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global partner

Grupo Delta:

A family and a team with an entrepreneurial spirit

This case study was carried out by Cristina Iturrioz and Cristina Aragón for the Antonio Aranzábal Foundation and Deusto Business School. The authors would like to thank Grupo Delta for their collaboration and, in particular, Gabi Sola, Mayi Sola, and Ana García for participating in the research project. The final version of the case study was approved in January 2021. Translator: Bettertext.

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November 1989 went down in the history of humankind for the fall of the Berlin Wall. But in the Sola family history, a family of seven siblings, that year will be remembered for the opening of a small photocopy shop at number 10, Eustasio Amilibia street, in San Sebastián. The small enterprise, *Copiplan Delta S. L.*, was founded by the brothers Óscar and Gonzalo Sola together with Jesús Larrea and his wife, their "bosses" at that time, and was controlled in equal parts. However, the company's history dates back even further. Jesús Larrea and his wife were the owners of the first Delta shop in Reina Regente street, where the Sola's father, Gabriel, who was an Accounting Professor at the ESTE-University of Deusto, used to edit and photocopy his manuals. Thanks to this relationship, Óscar and Gonzalo began to work with the couple, and after a few years of learning and collaborating, the two families, Sola and Larrea, set up a new business venture. The Sola family were tremendously excited by this new project into which they invested everything they had, and, as with every other undertaking, the brothers devoted all their energy and many hours of work.

The beginnings: setting up the family business

Thanks to technological progress, more modern printers are able to meet the growing demand, and the printing industry, which at the time of the company's foundation was in its infancy, is continually evolving both in terms of the products and services it offers to customers. For this reason, after a few years of intense activity as a small photocopy shop, the Sola brothers became aware of the importance of continuing to invest in the latest technology to be able to differentiate themselves in this field.

Thus, ever since the foundation of the enterprise, the Sola brothers have been convinced of the importance of being attentive to any new development that could give continuity to their business and make it grow. At a time when computers were uncommon, the young Sola brothers did not hesitate to make sizeable investments that allowed them to digitalise their business processes. And so, amongst other machines, they decided to purchase a scanner, which allowed them to produce digital copies of documents that could then be further transformed or copied. In those days, this meant potentially providing services of a much greater value added than simply the photocopying service. During this period of transformation, a third brother, Gabriel Sola, joined the other two in the business. Gabriel had left another company, and in 1992, with the lump-sum payment of his unemployment benefit, he bought a powerful computer with which, at first, he became Delta's supplier of scanning and graphic design services.

The Sola brothers were absolutely convinced of their products' appeal, and in 1994, with the idea of expanding the company's production capacity, they acquired the biggest printer on the market. Again, this was a major commitment since it meant investing 30 million pesetas (at present, approximately € 180,000), for which they asked for a loan at the Bank of Vitoria, located in the older part of San Sebastian.

We were only shopkeepers with an investment project, and we needed financial support. Elkargi¹ had initially compromised on underwriting the whole financial operation, but once we had the machine, Elkargi refused to do so. I then went to the BBV bank where Xabier Otaegui, who trusted us, gave us the support we needed to move forward. – Gabriel Sola, Manager of Grupo Delta.

Totally committed to the business, the Sola brothers and all their team worked day and night as well as at weekends. Things were going well and, in 1994, an opportunity arose to open a new shop in San Francisco street in Gros, a district of San Sebastián. And thus, a new company was created, *Fotocopias e Impresiones Delta 3000 S. L.*, which involved introducing other technology, such as a special machine for scanning architectural plans and drawings. This also meant entering a new market segment.

Sometime later, the fourth brother, Álvaro Sola, tired of his previous job and attracted by the dynamism of his brothers' business project, joined the family firm. Hence, the four Sola brothers became part of the company gradually, which allowed them to find their own role naturally within the company, all having differentiated and complementary functions.

Gonzalo is behind most of the decisions and raises any issues with Gabi, who is the one in charge of taking action and the visible leader. Álvaro is the most sociable and also the most cautious of the brothers, and Óscar was very temperamental. They are all very hard workers. – Mayi Sola, sister of the founders.

