

# MANUFACTURING MATTERS

Interview with

**DEREK BRADBURY, DIRECTOR**

**ANDY BRIGGS, DIRECTOR**

**THOMAS SANDERSON**



In a series of interviews with the directors of Dynamics Consultants, manufacturers talk about their ambitions and reveal the issues which are mission-critical for them to address in achieving their goals.

The interviews will be brought together as a report to be published by DECISION magazine and then as a digital book.



WHEN MANUFACTURERS consider the application of technology, it usually has a product, shopfloor, or supply chain emphasis. To coin a theatrical phrase, maybe it's front of house where there could be a bit more focus.

What Thomas Sanderson believe will sustain their leading position as the UK's largest manufacturer and supplier of conservatory and window blinds, and the only large significant manufacturer of wooden shutters in the UK, is to make sure their investment in technology touches the customer (existing and potential) directly.

Looking at the pile of heavy bags that is used as the sales kit, it's hard not to feel sorry for the sales agents who had to lug the weighty samples around. Business development director Andy Briggs sympathises too and did something about it, which revolutionised the sales experience for the customer. "Samples are very important, but there don't need to be this many of them," he says. He explains that a significant investment in technology is re-engineering the sales material into digital form to allow customers to see in virtual reality how the company's products will actually look in their homes.

Customers will even be able to see how the products will look in different lights and when made of different fabrics (for

example, some fabrics have 'vanes' that open to let more light in, and sheer fabrics which illuminate a room with a soft glow).

The augmented reality system, using computer generated imagery, will reduce the number of bags from fourteen down to one medium-sized suitcase.

Potentially, the company might not need to send people out any more to do a full survey of customer's homes because the window measurement capture that's part of the system will be able to accurately (and quickly) scan rooms and windows. "This is enabling us to give the customer an experience that others cannot, and the technology means we can do it consistently," says HR director Derek Bradbury.

Which in turn improve the conversion rate: at the moment, about 40% of home visits lead to sales. It would also encourage repeat purchases as customers could evaluate and then order other products without needing sales visit.

The company already have a system for making appointments and for pricing, and now orders will go into the system that tracks contracts, allocates them to local installers and flags up checks to ensure that all the work has been done.

Technology is already enabling all sorts of exciting developments to traditional products, says Briggs. For example, motorised blinds can be controlled by a smart phone app. They can do things like calculating what time the sun will rise and having the blinds open or close accordingly, which is great for security as well as convenience. Blinds could be automatically closed to prevent a room from overheating, or to keep heat in as the sun sets on a cold day – all according to the weather forecast. Similarly, motorised blinds that already have a sensor to report when the battery is running low could be linked to an app that would re-order the batteries.

But Thomas Sanderson are crucially aware of the need not to become “busy fools” in chasing a spiral of new technology that won’t necessarily add value or contribute to profit, says Bradbury. “But we know that intelligent products are the key to future growth and success.”

The manufacturing, mostly undertaken in the UK, is a combination of handwork, craftsmanship and the precision from CNC machines – “a perfect blend” says Briggs. Sanding, painting and stringing is done by hand, as is the delicate task of cutting blinds to shape on an angle using a hot wire. Despite this, the company operates on a two-to-four-week lead

time; not bad for a bespoke product in a field where competitors typically have lead times of at least eight weeks.

Briggs says much of the difference in quality is not directly visible but is nonetheless important. One of the processes involves drying wood in kilns so it will live comfortably in our climate, and he says Chinese competitors often do not dry their wood properly. “It’s the equivalent of a cake that has not been baked long enough and is still moist inside, which can cause cracking,” he explains.

The issue with high-end products is the low rate of replacement purchases; conservatory blinds in particular tend to be one-off orders. So the focus is on acquiring new customers, particularly owners of new homes. They will tend to have money to spend on their homes and are more likely to spend it on expensive window coverings as they are less likely to be looking to move in the next few years.

For historic reasons (primarily the availability of appropriate manufacturing skills), production of different product types is done in different locations. Shutters are made at three sites in the midlands and blinds are made at a factory in the south.

There tend to be seasonal differences in demand for the two product types, with shutters most popular in the winter while conservatory blinds are more popular in the summer. This means peaks and troughs in demand, and the company gets round that with a flexible working arrangement whereby people can take part (or all) of Friday off according to the hours they have already worked that week. This means the manufacturing function can expand and contract in response to levels of sales, meeting seasonal demands while minimising overtime costs.

There are 350 employees, about two-thirds of which are based in the south. The contact centre is based in the same location as the factory, and out in the field there are some 300 self-employed sales and installation agents.

The manufacturing production workforce has a higher than average age, which might present challenges in future in terms of finding skilled staff to replace them. But for now, that's not a priority, given the low staff churn enjoyed by the company, which in turn derives from the fact that there are not many manufacturing jobs locally for people to move on to. "Getting and retaining high quality salespeople and good people to work in the contact centre is more of a priority," muses Bradbury.

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