



Scott MacCallum slowed Jamie Bennett down long enough to learn about The Grass Roots Trading Company, past, present and future

Onward and upward



GRASS ROOTS
— TRADING COMPANY —

The name Grass Roots is perhaps a bit of a misnomer. Things are so fast moving at the Wokingham-based company, who have just become both a BIGGA Golden Key supporter and co-sponsor of the BIGGA Golf Environment Competition along with Amazone, that there is scarcely time for the grass to grow under their feet never mind have a chance to take root.

The day I visited Jamie Bennett, Managing Director of the Grass Roots Trading Company, had just returned from inspecting the premises the company were due to moving into in the first week of this month (March), having spent much of the previous few weeks recruiting new staff for a major company expansion.

"I think we've probably been the most talked about company in the industry over the last few weeks," joked Jamie, the catalyst being a two page recruitment advertisement in the December issue of *Greenkeeper International* asking for applicants for an array of posts, including a veritable army of Business Development Managers, all on attractive salaries with enviable benefits.

"The answer to the question of 'what's happening at Grass Roots?' is the launch of the Genesis range of natural microbial products. That's where we have focused our investment and planning," he revealed.

Grass Roots has linked up with Symbio which has 10 years of experience in the microbiological field.

"They have become the research and development arm while we're concentrating on the sales and marketing for all the products they produce," explained Jamie.

"The Genesis Range is an extensive range of natural products which provides everything a greenkeeper could need and which will assist the microbes we put into the soil to function to their best ability. It is a totally natural approach to turf management."

Warning to his theme Jamie outlined his doomsday scenario.

"I believe that a lot of golf greens and managed turf is on the edge of disaster due to the intense maintenance practices in place combined with the amount of chemical that is presently used and this has pushed grass, and the soil it lives in, right to the limit.

"If I were to take a bacteria count from a domestic lawn and another from a golf green the lawn would be up here and the green down there," he asked as he held one hand at about eyebrow level and the other somewhere around his knees, adding, "When did you last see *Fusarium* on your lawn?"

"In simple terms the natural bacteria in the soil which are there to compete with the disease pathogens have been dramatically reduced by the chemicals which are not selective in what they damage."

However, Jamie feels that changes are taking place with legislation forcing turf managers to look at different ways of working - "We've lost 20% of our chemicals in the last two years and there will be a snowball effect" - and people are becoming a lot more socially conscious about the environment and recycling things."

Jamie is genuinely excited about the prospects for Genesis and the direction in which Grass Roots are now heading.

"In 18 months time we won't be selling anything but Genesis," he predicts.

Each of the 18 Business Development Managers, who include some extremely well known Course Managers, have been equipped with a car, mobile phone, laptop and modem so that they can download information from head office.

"They all being trained in Business Development and information technology," said Jamie who has also employed a team of five in the accounts department, an operations team also of five as well as a manufacturing team.

The company has come a long way since it was set up in Jamie's home in November '94.

"It was a family orientated business involving my mother, brother and wife while my other brother set up a sister company in the Midlands," recalled Jamie.

He had arrived in this particular

industry after having owned his own telecommunications company which he sold, before investing in the property market...in March '89 which, with painful hindsight, was exactly the worst time to make such a move.

"It was the peak of the property market and the start of the recession and within 18 months I'd lost everything.

"I think in a way that's what drives me, I've had it all and then not had it all and I'll tell which I like better. I suppose my motivation comes from fear, not wanting to be there again, while the lesson I've learned is not to put all your eggs in one basket."

Grass Roots was born - or should it be seeded? - through Jamie's desire to get into the leisure industry which he'd highlighted as a growth industry.

"I'd read the R&A report and I'd seen all these golf courses being built and saw it as a developing market," he explained, coupling this objective reasoning with his general love of sports. "I was a physical training instructor, swam for Great Britain and played rugby for the county."

He then set about finding out more about the industry and discovered that he genuinely liked greenkeepers and their attitude to their work.

"It is totally different from the telecommunications industry. Here you can make 100 calls and get 100 appointments. You do that in telecommunications and you'll get one appointment."

Having earmarked golf as the area in which he would make his business comeback Jamie crossed the pond to see how the Americans operated.