However, work is not everything, and new strategic investments often arise from observing new developments in the industry. Always eager to learn new things and firmly believing that being up to date in technological advances is essential, for years the four brothers visited SIMO, the International Information Technology, Multimedia and Communications Fair. The brothers would travel to Madrid or Barcelona by car and took advantage of those trips to spend time together and talk about everything, catching up on what was happening in the company, discussing business projects and future investments, and sharing what they had seen at the fair.

We'd go to SIMO to look at the machines, as if we were children. And the four of us always went together. Sometimes my sister Mayi would come along with us too. We'd talk in the car and muse over everything. It was our time to be together as siblings. We'd also take the time to have fun and visit an amusement park or go for a short getaway. – Gabriel Sola, Manager of Grupo Delta.

In 1996, they left their rented premises in Gros, when they saw the opportunity to move to the middle of the university district in Ibaeta. This location was suitable for several reasons. On the one hand, it was very close to other companies and academic centres, which are important clients for the photocopying services sector. On the other hand, the new facilities were larger and better suited to the installation of new technology. And that moment in particular was the right time to enter the world of colour photocopying and to purchase what was a high production machine for that time.

¹ Basque mutual guarantee society.

The new project, which represented a quantitative and qualitative leap for the Grupo Delta, also saw Alvaro and Gabriel join the family company as business partners, which meant reorganising its ownership. Finally, it was decided that the four brothers would participate in the business on equal terms, together with the founding couple (the Larreas). This process was not an easy one, and it took a great deal of generosity to be able to distribute the ownership percentages equally and form the team of brothers that is today Grupo Delta.

The transformation: From a shop to a service-oriented SME

Despite the steps taken and ongoing investments, which included opening a new 300 square metre branch at number 6, Eustasio Amilibia street in 2000, and also its sustained growth, Delta continued to be a shop – a very large and sophisticated one that offered a broad range of products and fast, high-quality photocopying services. However, this changed in 2002, with the introduction of a new sales strategy: for the first time, Grupo Delta hired a salesperson, for a new branch that had been opened in the Zuatzu district.

Having worked previously for Xerox, the new salesman knew this business sector well, and with his help, sales activities at Grupo Delta were reorganised and promoted. Up until then, this activity had been limited to attending to the customers who came to the shops to purchase services. This was a gamble since the brothers were not entirely sure what the results would be. It was a risky step indeed, as was the hiring of more staff, but it eventually turned out to be a good decision because it enabled them to go from providing services to private customers from behind the counter to having other clients, namely, public institutions, companies and other organisations. During those years, Delta entered the academic arena and, in addition to Ibaeta's branch, they opened another one at the University of Deusto campus in San Sebastian in 2003, taking over this university's photocopying service, which until then had been an in-house service. They also got more work by means of an invitation to tender, through which Delta was appointed as the official photocopying service supplier for the Faculty of Law at the University of the Basque Country. Thanks to these sales efforts, orders grew considerably, and because of this increase in demand, the brothers felt that the way in which the business was being run had to be changed, and the moment came for Grupo Delta to transform itself.

When the sales department was created, and we began sales activities, the business was transformed. Besides, the company had more staff. In fact, we already had 13 people in the different branches, each one establishing their own criteria. – Ana García, member of the Grupo Delta management team.

In 2004, the Sola brothers decided to move to larger facilities and bought new premises in Zuatzu. They used this as an opportunity to upgrade their plan printing technology by acquiring new machines. It was at this point that Grupo Delta ceased to be a photocopy shop and became an SME offering printing services. All of this was done gradually and required improving many aspects: the promotion of sales, as well as new facilities, new organisation, and new processes... Hence, it can be said that, in 2007, Delta became a multi-centre service company with its

headquarters in Zuatzu and three other establishments from which it delivered its products: *Delta Amara*, *Delta Universidades* (in the Antiguo neighbourhood of San Sebastian) and *Delta Gros*.

Meanwhile, the company's products were evolving. Large format printing was booming, and there was a demand for roll-up banners, which was a new product that had become popular very quickly. But although there were many trends that the brothers saw coming and took full advantage of, they were not always successful.

We arrived late to the world of architectural plan printing, where lots of money was earned, but we didn't invest in time. However, companies that made a lot in the beginning, such as Copivasc and Azkar, ended up closing down. We've always taken a chance on everything in that we don't limit ourselves to one type of work, and this is what's allowed us to evolve. – Gabriel Sola, Manager of Grupo Delta.

