



Golden Key Profile

FEATURE



A PEARL AMONG COMPANIES



Scott MacCallum meets up with Dave Roberts, of Kubota, to discuss the company's 30th anniversary and the last five years of developments

In 2004 Kubota UK celebrated its 25th anniversary and the company produced a splendid silver painted compact tractor to commemorate the occasion. Five years on Kubota's 30th anniversary is upon us and Sales and Marketing Manager Dave Roberts is a relieved man.

"I'm not sure there is a colour for a 30th anniversary, but thank goodness because it costs a lot of money to respray tractors so I think we'll be sticking with orange," explained Dave.

However, anyone approaching a 30th wedding anniversary should note that, while Dave can be happy not to have to paint a tractor, wives will be looking for some pearls!

The last five years have raced by for Kubota UK with the company undertaking some major development and change within that time.

"We've had some new products which have really taken off, and they have been into different markets. At one end we've launched ride-on mowers into the consumer end of the market, which is all about volume, and we have had to develop our distribution channels to get the product out. At the other end of the scale is our larger tractor agricultural range which is not so much about volume, although we are building on that each year, but breaking into a very mature and aggressive market which is dominated by a small number of companies," explained Dave.

And that in a nutshell is what Kubota is all about. The company has in Dave's words "many strings to his bow" giving it protection if any one sector of business suffers a downturn. That strategy does involve working very hard to ensure no one sector is ever neglected.

"It takes a lot of energy and resources to work in so many sectors and it is a very fine line

to walk to ensure that we continue to develop new business but also to keep an eye on our core markets," explained Dave, as we sat in his office in Thame, Oxfordshire.

"The backbone of our business is still compact tractors and the markets they serve, grounds care, golf course management and horticulture are key to us and we can't afford to lose that business."

Kubota is market leader in the production of compact tractors but Dave admitted they are a big fish in the relatively small, compact tractor, pool and that it is difficult to expand sales or market share in that area.

"When you look at agriculture we are a very small fish in a massive pond and the potential is huge for us. Even if we grow our share of the market by a single percentage point it can mean a lot of tractors and a lot of money to us."

Kubota launched a range of agricultural tractors last year – the M40 series which offer



golf market has surprised us as we originally felt that they were a little over engineered compared with many of the vehicles Course Managers were running around in. We felt with the heavy duty chassis and engineering that went into it, that they would be more attractive to rough terrain users."

With that in mind Dave and his colleagues had fairly modest objectives and targets but just around that time the market exploded as people began looking for diesel utility vehicles instead of petrol driven quad bikes.

"Course Managers were deciding to by one of ours rather than two from another manufacturer or were working on an extended lifetime using our utility vehicle and getting better lifecosts" explained Dave, who said that they struggle to keep up with demand for the first two years after their launch.



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"We've learned an awful lot and are now much better equipped to go after a market which has grown to include even more makes."

In recent years Kubota UK has rededicated itself to the golf market with Dave recognising its importance to other sectors of their business.

He admits that in the past they may have looked at golf as just one, relatively small element of the business and devoted resources in time and marketing proportionately to it.

"I came into the Sales Management role seven years ago and added Marketing five years ago and I looked a little more closely at the various sectors we were operating in. It became apparent that golf provided quite a large proportion of the 30-60 horsepower tractor market in particular, as there are a lot of golf courses on this little island that need tractors, even with the advent of self propelled machinery."

According to Dave, tractors are the unsung heroes of the industry.

"They don't get looked after like cutting equipment, washed down and dried off and parked in the shed every night. The tractor tends to be left sitting in the corner with its loader on, but they are basic work horses and every golf club still needs something to load topdressing and tow the trailer to the bunker renovation site," said Dave, passionately.

But there were other reasons to ensure renewed focus on the golf market.

"Golf is a very high profile arena for us. A lot of people play golf, a lot of people with big houses play golf and a lot of people with big houses need

to buy Kubota tractors and when they see Kubota at the golf club they will think if it's good enough for the Course Manager of my golf club it's good enough for me or my business."

Dave brought Kubota back into Golden Key membership five years ago, and two years ago took over the sponsorship of BIGGA's flagship golf event, The National Championship.

Kubota has sponsored the events held at Dundonald and Glasgow Gables in 2008 and East Sussex National last year and have been delighted with their investment.

"We see sponsoring the National Championship as a great way to get profile, kudos and credibility within the greenkeeping fraternity while keeping investments levels realistic. It has to work for us and the Golden Key Membership and the National Championship sponsorship works very well for us," said Dave.

tractors from 60 to 95 horsepower – and these have enjoyed a favourable welcome by the industry with the company benefiting from the fact that it is somewhat easier to size up a tractor to meeting the horsepower demands of the farming industry than it is to turn larger vehicles into quality compact or mid-sized tractors.

"It is easier to make them bigger than to make a big one smaller and if you look at our main competitors who have a very strong pedigree in agriculture, when it comes to compact tractors, they are using Japanese technology" said Dave, who reiterated the point that Kubota produce all its own engines, all its own transmissions with the watch words, quality, reliability, durability and simplicity.

The other main area of growth for Kubota has been through the arrival of its utility vehicle the RTV 900.

"It was launched in 2005 and its success in the

Looking forward at the golf industry as a whole Dave, a positive thinker, believes that the weakened pound could potentially see golf tourism return to the UK and more outside money coming into golf clubs.

And in terms of product development engine technology will keep advancing in line with the emission targets that are being brought in.

"By 2014 the emission targets are going to be very very stringent and diesel engines will only be allowed to blow out what amounts to fresh air. That's quite a challenge for an engine manufacturer."

He also feels that Bio-diesel has dropped off the agenda for the time being for cost reasons.

"Bio fuels will be part of the plan to get emissions down but I don't think that it will be the great answer to everything that we thought it was five or six years ago. To produce a gallon of bio fuel takes an awful lot of energy and these things have got to balance out."

On product development Dave has some good news for tractor operators with comfort top priority.

"Forget the CD player now it's got to be the MP3 player. Forget one cup holder, it's got to be two, while seats are becoming ever more comfortable. it's all got to be done without increasing the overall weight of the tractor. They are really advanced these days" said Dave.

But one thing that won't be changing is the colour of the Kubota fleet. This year it will remain orange and you won't be seeing that pearl coloured tractor to mark 30 years of Kubota UK.

