

Kubota has donated to BIGGA's Education and Development Fund for the last 10 years and is well placed to see how that money has benefited the industry. Scott MacCallum met Deputy Managing Director Rene Orban in his Oxfordshire office.

Tried and tested



Kubota

A company knows it's got it made when one of its products becomes the market leader. It knows that it has really cracked it when the product name becomes the generic name for what it makes. One immediately thinks of Sellotape - it always sounded weird when Blue Peter presenters talked of "sticky tape" when making something amazing out of washing up bottles... or Squeegee bottles which was another generic name of its time.

We still talk of doing the hoovering although Mr Dyson may dream of one day doing the Dysoning... Doesn't work does it?

In our industry you could make a strong case for Kubota being the generic name for the compact tractor.

"Take the Kubota and go and do..." is a phrase that could be heard in many clubs and virtually everyone would know on which piece of kit to jump.

"As a company we don't offer a total

package, our uniqueness is our speciality which we do play on and we are known for our compact tractor. We produce the top product in our field and in many areas it has become the generic name," said Kubota (UK) Deputy Managing Director, Rene Orban.

Rene admits, however, that the compact tractor market is now more congested than it once was.

"Two or three companies have joined the sector recently. It is quite a small market but I would imagine competitors have come in because they see scope for another brand or an area for them to diversify into. Perhaps it's because they want to take on Kubota," smiled Rene. You can be sure that Kubota welcomes the competition safe in the knowledge that they feel they have the products to cope.

"When we bring something out we know it is good because a lot of testing goes on before it is released. Speaking

as the people who sell the machinery, it can be frustrating because we know what's coming up but we can't get our hands on it until it has been completely tested. Having said that I've always believed it be the best policy," said Rene, who joined the company five years ago.

Kubota (UK) Ltd is a wholly owned subsidiary of the Kubota Corporation which is one of the largest manufacturing companies in Japan with a worldwide turnover in excess of £6 billion and 15,400 employees worldwide.

Kubota (UK), which also covers Ireland and, funnily enough, Iceland, works closely with its sister Kubotas in France and Germany.

"When we talk about development it tends to be on a European scale rather than just UK and some new product we've initiated while some of it has come from France," explained Rene, who collected a silver plate during BTME 2001 to recognise Kubota as one of only six companies to have given 10 years continuous support as a Golden Key member.

"We have monthly European technical meetings and tend to put forward a consolidated view rather than an individual one."

Each of the national Kubota companies works in a similar way with local nationals working alongside Japanese management, and in Kubota's Thame headquarters there are three Japanese - the Managing Director, the Finance Director and the General Service Manager. The normal practice is for a five to seven year secondment to the British base.

The MD is Mr Hideaki Kusaka, but like many Japanese he answers to a European first name, in his case Cliff.

He joined Kubota in June of last year





having previously working for Kubota in Japan and the US.

The relationship with Japan is extremely close and there are regular visits from the UK to Kubota's worldwide Headquarters to keep up to date with new developments and pass on the ideas of the British and European bases.

"I've just returned for a 10th visit to the United States and Japan with 32 dealers. The reason for the visit was to give them some idea of the sheer scale of Kubota as a company," explained Rene.

While no manufacturing takes place at the Thame base, just a few miles from The Oxfordshire golf club, Kubota (UK) employs 74 people and boasts 100,000 square feet of warehouses containing £12 million worth of machinery and parts. Current annual sales exceed a total value of £50 million.

Such is the reputation of the Kubota engine that many of the best known companies in the industry use the engine to power their equipment, although Kubota don't supply engines for installation into machines versions of which the company makes themselves.

"Supplying good quality engines for other companies must have a spin off for Kubota's own machinery business," explained Rene.

Since taking over from well known industry figure, Brian Hurlley, Rene has seen Kubota's market diversifying and not, as might be the case in with some manufacturers as a reaction to the downturn in agricultural, which Kubota have never seen as a core market.

"Prior to my arrival Kubota had built

up an incredible reputation in the trade and focussed on specific market segments, namely golf and local authority. In the last five years we have maintained our share of the golf and local authority markets but have looked at other markets as well. Add to that the product development and product extension we have made across the board and we have made good progress over recent years," he explained.

Included in these newly targeted areas are estate management, the hire market, contractors and landscaping, whose growth in market can be partly explained by the plethora of garden make over programmes like Ground force and Home Front in the Garden.

"It is very true that the market for ride-on mowers has been growing quite considerably and I suspect a lot of that is due to the gardening programmes. Not necessarily the domestic user perhaps but certainly the contractor," he explained.

"We are suited to these markets and it means we now have a very broad base."

Looking to the future Rene can see Kubota continuing to develop and improve its portfolio of machinery and equipment.

"When it comes to environmental issues we were one of the first compa-

nies to meet the strict Californian Emissions tests while this year we will be bringing out six new products bringing the total for the past two years to about 12. It is very much a case of continuous improvement."

With ten years of continuous support for the Education and Development Fund Kubota's commitment to greenkeeper education is there for everyone to see.

"There has been huge progress in BIGGA and that has assisted our policy of training and making information available.

"Any organisation that represents a serious proportion of an industry acts as a catalyst for the supplier and the end user. We are not at the opposite ends of the spectrum but someone has to bring them together as our needs are slightly different from the greenkeepers.

"The needs of us both can be satisfied by better training, more knowledge and better communication and I'm pleased with what BIGGA has done," he said.

Kubota has always enjoyed a close relationship with its customers but it is something Rene is keen to build upon.

"We'd like to see more greenkeepers coming to visit us here. We are a distribution place, not a manufacturing

operation but we'd like them to come down, take a look around and just talk about things.

"We have some extensions going onto the premises so we've got plenty of room so that's the message I'd like to go out to the Sections. If you can organise groups of greenkeepers then we'd love to meet them and I'm sure the odd bottle of stout would be in order. I'd like that very much," said Rene, whose offices are actually very well placed for a number of Sections in both the Midland and South East Regions.

In his time in the industry Rene has witnessed a change in the type of person now looking after golf courses.

"No disrespect to those who have been in the industry for years but the greenkeeper of 20 years ago is completely different to the one today and that's down to education and a more formal career structure which has brought people into the industry who perhaps previously wouldn't have considered a career in greenkeeping," said Rene.

The progress of the greenkeeping profession can be mirrored by the progress made by Kubota (UK) over the last 20 years and you can be sure that the close relationship between the industry and the company will only be strengthened in the future.