Business process and organisational integration

Each of the company's work centres was specialised in specific services and products, which was reflected in the company's geographic dispersion. But as the number of corporate clients grew and their projects became increasingly complex and sophisticated, it was necessary to integrate all the processes and reduce the inefficiencies that arose from working in different centres. Therefore, to achieve a more dynamic customer service, the management team decided to centralise the company's production in an 800 square metre warehouse in Zuatzu, close to the Amara and Ibaeta centres.

Fig. 1. Grupo Delta's current facilities in Zuatzu



Source: Grupo Delta.

This decision, which was undoubtedly called for, went beyond the geographic location of production since it affected not only the organisation, but also all the processes and staff of Grupo Delta, which then had to face organisational issues arising from having to integrate individuals who had worked autonomously and independently for so many years.

The fact that all the production processes were now concentrated in the new plant, made it possible to reorganise the teams according to this situation, which led to formally structuring Grupo Delta into five departments: Pre-printing, where the tasks before printing are done; Printing and Finishing, which involves working with the printing machines and subsequent processes until the product is finished (binding, etc.); Large Format Printing, specialised in printing large posters and the corresponding pre-printing processes; and finally, the Sales and Finance departments.

It was no easy matter to harmonise the working methods of staff, who, over the years, had become accustomed to working in different ways and this caused many frictions and difficulties.

Everything became centralised in Zuatzu, but this was not such a simple step because everybody was used to working with their own staff, and each centre had its own criteria. It was particularly complicated to do away with comments such as "This is my shop", "These are my people"... But someone had to set the guidelines, and this had to be done by Management. – Ana García, member of the Delta Group management team.

These frictions, however, made it imperative to establish consistent ways of carrying out the processes and procedures, although reaching such agreements was not always easy. It was a transition to a more mature and robust organisation that required setting up certain criteria, even if it meant losing some of the freshness the company had enjoyed until then. The three Sola brothers and Ana García held regular meetings to decide on these criteria. Before this business integration process, Álvaro had run the Ibaeta centre, and Gonzalo was in charge of the Amara one. Óscar was not affected by the changes since he continued to be head of the University of Deusto centre, which was left out of the process.

In this regard, it is worth highlighting the effort made over the years by all the staff, including the managers, in training, building awareness and improving teamwork. They took courses in everything from management to team-building and coaching in assertiveness and communication skills.

Being part of GLOBAL PRINTERS was a great help in the staff integration process. We did a lot of high-level training with them and spent a great deal of money on it. GLOBAL PRINTERS is a trade association of companies in the same field as ours which organised activities that were extremely interesting for us. – Gabriel Sola, Manager of Grupo Delta.

Gradually, thanks to the training and the long hours devoted to management meetings, the new guidelines for the entire team became increasingly clearer.

We held many meetings just trying to unify the criteria, but finally, we came to agreements, and the information then had to be passed on to the workers. One good thing that came out of all this was that we got into the habit of holding weekly meetings. – Ana García, member of the Delta Group management team.

Fig. 2. Grupo Delta's offices in Zuatzu



Source: Grupo Delta.

Currently, department meetings are still held with their staff and a few members of the management team. The aim of these meetings is to discuss any problems openly, and their objective has always been also to promote participation in them. Thanks to the company's constant concern for their team, it finally managed to come out stronger, with a cohesive team totally committed to the Delta project. Consolidating the organisation and reaching agreements on the procedures while building a successful team was an achievement that enabled the company to continue guaranteeing a flexible and fast service for their clients.

At Delta, people don't clock in, but there's no problem with taking time off either. We're always there if an order for a client needs to be finished, readily available and giving it our all; also, nobody checks when you leave or if you have to go out to attend to a personal matter. They know that you are available... There's no control, but at the same time, there's no lack of control either. They know that we're not going to let them down if a service needs to be provided. – Ana García, member of the Grupo Delta management team.

Fig. 3. Grupo Delta team



Source: Grupo Delta

The family: a solid pillar thanks to their family share-holder agreement

The Sola family is a large, close family. The four brothers share not only the business but also activities, friends, leisure, weekends, celebrations... They are constantly in touch with one another, and there is a strong bond between them.

