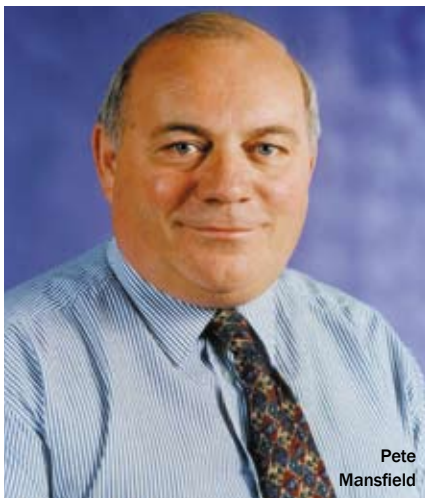




FEATURE



Pete Mansfield

STANDING THE TEST OF TIME

Scott MacCallum travelled to St Neot's in Cambridgeshire to meet Pete Mansfield, of Lely UK.

There can be few relationships that have been as harmonious and long lasting as that of Toro and its UK distributor, Lely.

Richard and Judy; Marks & Spencer; Ant and Dec – they've all been pretty good over the years but none have enjoyed the unbroken run of success more than the two and a half decades of America's The Toro Company and the St Neots-based, Dutch-owned Lely UK.

"We've been a distributor for Toro since 1983, so it is a longstanding relationship," explained Lely's General Manager for turf products, Peter Mansfield, who has been there every step of the way.

"In fact last year we celebrated 25 years together. It was quite uncanny as we had three

anniversaries in the same year. There was also 60 years of Lely itself, and 40 years of Lely UK. We had a big party in November for all the staff and our owner, Alexander van der Lely, brought his board of directors over from Holland to mark the celebration."

Lely UK was launched initially to cater for the agricultural market and its agricultural arm is still just as strong as its amenity division which took off when they joined up with Toro.

"We keep very close connections with Minneapolis. (Toro's worldwide headquarters). As a company we probably visit around four times a year and we support every meeting and training event that Toro holds, making sure that we send

over a reasonable group. Emails and phone calls take place on a daily basis and we treat each other much more like colleagues than business associates," said Peter, who is probably the Lely man who spends most time at Toro HQ.

Peter's main contact in the States is fellow Briton, Barry Beckett, Toro's Worldwide Marketing Manager, but such is the relationship between the two companies that all of the Lely staff know exactly which member of Toro staff to contact if they have a problem.

"There are a lot of people from both companies who have given many years of service and over the years most of us have met and know each other well."

Toro trusts Lely to run the UK arm and Lely ensures that no stone is left unturned in giving blanket coverage.

A UK and Ireland map behind Peter's desk is riddled with pins each signifying a dealership or service centre and each is supported by a Sales Manager. In total there are 23 main dealers and 13 service centres, while Lely itself also acts as a dealership covering the local Cambridgeshire patch.

"The map has evolved over the years. We tickle it a bit occasionally, moving territory lines slightly, for example, if demographics change or a new road improves accessibility within a particular area. All the territories need to be viable and for that we feel it needs to have at least 50 golf clubs in it," said Pete, who several years ago instigated The Commitment Programme for the dealerships.

"The aim of the programme was to look at dealerships, their business and support them into becoming more viable companies so they would grow over the years. We are conscious that we didn't want one dealership competing with another for business so the Regional Sales Manager is there to ensure that everything works fairly. Prices are set by us so there is parity across the network," explained Peter.

Dealing with a mighty organisation like Toro leads to some extremely sophisticated planning to ensure that sufficient product is available to customers in the UK without a huge surfeit clogging up the warehouses.

"For whole goods (complete machines) we are looking at a year out for ordering which we review every month. Our forecasting is extremely accurate as it is based on many years' experience and regular on-going discussions with our major clients. In our planning we identify the firm orders from the tentative orders and as the year progresses we continue to update our forecasting and keep talking to our customers to make sure we have the product ready for them when they want it."