"Superintendents in the States make many more demands on their suppliers. If something goes wrong here we used to be fairly laid back about it - if an order didn't come for a week or so it didn't really seem the supplier would lose business over it."

Jamie set about introducing some of the things he'd learned in the States as well as others from the telecommunications industry.

"I wanted to make greenkeepers realise they could have a much better service and should expect much better."

As its name suggests Grass Roots



Above: Jamie Bennett, Managing Director, Grass Roots Trading Company

Below: Stella Inglethorpe, Technical Director, Grass Roots Trading Company





Above: The Genesis Sales Team take delivery of their Honda fleet, aiding in Grass Roots' guaranteed 48 hour order turnaround

Trading Company was initially a trading company.

"We introduced a product base and then when a customer asked for a specific product we'd set up the deal. We'd source the product, ring four or five companies to get the best price then give a definite time for it to be delivered. If it didn't arrive the customer would get a discount for every day that it was late," explained Jamie.

"Over a period of a year we started with 800 products but now we have 18,000 in our product range which, on the whole, we can supply within 48 hours."

As you can imagine, with over 1200 suppliers, it is an administration headache.

"We have a financial controller who came from a company which turned over £60 million. We turn over a fraction of that but there is more paper work with us. It is an administration nightmare but it set us up in business."

Among the other innovative approaches taken by Grass Roots was to operate some unusual business hours.

"We were the first company to operate the same hours as the greenkeeper and we do more business between 7 and 9 in the morning than in the rest of the day."

To reinforce the benefits of the "one-stop shop" philosophy employed by Grass Roots they asked a greenkeeper to note how much time he spent talking to suppliers on the phone, chasing products, making

enquiries and distributor meetings.

"Over a six month period he spent over 180 hours doing this which, worked out over a year, relates to a month and a half worth of work.

"Clubs are under enough pressure as it is without this additional burden and they know that if they phone us we can get them any product they need, in the time that they need it."

As well as products Grass Roots also supply manpower and this was particularly vital to one club a couple of years ago.

"Just before a big competition the greenkeeping staff went out for a meal and all came down with food poisoning. I got a call, put a team together and we set the course up and sorted everything out," recalled Jamie.

Having operated from the Bennett home, and a old pig farm which was used for storage, Grass Roots moved to new premises in April '96 on an industrial estate in Finchampstead, near Wokingham. Such has been the rapid rate of growth these have become overly cramped for the company's latest expansion hence the need for more new premises.

"We smashed our first year target by 300% and achieved our first three years of objectives in the first 18 months. Our success was recognised by winning the Lloyd's Bank Small Business of the Year Award of which we were very proud!"

The company always has and will continue to spend a significant proportion of its marketing budget on hospitality events.

"Reps from other companies were very well known by their customers - they'd become friends, so it was difficult to pull customers from them.

"So we put on go-karting events, five-a-side football competitions, take them to top sporting events anything just to get to know our customers better," he said.

They also sponsor many of the local BIGGA Section events and run educational seminars free of charge.

"This will continue and each of our Business Development Managers will have a budget to spend on market relations in their area."

The company also made strides when it took on Standard Golf at the beginning of last year.

"While we were predominately South East based, Standard Golf were national and had a data base of 2700 golf clubs.

Standard Golf products are being used as incentives to companies who take on the Genesis products.

"We will go into a golf club and take soil, tissue and water analysis and find out everything we need to know. Then we'll put together a programme in conjunction with the greenkeeper using the Genesis range which are all natural products and totally beneficial to everything else you're trying to do in the soil. The package is bespoke and we've priced it so that it will save the club money. Having agreed a programme we will guarantee results from the initial objectives having mutually agreed the quantitative criteria"

Jamie sees this as the springboard to Grass Root's next phase of development.

"We are clear about where we intend to go as a company. In 2002 we intend to float the company and within that time we will have developed the Genesis range from which is currently about 62 products to around 200. We know exactly what we need in that range and we know in which areas to invest money in research and development to achieve that.

"We want to venture into Europe and then maybe global," said Jamie, who doesn't rule out the purchase of other companies to assist in this expansion.

It may be that they will sit down and think of a more appropriate company name. "Fast Track" perhaps...



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