businesses were valued on their size, then valued on their people and information sharing abilities. Then knowledge, listening to customers and being more collaborative became the buzzwords for business success.

“All these were about building resources inside of businesses. Today we live in a world of co-creativity, where customers have better technology than businesses have and have the capacity and capability to help build those businesses from the outside.

“For businesses to compete effectively today they need to build eco-systems that create platforms for co-creation. Co-creativity made Apple, and killed Kodak. The company’s executives didn’t realise that creativity, innovation and invention is now a co-creative exercise. They forgot what was happening on the outside and only used internal resources to build their cameras.

“They failed to understand that people no longer care so much about the quality of their devices or the grain in their pictures. What they care about is putting their pictures on their social streams and having people like them.

“Businesses need to realise that people want to consume new technology to express their humanity and leave a legacy. They want to be recognised and prove they were part of something. These things speak to love and empathy, and businesses today need to personify that if they want to succeed.” ■