

Business stories

Flambeau Europlast Limited

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Background

Flambeau Europlast is a long-established plastics processor, trade moulding for a varied customer base in markets ranging from defence to the leisure industry. With no own-brand manufacturing, the company historically supplied a diverse range of plastic products and services from tooling design for injection and blow moulded thermoplastic components to contract manufacturing of complete assemblies. Future growth was dependent upon attracting new products or undercutting the competition. To drive the business forward Flambeau needed to develop new ways of using its proven skills and capacity.

The challenge


Managing Director John Wingfield took on the development challenge when he was brought in to turn the business around in 2006. He quickly identified the need to stabilise the Kent-based business, invest in Flambeau’s core skills and prepare it for growth. Acknowledging that the company had to evolve to succeed, John’s choices seemed clear: sell the 10 acre site and relocate to smaller, bespoke premises, or fill the existing manufacturing capacity by increasing volume.

That decision had yet to be made when he was introduced to Designing Demand, a Solutions for Business product developed by the Design Council and delivered by South East Design (SED). This intensive support programme was specifically created to help businesses tackle key strategic design issues and improve performance and it played a major part in moving Flambeau forward.

“In fact the Designing Demand process became an integral part of the turnaround plan,” said John. “In particular, it emphasised just how important it was to Flambeau’s future to begin generating our own designs to set us apart from the competition.”

The response

The Designing Demand process began with a full day visit from a group of Design Associates which looked at the way the business operated and involved all the key staff. Design Associate Gavin Pryke then led a series of workshops, bringing in other key specialists in branding, marketing, innovation and consumer-based design; all very strongly directed at stimulating ideas within the company.

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▶ Gradually everyone in the organisation became exposed to a new way of design-led thinking which put the customer first, and came to understand the importance of market research, customer feedback and real-life experience in designing successful consumer products.

“Flambeau was fantastic at making contract products,” said Gavin. “Yet they had no in-house design experience themselves. My role initially was to help the company understand the potential benefits of putting design at the heart of the business, and then go on to help them achieve it, design their own products, add value and grow.”

Growing the business

Before the role of design could be fully embraced however, Flambeau had to define exactly where future business growth would come from. The diversity of its business presented a wide range of opportunities but with limited resources these had to be carefully evaluated to pursue only those capable of offering maximum return.

South East Design was also able to help with that evaluation process. Through the European and SEEDA funded project, Design and Innovation for Business Sustainability (DIBS), SED funded a two-day consultancy package, bringing in Stuart Frodsham to ensure Flambeau put all its efforts behind opportunities which were worth winning and could drive the organisation as a whole.

Stuart specialises in team workshops for companies looking to grow and he quickly realised to importance of focusing the company on specific goals.



Managing Director John Wingfield

“Flambeau was looking for a route map and that only comes with focus,” said Stuart. “Between the whole team they had the information they needed, but were unable to structure it or bring it together. Incredibly the workshops initially identified 34 different growth opportunities. Working as a team we were able to reduce these to viable options that everyone could buy in to, and crucially John could drive forward.”

“With those growth options identified it is much easier to create a clear and tangible design brief with the full commitment of the company behind it.”

Creating the infrastructure

John was soon able to implement this new-found focus and bring

design into heart of the company’s growth strategy.

In June 2010 Flambeau acquired Quest Consumer Products and Stadium Building Products from the Stadium Group plc. Already producing its own range of building, gardening and baby products, the acquisition tripled turnover, provided Flambeau with its own route to market, and brought with it full intellectual property rights.

The infrastructure was now in place for Flambeau to fill its manufacturing capacity, focus on design, and develop a clear branding strategy to support business growth.

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► Making design work

The appointment of a product design engineer underlines just how important Flambeau now considered design to be to its future success. Joe, a recent industrial design graduate from Brunel University, became largely responsible for all new product design within the company, and he found Gavin’s help and support invaluable in his new role.

“The Designing Demand process convinced Flambeau to have faith in design and invest in in-house design in particular, so I have Designing Demand to thank for my job,” said Joe. “But, having arrived on site the support Gavin then gave me was hugely beneficial. I was full of ideas, but like many recent graduates lacked confidence when it came to communicating them to senior managers. It was a new way of

working, for the company and for me and it was vital to get it right from the start. Gavin not only provided reassurance, he also acted as a sounding board and crucially, identified the importance of user-centric design when it came to looking at developing our own products”.

Flambeau launched its first new products under the ‘The Neat Nursery Co’ brand in autumn 2011. The baby care range features bright, eye-catching colours and was well received at its first trade show outing.

“Quest had supplied own brand products to major retailers for many years and was recognised as the leading UK manufacturer of infant care products,” said John. “When we took over its IP we knew we wanted to produce our own modern range, and that was

embodied in the new ‘Neat Nursery’ branding. But we felt it was important to maintain a link with Quest’s established market. The new branding achieved that by the addition of a strapline: ‘Thoughtful products since 1961’”.

Now Flambeau is building the brand and a dedicated website will soon be in place to support it.

“The development of the Neat Nursery range also owes a huge amount to the Designing Demand programme,” said Joe. “Especially when it comes to usability. It can be easy to rely on marketing data to design new products. Thanks to Gavin we have really focused on the end-user, worked from their feedback when using our products in their own homes and designed-in features to meet their needs. We are now expanding the range, using the same, consumer-led principles.”

Alongside the Neat Nursery branding, Flambeau is also developing the other part of its acquisition. Stadium Building Products specialised in ventilation products and the multi-award winning Rhino flexitubs brand. Flambeau is now in the process of separating out the Rhino brand and developing it further, creating its own dedicated website and working on product development to reduce unit costs and increase productivity. Two new products are set to go into tooling shortly.

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▶ “Again we are responding to consumer requirements,” said Joe. “The existing flexibuckets are hard wearing and long lasting, ideal for the building suppliers market where longevity is the preferred option. But when the supermarkets became interested in the product we had to find a lower cost option to satisfy their markets”.

“
 Flambeau is now in a position to develop its market share through innovation and product development that in turn will maximise the efficiency of our manufacturing plant.”

It is a challenge Flambeau has met head on, not only designing a lighter weight bucket, but also investing in long-term production, bringing in new machinery and creating a multi-capacity tool to maximise cost-effective production.

“For me the icing on the cake was when we gained ISO 9000 for our design process,” said Joe. “Of course, Flambeau was already accredited to ISO 9000 and TS16949 for its trade moulding and manufacturing processes. Now we have the same independent accreditation for design. Personally it is a real boost, whilst for our customers it is the ultimate guarantee that we really do what we say we will do”!

The outcome

Designing Demand has helped Flambeau develop and brand its own products from a standing start, building on its existing technical skills to bring a range of unique products to market. “And this is just the start of our journey,” said John. “Flambeau is now in a position to develop its market share through innovation and product development that in turn will maximise the efficiency of our manufacturing plant.”

The Neat Nursery Co.
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