

# Compu-stor moves with the times

The Manford family brings four generations of commercial experience to its growing Compu-stor business.

**CAPACITY:** Jeremy (left) and Robert Manford look over their 10,000 square metre Belmont warehouse. **Photos:** Attila Csaszar



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**5-PAGE FEATURE**

## Key Takeaways

- Compu-stor has expanded nationally
- Digital storage is transforming the business
- Manford family has retained ownership
- Mark Lindsay chairs advisory board
- Non-family managers hired to run Sydney branch

**R**OBERT and Jeremy Manford, who run Australia's largest family owned document storage and information management business, have family business in their blood.

Their great-grandfather Frank was a trucking pioneer, who started his business in the 1890s operating camel trains to the Goldfields.

Their grandfather John and uncle Tony continued to expand the trucking business, which traded as Frank Manford Pty Ltd up to the mid-1960s, when it was sold to national operator Brambles Industries.

As with many family businesses, it was sold to accommodate the needs of a growing family.

"There were five shareholders, three were women and they were not involved," their father, Peter Manford, recalled.

"They wanted some dividends so it was decided to sell the business."

Peter Manford started his working life as an employee of Brambles Manford, which grew to become one of Western Australia's largest trucking and logistics groups in the 1970s and 1980s.

During his time at Brambles Manford, Mr Manford helped the company expand into three new lines of business – CHEP pallets, armoured cars and document storage.

"I effectively started three separate businesses, and as it

turned out that was a blessing in disguise," he said.

In 1987, Mr Manford struck out on his own after a falling out with his boss in the eastern states.

"He said to me, 'If you think you're so good, why don't you go and start your own business?' he recalls.

"I said, 'Well if you make it worth my while, I will.'"

"About a month later I got a cheque for \$45,000, which was like winning Lotto, and that's how I started Compu-stor."

Mr Manford said he didn't even have a forklift when he opened his first storage warehouse in East Perth.

He sorted invoices in the evening at the dining table with his partner, Jenny, helping out.

Turnover was just \$114,000 in the first year.

The business has expanded greatly since then, with a 10,000 square metre purpose-built warehouse in Belmont able to store up to 1 million boxes, a warehouse in Melbourne of a similar size, and a smaller facility in Sydney to support its move there in 2015.

The day-to-day running of the business is now in the hands of Robert and Jeremy, who run the WA and Victoria operations respectively.

Peter Manford said he genuinely appreciated the fact that his father (John) did not help establish Compu-stor.



**TRUCKING:** A young Robert and Jeremy Manford.

**“It's about being an end-to-end provider, as opposed to just the back-of-house resource that clients use when the records are at their final stage - Robert Manford**

"Before he died I told him the best advice he ever gave me was not to give me any money to put into Compu-stor," he said. "I had two outside shareholders, and I bought them out in the early years, otherwise I did it on my own."

Mr Manford said the outside shareholders – the late mortgage origination entrepreneur Tim Holmes and former stockbroker Rob Bird – had provided a lot of help through their business networks.

"I've tried to do the same for Robert and Jeremy," Mr Manford said.

### Advisory board

Compu-stor has had an advisory board for more than 15 years, and it now comprises three outsiders and three family members, including Robert and Jeremy.

Perth lawyer David Craig was the first person appointed to the board, primarily to act as an independent sounding board.



**HISTORY:** Peter Manford started Compu-stor in 1987.



**EARLY DAYS:** Hauling goods before trucks.

"I did it for Robert and Jeremy when they both worked out of Perth, so there was someone who knew a bit about the business that they could talk to other than their father," Mr Manford said.

When the business expanded to Melbourne, Mr Manford asked his old friend and lawyer David Inglis to take on a similar role.

The most recent move, four years ago, was the appointment of Mark Lindsay as independent chairman.

Mr Lindsay brought broad experience to the role, as a former accountant and chief executive of Quick Service Restaurant Holdings, which operated the Chicken Treat and Red Rooster fast food chains.

"We appointed him chairman

for the group, so there is very little involvement from me anymore," Mr Manford said.