My mother never pulled a face or anything when we brought friends home with us. She was very friendly. At home, we organised everything together. Since we were very little, my sister Elena and I used to draw Snoopy comics for my brothers' birthdays and composed bertsos², describing the most typical things about each of us. When Gabi turned forty, we put a slogan on a bus, "Vote Gabi", and toured through San Sebastian. We even made some small flags!
– Mayi Sola, sister of the founders.

Evidently, their parents must have influenced their spirit. Pilar, who was an educated woman and housewife, was utterly dedicated to her family and instilled in her children a deep sense of work and commitment. For the couple, there was no room for laziness or tedium: if you were committed to something, you always had to meet it above expectations.

² Traditional Basque songs that are composed following certain melodies and rhyming patterns and sung on special occasions.

My mother's legacy was to work, work, work and to fully support the company. She started working with us to fill up her time. She was a jack-of-all-trades and helped with the accounts. At home, there was no "public servant" atmosphere, quite the contrary, there was always a spirit of enterprise and risk-taking, which also entailed some instability... but this was always seen as something positive. At home, we never failed to go to work; above all, we had to fulfil our duties. I am the youngest of the seven, and this sense of hard work has been passed on to me. We're all incredibly hard-working, and although we never saw ourselves as entrepreneurs, several of us have ended up having a business of our own... - Mayi Sola, sister of the founders.

Gabriel Sola, who was the father of the seven siblings and professor of accounting at the Faculty of Business Management and Economics of the University of Deusto in San Sebastian, died in 1991, and his widow, who was an educated woman and with not much to do at home, joined the company's administrative area during those years, preparing the delivery notes and keeping track of the bank accounts. She continued doing this for many years, even when an accounting and finance department already existed in the company.

Despite her age, our mother didn't stop coming to the company. We'd get a taxi for her, and she'd come to work every single day. – Gabi Sola, Manager of Grupo Delta.

But she was not the only one who collaborated in the early days of Grupo Delta. The younger sisters of the Sola family also participated to a greater or lesser extent in the company.

When I was at secondary school, I already worked at Delta in the summers. I substituted everyone who was on holiday. When I finished my degree, I got a job, and to tell you the truth, I didn't think of joining the family business my brothers were involved in. But, after many years working for others, I have ended up running my own business. – Mayi Sola, sister of the founders.

Thus, it can be stated that thanks to this common base, all the siblings feel the same sense of work and responsibility for the business project, with no rifts between them, although each one is different. In particular, at Grupo Delta, each of the sibling partners has his own skills and spirit, bringing something unique to the table.

The fact that such a good relationship between these brothers and sisters has been maintained and lasted so long is incredible. After so many years... I appreciate this a lot. There's trust, and the key thing is that each one plays a different role, and that responsibilities haven't overlapped. They respect each other, and each one adds something, each one is valuable in a different way, that is, they're all part of the inner workings... – Mayi Sola, sister of the founders.

Besides being hardworking, another intrinsic aspect of the Sola family is that they refuse to do things in just any way; in other words, not everything will do for them, neither aesthetically nor with regards to people. The parents transmitted a fundamental sense of right and wrong to their children, as well as the importance that this has on the family's image and reputation. And this is reflected in the company. The four brothers speak frankly and their actions back up their words. The company has an identity of its own.

Working day in and day out is their way of setting a good example, which was also typical of my father. I'm very proud of my brothers. They've been able to instil in their workers a sense of belonging to the company. They are highly valued and respected by everyone...
– Mayi Sola, sister of the founders.

Fig. 4. Five of the Sola siblings



Source: Grupo Delta.

Óscar Sola's death in 2009 came as a major blow to all the family. He was one of the founders of Grupo Delta in its early days, and the loss of this brother, who was still young, was a great shock to both the family and the business. Some months earlier, the family had agreed upon a family shareholder agreement which had been discussed at length, and this helped the family cope with this painful and totally unforeseen event.

