

Spotlight on Smartvel

Submitted by clatruiyols on Wed, 29/11/2023 - 13:34

Travel TechLab by HBX Group is the innovation lab of HBX Group, powered by Wayra. The lab seeks to constantly re-imagine the world of travel by finding new ways to help our customers succeed, and to enable our business partners to achieve their goals.

As part of our ongoing mission to co-innovate with startup partners to deliver impactful, customer-focused experiences, products and platforms which reshape the travel industry, the Lab hosted a **Pitch Day Challenge**. Startups from around the world were invited to showcase the forward-looking ways in which their products and services are providing solutions to real-life challenges currently being faced within the industry.

In this '**Spotlight On**' blog series, we'll be shining a light on each of the four start-ups that were shortlisted during this Pitch Day Challenge, to bring their work to the forefront of the travel industry's focus.

This first 'Spotlight On' will explore the journey of Smartvel, a B2B SaaS company working within the travel industry to improve customer experience and SEO through the use of AI-powered digital solutions and high-quality content that resonates with their clients' audiences, to ultimately drive increased sales and brand awareness.

We spoke to founders **Iñigo Valenzuela and Esperanza Zarauz** about the company, their mission, and the solutions they're bringing to the industry.

Can you describe the genesis of Smartvel as a startup, including the idea that sparked its creation?

Smartvel was founded by Iñigo Valenzuela and Esperanza Zarauz. Both with C-level experience, we thought it was the right time to start our own adventure. Iñigo worked for many years in companies such as Marsans and CWT, and Esperanza in the media industry at Prisa and WPP. The beginnings were a rollercoaster, with ups and downs that involved discovering just how difficult it is to create a B2B solution in the travel industry, whilst always looking for technological advantages that would make our company stand out from the rest.

We started Smartvel because we wanted to start our own company, and we thought it was the perfect dynamic for both of us. The genesis of the idea was that, as an industry, we had not solved the problem of how to **properly inform the end traveller and provide real consulting added value** in one part of the travel journey: information about the destination.

Companies were focused on their own products instead of adding value in this area. We thought that **inspiration drives sales and value**, and that there was an opportunity to build a **global trusted solution** for that.

Can you articulate Smartvel's mission as a company and its long-term vision, outlining the problems it seeks to solve, and the opportunities it presents?

Our mission is to improve our clients' customer experience and SEO through AI-powered digital solutions and meaningful content, resulting in increased sales and brand awareness across the entire customer journey.

We're present at the top of the funnel, or the 'inspiration' phase; in the pre-departure phase, or in pre-departure emails; and also at the destination, with different solutions for each interaction.

We offer the unique blend of a technology company and a content company, using technology to create content in a more targeted and efficient way. But at the same time, we have a relevant team of copywriters who create content at scale using technology as a critical tool.

How does Smartvel fit into the larger industry landscape, and what is its growth potential?

We want to be the reference in the industry when it comes to travel content, understood as information for the traveller. The market is huge, and we are very happy to partner with Hotelbeds as we think it is the perfect fit for us to support our growth in different verticals like hotels, travel agencies and DMOs.

We have customers on every continent, although we have been focusing more on the airline industry lately, so we think that hotels offer the best opportunity for global growth.

What is your unique value proposition, and how does it set you apart from the competition?

We offer the **best content** with a mature travel tech company that **provides customisation in content and products**, detail, expertise, and a **range of solutions** that fit with the overall strategy of the industry.

Tell us about the innovative solutions that Smartvel offers!

First, there are our **Destination Content solutions**, with everything there is to do in a destination, with POIs, restaurants, events like music, sports and culture, and any layer of content that our customers want to integrate, such as tours and activities, their own products, et cetera.

Second, we have our **'EntryDocs' solution**, where we provide all the information needed to make a trip from A to B, taking into account nationality and residence. We provide health documents and visa requirements to take the stress out of travelling, and use technology to detect changes in these requirements. We read the official websites every hour to see if anything has changed.

Who is your target audience, and what are the specific needs or pain points that your offerings address?

As a B2B SaaS company in the travel industry, we work with all players, from the suppliers of the final product, such as airlines, hotels, car rentals; to the classic intermediaries, like travel agencies, tour operators and bed banks; and all the different technology players around them, such as GDSs and tech providers. We also work with DMOs and other segments such as insurance or F&B.

Tell us about Smartvel's accomplishments and milestones. What are your current significant achievements to date?

If we had to name our most important milestones, we would be remiss not to talk about how we achieved a positive EBITDA and operating cash flow, which is very important for any company – but for a startup, this is the difference between ‘life’ and ‘death’. We have also achieved significant global MkShare in some of our products. For example, with EntryDocs, we’ve reached a total global MkShare of international travellers of 30%.

As a company, we believe one of our biggest achievements is that we have, and continue to maintain, a strong culture in times of uncertainty and change, such as COVID or remote working, where innovation, and product change mindsets are key. That we also have a positive churn figure – which means that upsells from current customers exceed losses of portfolio – means a healthy portfolio of customers.

Another of our biggest achievements is being able to work with some of the most respected and biggest brands in the industry as a relatively small company (50 FTE). We always say that having demanding customers makes us a better company. Not to mention completing our first M&A, by buying a direct competitor!

How do you foster innovation, as a company?

Innovation is a challenge for any company, and it is exactly the same for a startup. We have some advantages, especially size and agility, but there are many risks: we can't fail too often to be generous; cash is king and can easily shut down your company; and the trade-off between talent and salary is complex to manage.

Our key to success, if you can call it success, has been to look for the best team, create a culture of transparency and excellence, and always look for new opportunities. What was a disruptive solution at a certain moment will become a difficult market over time. The only solution is to generate change, to be really open to it, and to create new solutions together with our customers.

We use the classic agile approach, so we are not very original. Of course, we do quarterly reviews of our strategic plan, reviewing and updating the mid- and long-term priorities.

Meet the team at Smartvel



Smartvel's directors with Threedot.io team in a strategic session, pictured from left to right : Glenn Morgan (Threedot); Miguel Camacho, CTO, Eric Leopold (Threedot); María Liniers, CCO; Iñigo Valenzuela, CEO; Belén Romero, COO; Esperanza Zarauz, CFO

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TRAVELTECH LAB BY HBX Group

We explore the intersection of emerging technology and travel, to build innovative products and consumer experiences all whilst engineering solutions that advance HBX Group's innovation agenda, and better the lives of our customers.

We're firm believers that in a collaborative environment, it's all about exploring new horizons

to future-proof our business and drive digital transformation.

Learn more about our work [here](#), and visit the [Smartvel website](#) to discover more about their offering.

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