

The Ransomes' way

Scott MacCallum catches up with David Withers, the Managing Director of BIGGA Gold Key Supporter Ransomes Jacobsen



Not far from the Ransomes Jacobsen factory, on a huge industrial estate just outside Ipswich, is a road called "Ransomes Way".

It is pure coincidence, the two are not related as, I believe, the road, was named in honour of the "Swallows and Amazons" author Arthur Ransome, who has connections with the area.

But wouldn't it be great if the road and the company were part of a master plan because listening to Managing Director, David Withers, you become very aware that there is a Ransomes way – or more accurately - a Ransomes Jacobsen way.

"Over the last four or five years we've focussed on three core principles. 1. You've got to build a relationship with your customer; 2. Build a good machine, which meets the customer's unmet needs and 3. You've got to look after it for the whole life of the machine," explained David, as we sat in his office overlooking the wonderful three hole golf course which has become such a feature of the Ransomes Jacobsen HQ over the last three years.

"If you do these three things, you'll succeed in business. Get any one of them wrong and you'll fail," said David, who was honest enough to admit that the company had not always achieved all three.

"There have been times in the past when we did get one or more of them wrong."

David is very much a people person and is keen that the team he has built around him contains individuals of a similar vein.

"I'm definitely a believer that you've got to build relationships. We don't just sell a mower and walk away. It's all about repeat business and that comes back to having the right people in place. We always try to hire the best people we can and don't give them short term incentives.

"We always look to the long term path and that means winning one customer at a time.

"That is the ethos which runs through the whole company and if you hire people with that same kind of philosophy, and reinforce

the message, the more you will tend to end up with a group of people who embody that spirit and ideal."

The success of the policy has seen the Ipswich-based team extending their boundaries to cover the Asia Pacific rim.

"We had always described our territory as 'I to I' – Iceland to India - now it is still 'I to I' but now it's Iceland to Indonesia. It is very good news for us and gives us the chance to explore an area which has potential for growth in the golf industry," said David, who explained that the new area had previously been covered by Textron's American team but that they were now focussing on Latin America.

"We were known to have a good sales team – or 'Bench strength' as they describe it in the States – and it was felt that we should have the opportunity to use that strength to build on the excellent work that the US team had already done."

Ransomes Jacobsen's Sales Director, Alan Prickett has relocated to Singapore to become Managing Director of the Asia Pacific Region.

"We are used to managing disparate time zones and the expansion fits in nicely with what we have been trying to do in terms of getting close to our customer," said David, whose already extensive travel schedule has recently increased markedly, with additional trips down to Asia coupled with his regular trans-Atlantic hops to the States.

Indeed he's a real rival to George Clooney's character in "Up in the Air" when it comes to Air Miles.

"It'll calm down when Alan gets everything in place in Singapore," he said.

Other than Alan, they have recruited nationals wherever possible to fill key roles in the various countries.

"I'm a believer in that strategy. The more you can have the local culture represented the better, as it is much easier to fit in and communicate with customers."

Like so many companies in all areas of business the recession has had an impact on Ransomes Jacobsen but David feels that they are fortunate to have a balance of markets to trade in, plus

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the backup of a huge company in Textron.

"Generally speaking we have the public money with our Ransomes brand and private money with the Jacobsen, EZGO and Iseki brands. In recent years if one side has been up the other side has been down and they have balanced themselves out.

"However we had the perfect storm in '09 when we had a bad public year and a bad private year. We had to put a redundancy programme in place and had to shut the plant on a couple of occasions," explained David, candidly.

One of the major problems was that the RJ dealers had strong inventories of machines in stock and were reluctant to order more until they had sold what they held.

"They were quite right and so they sold what they had in stock and we accepted the situation and didn't push any inventory onto them. We ran the plant slow and lean and it was tough for us, but I'm happy to say that we didn't lose any dealers during that time."

While it meant a tough 2009 the following year and first half of this year have been more encouraging.

"Having sold what they held the dealers had empty shelves at the beginning of 2010 and needed to restock and with a decent year they ended the year with the same amount of inventory as they started so they had sold out what they have bought in so 2010 was a good bounce back year."

One area which has particularly pleased David is the number of new customers they have attracted during the recession.

"We track our unique customers and last year we had 30% more unique retail customers that we



RJ International Golf Course

had the previous year," said David.

A major success over the last 18 months has been the emergence of the Eclipse 322, the hydraulic free greens mower.

"That comes back to coming up with a machine which meets the customers unmet needs and the Eclipse can control clip rates, cannot spill oil, gives a better finish and uses a lot less fuel thus reducing running costs.

"It means that there are people who are now considering us and saying 'Maybe I'll give Jake a chance,'" said David, who added that the company has now invested in three demonstrator vehicles which tour the country ensuring that potential customers can view machines at their absolute best.

Another area of huge investment by the company has been in the area of after sales and spare parts, which had been a weakness.

"We doubled the value of parts held in our inventory, which is not as easy as it might sound, as we have hundreds of thousands of individual parts with an inventory of 40,000 different parts numbers which we hold.

"We must get it right as it can ruin people's jobs if we get it wrong and we are well aware of that."

Ransomes Jacobsen has a very strong relationship with BIGGA



RJ's recently introduced demonstration fleet

and the other industry bodies which David has worked hard to develop and BIGGA is delighted that the company supports the Learning and Development Fund as well as sponsoring the soon-to-be-relaunched Safety Management System; the BIGGA educational scholarship scheme which has seen greenkeepers' courses funded to the tune of over £150,000 since it was launched as well as other sponsorships including rucksacks for the BIGGA Open Support team.

"I get many letters from guys

who have been given scholarships saying that they wouldn't be in the job they are in now if it wasn't for the fact that Ransomes Jacobsen had helped them through the BIGGA programme. I get a warm feeling when I read that."

It is all part of Ransomes Jacobsen's support for BIGGA.

"I believe that BIGGA is a great force for good in the industry and working together is good for BIGGA, good for us and good for the industry and it is still something I personally like to get involved with."

All part of the Ransomes' way!