



Bright future

Jacobsen's René Orban, pictured right, has seen an industry once content to plod along change into something much more vital. It's great now, he tells Carol Dutton

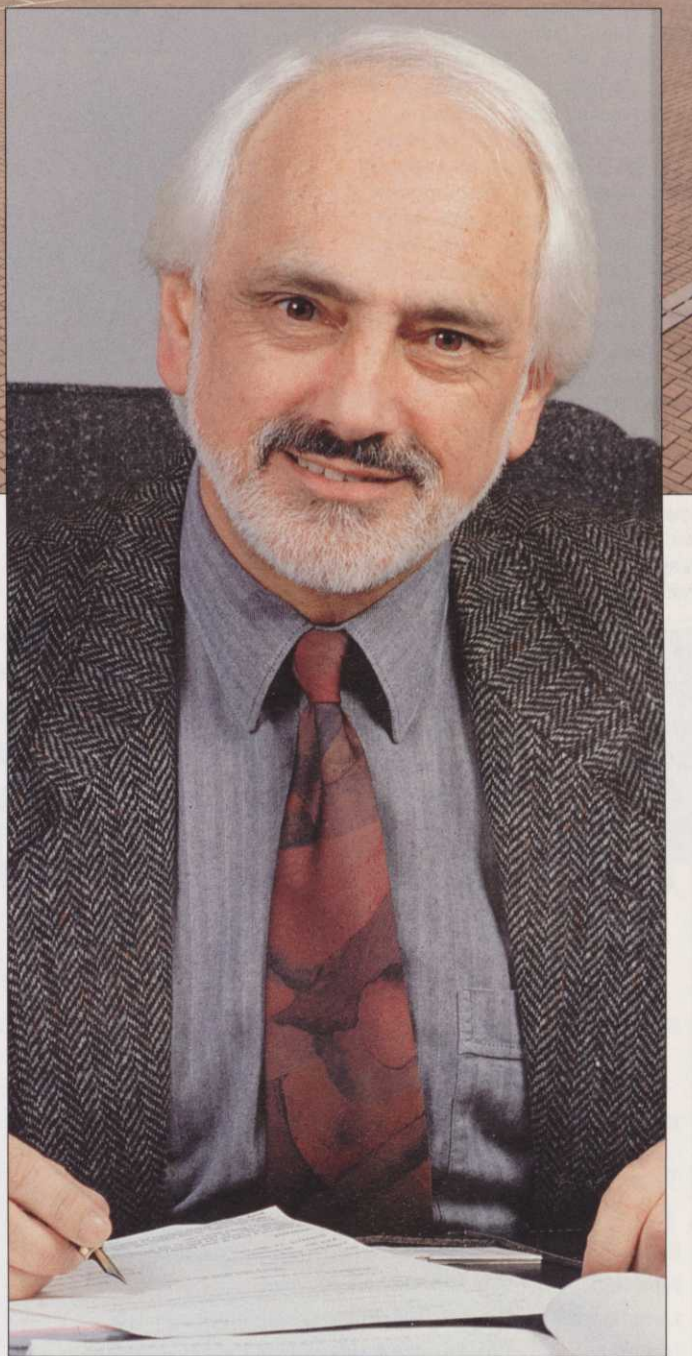
Jacobsen/Textron, the American conglomerate worth approximately £6 billion, is expanding its European operations with the help of a man who would never grab the limelight.

As managing director of Jacobsen E-Z-Go UK Ltd, he is a marketer who puts sales promotion and advertising way down his list of priorities and whose image is as far removed from Saatchi and Saatchi as you can get.

Yet René Orban took Jacobsen/Textron successfully to Australia, developed the Irish market and has seen a 100% increase in UK sales since he took over six years ago. Textron has now given him their E-Z-Go golf car range for the UK and made Textron Finance Corporation (TFC) available for the first time outside the

US under René's control. He must be doing something right! I set out to discover the secret of his success.