In 2007, all of the partners had one or two children of their own. We were doing very well, so we took advantage of that moment to draft the family shareholder agreement together with Sayma, the company that took care of some of our management issues. Joanes Alkorta was in charge of everything. In spite of it being a family succession plan, all the founding partners participated, including both Jesús and Mari Carmen, with whom the relationship has always been very good. It was established that none of the children would enter the company and that the wives could not join the company or inherit anything either. How the shares were to be valued, etc., was also stipulated. The consensus process was a major source of friction, but all issues were raised in a very professional manner, and all possible circumstances were considered. It was indeed a great effort but very useful for all of us. – Gabi Sola, Manager of Grupo Delta.

Thus, when Óscar passed away in 2009 and Mari Carmen no longer wanted to be part of the ownership in 2011, or when Jesús also wanted to leave the company in 2015, the valuations that served as reference levels and had been pre-established could be applied, although the partners who remained within the business always improved the amounts that had been previously decided on.

I thought the plan was a very good one indeed since Delta is synonymous with the team of brothers, a factor which in a transfer could get lost or diminished. What we siblings have between us, our children will not share, simply because they don't spend as much time together as we have done. You have to live this to be able to truly understand it. So, I think it's a good thing to preserve the business in this way. – Mayi Sola, sister of the founders.

Today, Grupo Delta is in the hands of the three remaining Sola brothers, Gonzalo, Gabi, and Álvaro. Gabi is the company's manager, and his two brothers are the heads of two important areas: Álvaro is in charge of purchasing and R&D activities, and Gonzalo is responsible for the production and the workshop. All three of them appreciate how fortunate they are to be able to count on the other two and trust them blindly. Moreover, so far, they have been able to combine their personal and professional lives without any difficulties, and this magical formula is at the heart of the business project.

Being a worker is just as important as being a manager, with each having their own role to play. It is paramount to be humble and to know how to react at all times. If your wages have to be cut, well, so be it. We've got to be flexible and give priority to the business over all other things. – Gabi Sola, Manager of Grupo Delta.

Fig 5. Gabi and Gonzalo Sola with Grupo Delta's equipment



Source: Grupo Delta.

The entrepreneurial orientation of a business family

The Sola family has always been concerned about the sustainability of the family businesses. With Grupo Delta as the flagship company, the Sola brothers have always tried to launch different entrepreneurial initiatives both inside and outside the company.

There are a great many pressures in the sector in which Grupo Delta specialises, not only due to the relentless pace of technology and digital platforms but also because of the changes in the market and the business world. These factors began to pose a real risk to the business in 2011, which was still based on the printing of paper materials.

Fig. 6. Grupo Delta's digital equipment



Source: Grupo Delta.

Although the 2009 crisis did not initially affect the company, they began noticing a drop in demand from 2011 and 2012 onwards when other printing companies, which were used to long-run printing, were adapting to smaller print runs and entering the market segment where Delta was already a competitor with a certain advantage, having differentiated itself for years by offering high-quality products with a fast and friendly service.

We were very cautious, we saw the crisis coming and worked like 'ants', so to speak, setting our profits aside and building up a reserve. From 2004 to 2008, even though they were good years, we didn't pay dividends, just in case. It's true that I was a bit of an ogre then, but I foresaw that something was going to happen and during the good years, we managed to save. And thank God for that! Because it allowed us to make the payments that derived from the shareholders' restructuring in 2009 without putting the business at risk. – Ana García, member of the Grupo Delta management team.