Those orders are then shipped to the UK from Minneapolis, which is a huge logistical undertaking as the Minnesota city is hardly close to the sea. It's around 1500 miles from the east coast, while St Neots couldn't describe itself as a harbour town either, being just about as far away from the coast as any town in the south of England could be. Shipping normally takes 15 to 20 days and depending upon the carrier used it can arrive at one of a number of UK ports.

"At both ends lorries transport the goods to or from the ports," said Peter.

One of the interesting points that the Lely staff sometimes see is the different types of packaging that each country requires and which Toro has to supply.

"We have seen boxes destined for Australia that have been coated with green cuprinol and crates that have been waxed to meet specific conditions in certain countries. The disposal of packaging these days is a very sensitive issue and it is important that we adhere to the legislation," said Peter, as he took me around the 6.2-acre site.

Lely holds a huge supply of parts with three quarters of a million worth at any one time

and liaises closely with both Toro's main Parts Department, in Plymouth, Illinois, near Chicago, and the central European Parts Department, based in Germany.

"Our dealers order from us and if we have the parts in stock we guarantee to supply to them within 24 hours or overnight. If we don't have the part in stock we order it through the US and they link to Germany. Usually they can get it out to us the same day. If not, and it has to come from the US, we promise to have it to the customer within 72 hours. So it's 24 hours if we have it in stock and 72, maximum, if we don't," explained Peter, who added that Lely has a 96% first pick rate – part in stock – while Toro as a whole has an extremely impressive 99.2% first pick success rate.

"We ship directly to the end user as well which often saves us a day."

One element of Lely's day-to-day business which is becoming increasingly important is training and the company has a brand new on-site training facility that proves the point.

"We actually currently have two training rooms – our old 'dirty' one where we have grinding equipment and do mechanical courses and the new 'clean' one where we have a pool of computers and we do more management training, although we do have an option to bring machines into the building as well," said Peter, adding that a decision whether to remain running with two facilities or move exclusively to the new one was still to be made.

Last year Lely had around 800 people through the doors covering in-house staff, dealers and end-users. Ian Sumpter has been Training Manager since 2003 and it says much for the development of training methods and the commitment to the cause that a machinery distributor employs a full-time educator.

"Originally training used to be the remit of the position of Service Manager, who looked after warranties and dealt with teething problems and breakdowns of machines. Then he became Service and Training Manager and then eventually we had a dedicated Training Manager because the job became so involved.

"It has to be someone with the skills because we can train the product into the person but you can't train the ability to manage the training. It's a big job as invites have to be sent out, hotels booked and we have to organise buses to take people out to dinner etc. It all needs to be done."

Lely has a large training budget but some recovery of costs can be made through Government Schemes and some training can also be charged to the recipient.

"Some years ago this wouldn't have happened but thanks in part to BIGGA, which has done a lot in this area with the CPD Scheme, people are quite prepared to pay for training as they see that it is necessary."

Toro and Lely have always had education and training at the forefront of their thinking and nothing could highlight that more than the Toro Student of the Year Competition which has run since 1989.

"I think I missed the first three but I have been heavily involved in every one since then. Our Managing Director Graham Dale used to be a judge at the Final and I'd do the Regional Finals then I took on the Final as well. More recently I've dropped out of the Regional Finals and our Regional Managers have taken that on and I've concentrated on the Final," said Peter, who is normally joined as a final Judge by a Toro colleague, John Pemberton, BIGGA's Chief Executive, and the Chairman of the BIGGA Learning and Development Sub-Committee.

"We have uncovered some extremely fine greenkeepers over the last 20 years and I have watched young boys, and some girls, become grown adults. It's very rewarding. It would be over my dead body if we ever said that we couldn't afford to do the competition."

Toro is very proud of its Total Solutions programme offering a full programme of machinery, spare parts, irrigation systems and general expertise and it is not just a marketing boast that if a customer chooses to go down the Toro path they are welcomed into the Toro family and treated as such.

If the relationship between Toro and those people who buy the product is as fruitful as that between Toro and Lely has been over the last 25 years they will be extremely happy customers indeed.



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