In 1989, after 30 years in the business with Kubota, Yanmar and Massey Ferguson, René was head-hunted by Jacobsen/Textron to manage its operations in the UK. Formerly under the control of Orag, the company's European distributor, Jacobsen had gained a bad reputation for supplying spare parts and suffered from lack of financial support. The parent company created a UK subsidiary at King's Lynn, bypassing the European operation and pumped money into the enterprise, air freighting parts directly from the US. By the time René took over, the Jacobsen name had regained a place in the



UK golf market, but there was a desperate need to consolidate.

"My immediate task was to regain credibility by creating a professional operation and managing the UK sales. Up until 1989, sales had been haphazard, with a mixture of direct selling from the main office and indirect selling through dealers."

René created an exclusive dealer network of hand-picked individuals and cut out direct sales altogether. Research showed that UK customers liked local access to products and relied on a strong personal rapport. Up until this point, René admits that the reputation of Jacobsen dealers in the UK had

been poor. "They came bottom of the list, both for supply and service," he said.

The dealers immediately became "stocking dealers", receiving new machines on the premises, with regular training from Jacobsen UK. René's four business managers (deliberately not called sales managers), were appointed primarily to support their dealers and develop new business. René insists that Jacobsen dealers are not customers. "There is only one customer – the customer," he says. "Without wanting to sound too American, we look on all our dealers as business partners."

By 1990, as the business moved to new premises in Kettering and a full-scale distribution centre was set up, dealers could expect spare parts despatched the same day (if ordered by 3pm), regular training on preventative maintenance, fitting and operation, spe-



Jacobsen has appointed two new dealers: Chelmsford Grass Machinery Ltd for the Essex and north-east London area and SCATS (Southern Counties Agricultural Trading Society) for East and West Sussex.

cially trained demonstrators ready to go anywhere in the country and support from their business managers, when approaching major clients. New product information was pro-

vided by *Turf Talk*, the company newsletter, which has grown from a four-page hand-out to a mini magazine.

This year has seen the launch of the customer service log book building on the success of the customer satisfaction survey. It's a form which evaluates every aspect of the customer's experience with Jacobsen from the "sales person's understanding of his needs" to the "overall rating of the product". All forms are fed into the computer with the results going back to the US for analysis before returning to the UK and René, the dealer and business manager. This vital information system which has been operating for over two years relies heavily on customer participation. Not everyone likes filling in forms, but the incentive – having bought your machine – is a free set of protective clothing.

René runs a tight ship. The entire Kettering operation, serving 22 UK dealers, carries just 20 staff, again, hand-picked. René chooses people he can work with. "It's important to exchange new ideas and concepts in order to develop," he said.

The head of Jacobsen Australia was also carefully chosen. Following his own marketing strategy of "research and information lead-

ing to the right decisions", René spent his first two weeks in Oz gathering information on golf courses before deciding on a direct selling approach, "But I also found the right man to run it," he said.

Looking back, René has seen a once conservative industry, content to plod along, change for something much more vital. "It's great now," he says, "Full of new ideas and concepts which just would not have existed ten years ago." These include the upgrading of greenkeepers, at last being recognised as professionals and not just someone who cuts grass.

Whether Jacobsen UK has been successful can be judged by the comments of one of our members who I talked to at Harrogate. Asked about the differences between grass cutting machinery on the market, he replied that there was nothing to choose between most of them but Jacobsen's service was the best.

Fundamentals

René will say that the fundamentals of business are the same, "A professional approach, creating the confidence to buy", but perhaps his secret lies in his personal system, evolved over the years which employs in his words, "The best use of our people resources and applying these to our products."

Considering the fierce possessiveness displayed towards his staff, the staunch back-up of his dealers/business partners, the commitment to training both within Jacobsen and BIGGA – René was one of the first to join the Golden Key Circle and the brains behind the Ecology Booklet out next month – perhaps it is the value and recognition of people which sets him apart.

As an employee or a Jacobsen dealer/business partner, a great deal will be expected of you in return for first-class support. As a customer, you can rest assured, for as the man says, "Selling is the ability to deliver."

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