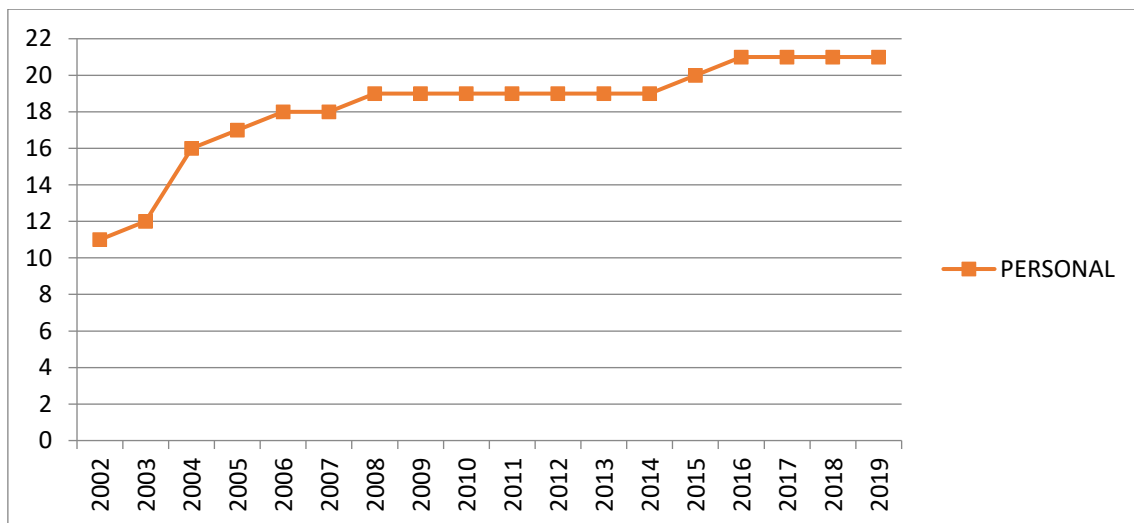
Always on the lookout for new market opportunities, the Sola brothers spotted a new niche for their company: signage printing. Thus, in 2017, they invested in equipment and machines with which they could print on adhesive vinyl. In the beginning, they identified their target market in the customisation of vehicles with vinyl decals, featuring the logo of the client’s company.

Once this new service was underway, they decided to exploit its potential by proposing the same service for other surfaces, such as machines, walls, or for façade wraps, etc. Despite not always being profitable, it enabled them to offer a comprehensive service to corporate clients and attract new ones.

Given the relevance of this new business area, the company created a specific signage department in which there are currently three people working who are in charge of installing the vinyl wall murals and labelling or decorating any type of surface.

Large format printing and signage are our latest business areas as far as printing is concerned. At present, in addition to digital printing, laminating and printing on rigid materials, we also offer large format printing and signage for all types of surfaces. - Gabriel Sola, Manager of Grupo Delta.

Fig. 7. Staff’s evolution. 2002-2019



Source: Grupo Delta.

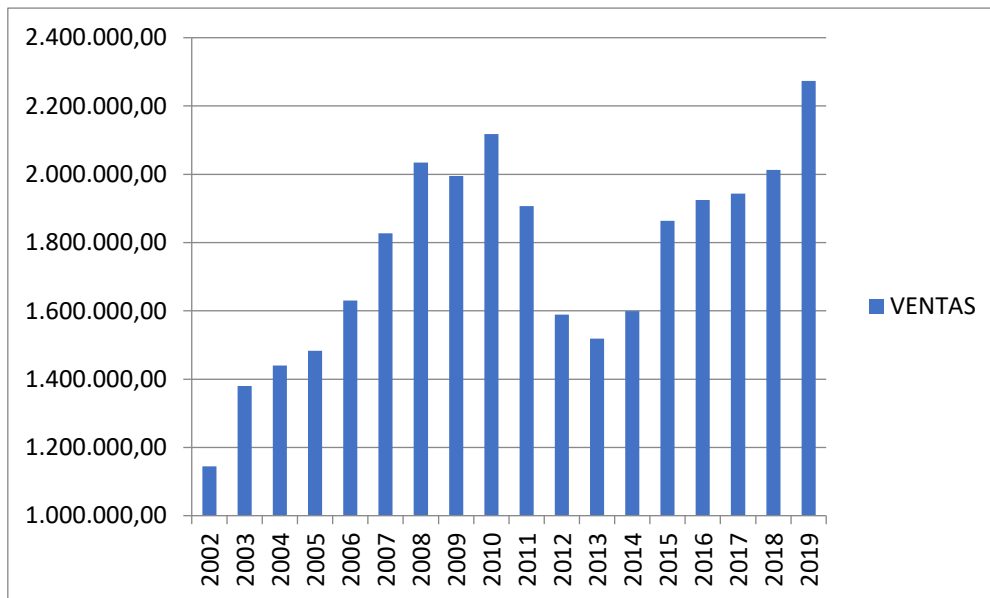
In the midst of the 2020 Covid pandemic, Grupo Delta acquired a firm dedicated to distributing and selling LED screens, located in Miracruz Street. Through this operation, Delta aims to expand its poster printing and signage services by complementing the posters and wall murals with LED screens which are much more dynamic and versatile communication tools. In Gabriel Sola’s opinion, the sale of screens will not cannibalise that of signs but will actually complement it.

