

Making it in Leeds

News release from Leeds Manufacturing

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Panels Build A Brighter Future

Suppliers to the construction industry have had a tough few years, but for those continuing to invest and develop new lines and markets 2010 is looking a whole lot brighter.

Leeds-based panel manufacturer VC Industries is one such firm now poised to take advantage of the upturn. Despite a 2009 dip in annual sales from £4m, gross profit has been safeguarded and the company is planning two major investments in sophisticated new plant to build on new markets and opportunities.

Owners Robin Cliff and Pauline Vernon acquired the former Renaissance Interiors from administration seven years ago and have since refined the business of high volume panel production to impressive levels. Traditionally supplying the kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, office and occasional furniture sectors, the construction downturn forced the duo to seek new markets.

Now they're adding to the 47-strong workforce with a new £100,000 manufacturing cell, which will create four new jobs, making furniture carcasses for the resurgent East Yorkshire caravan industry, buoyed by the "stay-cation" trend in the UK holiday market.

"The leisure industry has held up remarkably well and we're also chasing contracts in the hotel construction industry, alongside a toehold in the NHS market, where we're supplying panels for hospital bedside cabinets," says Pauline.

"We're able to take on these additional projects due to running a very tight ship, cost cutting and continued investment in state of the art plant. In the past few years we've spent well over £1million, including a dust extraction system at over £400,000. And we're currently considering a new beam saw at over £200,000.

"Our company vision is "To Go Maverick" based on Ricardo Semler's book and hence we run a very flat structure with one works manager, but extremely capable shop-floor co-ordinators. We've also created a continuous improvement cycle – including the bar coding of each individual panel process, which gives us a complete audit trail throughout the production process and delivery to the customer. A further investment in additional software programmes to link all shop-floor machinery operations is also on our shopping list."

Most of VC Industries raw material board stocks come from sustainable UK sources and the company subscribes to the Forest Stewardship Scheme. A survey by the Carbon Trust has resulted in an action plan to reduce waste and carbon emissions. Sawdust waste has already been eliminated – the sawdust is now recycled and sold on as pet bedding. Additionally, the wooden "liggers" that bear the delivered board, are sold back to the supplier.

Pauline agrees that a recession creates opportunities but stressed that companies have to compete successfully on price, quality and service to take advantage of them: "We're basically order takers and panel manufacturers, but we like to think we're quite good at that," she says.

Cllr Andrew Carter, joint leader of Leeds City Council, said: "A lot of the talk about the future of manufacturing focuses on the advanced materials and high tech sectors but there are some fantastic companies operating under the radar. Using traditional skills, combined with investment in modern manufacturing technology and processes, they're creating highly competitive and innovative businesses."

Ends

Panel Personnel

Robin Cliff has spent most of his working life in volume kitchen manufacture and as a director of companies including Gillroyd Group and Renaissance Interiors.

Pauline Vernon's career has spanned the manufacture of MDF wrapped mouldings, kitchen manufacture and MFC manufacture as a director with BLP Group, Next Dimension and The Symphony Group. A process control specialist, she returned to the industry after seven years in consultancy assisting organisations to use the EFQM Business Excellence Model for continuous improvement.

Works manager Paul Douglas has extensive technical expertise gained from working in posts ranging from joinery to antique and specialist furniture as well as volume wrapped moulding and kitchen manufacture.

Photography: 1. VCI works manager Paul Douglas on the shop floor

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