"The only thing I watch like a hawk is the cash flow.

"I'm the sole shareholder, so it comes out of my pocket."

Mr Manford has minimised the use of borrowings, though he has taken out loans to fund the company's warehouses.

"Perth funded Melbourne, and now Melbourne and Perth are funding Sydney," he said.

"It's getting stronger and stronger every month; I think it will be our biggest branch."

Mr Manford said the business had no hire purchase or leasing debts.

"Everything under the roof we own, I paid cash," he said.

Like many Perth people, he has an affinity for property.

"One of the best decisions I made was to own the properties," Mr Manford said.

#### Fourth generation

Robert and Jeremy have been around the business from a very young age.

"We grew up in the warehouse, Jeremy and I often helped out after school and on holidays," Robert said.

"That means we understand what everyone does here."

The Compu-stor business has changed substantially since it was established, and is continuing to evolve.

The core business was physical document storage, and added to that have been services such as document destruction and pallet storage.

The biggest change has been the move to digital imaging.

"We've become a digital storage business as well as a physical storage business, which has been a big change," Robert said.

"We don't need a customer to have physical records to be a provider for them."

Jeremy said a big focus was helping customers understand how they could use new technology to improve their business efficiency.

"We're now working with the customers, to understand what they do with their information and what the records are needed for," he said.

"It's really now around business processes, to understand

how our business can help them."

Law firms, for instance, used to store wills and deeds in their CBD offices.

Compu-stor is now able to house both physical and digital versions of these documents, in warehouses that are safer and more secure.

"A lot of time they just need to view what has been written, they don't need the physical document, Jeremy said.

"We can scan the physical documents and they're available almost immediately; it's all about minimising the time taken to retrieve the information.

"That builds in process improvements."

Robert said customers could access Compu-stor's web portal, not only to track physical records but to view digital records.

"It's about being an end-to-end provider, as opposed to just the back-of-house resource that clients use when the records are at their final stage," he said.

**15 years**  
**COMPU-STOR HAS HAD AN ADVISORY BOARD**

While the trend towards digital imaging is unstoppable, the business has continued to invest in the traditional side of its business.

This includes having a software system to track documents in the warehouses, storage racks that stand 13 metres tall, and a wire guidance system to help the pickers move efficiently around the warehouses.

#### Interstate growth

The interstate push has been a big focus for Robert and Jeremy.

"About 12 years ago we started having conversations about where we could go, and Rob and I were quite passionate about driving the business to the next stage, and for us that was going interstate," Jeremy said.

"It was a quantum leap, but luckily we were invited by a customer who wanted us to branch out over east.

"Funnily enough, I re-signed them about two weeks ago;

they're a multinational company and they've been with us for 26 years."

Robert said the family had looked externally to support its growth.

"We're not afraid to go outside the family to get advice and the right skills," he said.

"The original family entity needs to expand out to allow for the business to grow."

This concept was put into practice last year when the business employed two experienced managers to open up the Sydney operation.

"They came on board, which has been great, because one of the biggest concerns for a family business is having a non-family member involved," Robert said.

#### Competition

Compu-stor's biggest competitor is US-based Iron Mountain, which this year acquired Recall, the business Brambles established in the 1980s.

As part of that deal, Iron Mountain's legacy business in Australia was recently sold into a private equity backed venture called ZircoDATA.

Other competitors are mostly big international players but also include Perth-based listed company CTI Logistics.

The Manfords believe Compu-stor's family ownership is an advantage.

"I push as hard as I can, particularly to the boys in Sydney, that we're a family business, and there's no question in my mind it has paid off," Peter Manford said.

"It's more personalised, it's as simple as that."

Mr Manford said he always gave his business card to customers, and told them to call if they ever had any problems.

It's a practice his sons have continued.

"The customers have our business cards, they can call us direct any time," Jeremy said.

Robert believes Compu-stor's specialist focus is another advantage.

"We're passionate about the fact we are solely a document storage and information management provider, whereas our competitors have multiple arms," he said.

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