I've got to provide Delta with continuity, and I believe screens are a good strategic fit for us. If it goes well, this will allow us to migrate to another business area in the future. Today, if someone calls asking about the screens, I'm the one who takes care of it. I've already closed several sales; in fact, only this Saturday I've been setting one up for a client. – Gabriel Sola, Manager of Grupo Delta.

Currently, Grupo Delta is selling, renting, and installing advertising screens, and although for the moment, the company does not create any content, if it were necessary, they would be willing to offer this service.

The screen business will enable us to grow about 20 to 30% over the following two or three years, and then we'll have to decide what's next. We've been looking into other technologies, such as 3D printing, but this can't be called printing really. It's like entering another dimension, a completely different business area... – Gabriel Sola, Manager of Grupo Delta.

Fig. 8. Sales evolution, 2002-2019



Source: Grupo Delta.

In other words, Grupo Delta is constantly evolving, and the brothers have invested in many different businesses: from a training company they set up together with CCC and an advertising and media agency they sold two years ago to a sushi business that was afterwards sold and *Delta Papelería Informática*, a stationery shop which was handed over to their employee. Their latest investment, along with other partners, is the *Ciudad de San Sebastián*, a boat that offers a tourism experience in La Concha bay in San Sebastián.

In order to be able to make these investments more freely and without putting their business at risk, the partners created an asset holding company to separate their properties and future investments from their main economic activity. Through this company, they plan to continue with their entrepreneurial activities, which are what has characterised this family over the years.

In addition to these business ventures, the brothers are sensitive to any need that may arise and collaborate with numerous social, sports and academic organisations as they firmly believe that "selling is not everything." By way of example, they collaborate with the University of Deusto, where the Professor Gabriel Sola scholarship is awarded to two students every year within the Business Management degree. Furthermore, they organise internships for young people studying graphic arts at the vocational training school Salesianos, who are offered these internships to complete their training. In the sports field, they sponsor the Behobia-San Sebastián race, printing all the racing bibs and part of the magazine. Regarding social work, they are members of the Pauso Berriak programme of Atzegi, a socio-labour inclusion project. Additionally, they participate in many environmental initiatives, such as their action for the San Sebastian City Council when they made 50,000 ashtrays for the beach for free in 2019.

Our altruistic actions got to such a point that, last year, my catchphrase was "What? Are we now an NGO?" I think there hasn't been a race in this city for which we haven't printed the banners for free... In fact, at the beginning of each year, we allocate a special budget for these matters, but it always doubles in the end. Before, Álvaro used to be in charge of this, and I had to tell him: "You can't say yes to everything..." They're all so very generous. – Ana García, member of the Grupo Delta management team.

But it is not only outside the company that they get involved, they also take care of their team. Grupo Delta's managers are well aware of the role non-family employees play and value them highly.

[Our team] is the most important thing. This is one of the greatest merits of the family business. All the brothers are very united. We've invested a lot in the team, in their training... Perhaps it is because there are so many siblings involved that what has prevailed is the human side, the people, the team... – Ana García, member of the Grupo Delta management team.

Fig. 9. Grupo Delta's team in Zuatzu



Source: Grupo Delta.

Ana García is a member of the management team together with the three brothers who inspire a feeling of confidence and security – having a financial advisor on the management team has provided the brothers with a more professional vision, a certain cautiousness, and an understanding of the importance of economic forecasting, as well as someone to restrain their impulses.

I've always relied on Gabi's support, we're a great tandem. I'm the cautious one, the one who holds him back. Although, if they're sure something is worthwhile, they do it regardless of my advice and cautiousness. – Ana García, member of the Grupo Delta management team.

The way they have earned this trust is based on their courage to say frankly what needs to be said to people, that is, without concealing anything and in a straightforward manner, and without any hidden meanings.

Humility is very important, and also that people know that I'm not going to lie to them: that is, saying what needs to be said to their face and not wasting time by complicating things. A lot of people have helped us in this venture, and we're very grateful to them. We truly believe that it's not only about doing business but also about building a community and adding value to our territory. – Gabriel Sola, Manager of Grupo Delta.