

Pledge reveals plan for leading edge brand

Following a year of research, planning and development, Pledge Office Chairs is launching a high-profile brand awareness campaign to secure its future as a design-led manufacturer.

Sales director Stephen Russell reveals all to Interior Channels

Bedfordshire-based Pledge Office Chairs was established in May 1970 by David Carter with the objective of specialising in the production of swivel adjustable office seating. The company started with just 10 employees working out of 180m² premises. Today, it employs 160 people; operates out of a 9-acre site with 14,000m² of production capacity; and currently produces no less than 120 ranges of office seating, which includes Formline and Pelvic Posture acquired in 2000.

Though one of the furniture industry's profitable few, Pledge is no longer content to remain one of its silent majority. Following a year of market research, business planning and product development, the company is ready to launch a high profile corporate brand awareness campaign, with the aim of projecting its image as a design-led UK manufacturer.

The quest to raise the company's profile began with the design and manufacture of Edge, a new concept in soft seating created by a collection of top European designers, including the UK's David Fox. Unfortunately, its introduction did not lead to the immediate sales success that everyone had hoped for. Recognising that selling a design-led product required a different, more structured approach to the market, David Carter appointed Stephen Russell as sales director, with a brief to develop a highly focused marketing strategy that would transform the Pledge image and ensure its design credentials were instantly recognisable.

With competition getting tougher by the day, and corporate purse strings getting ever tighter, Russell knew time was not on his side. True UK chair manufacturers like Pledge, as distinct from assemblers, currently



Edge Design for the more discerning customer

have the edge over foreign imports because they retain control of every stage in the production process, from initial research and design through to delivery to the customer; and can prove their quality and safety standards thanks to FIRA certification. Comprehensive environmental credentials are an additional advantage for companies such as Pledge who are members of FISP, the Furniture Industry's Sustainability Programme. "But once Chinese manufacturers can claim the same certified credentials, the UK industry will be in trouble". No time like the present then to forge ahead with the 'Pledge is Edge' campaign.

The first task was to look at the dealer base. "We acquired a list of every person in the UK who professes to sell office chairs and visited every single one of around 2000 on the list. It took a long time, but was worth it because it enabled us to determine whether or not they were serious players. It also enabled us to draw up a list of potential new prospects".

The next step was to carry out a needs analysis exercise, which included asking dealers what they thought of Pledge as a company compared with its competitors. The feedback highlighted a general lack of awareness about who the main manufacturers were; a haphazard approach to the market; and insufficient attention by the majority of competitors to the customer base. For Pledge, the main issue raised was too many products. "They found being presented with 120 ranges of seating was just too confusing and, to be honest, it was a bit hefty", admits Stephen Russell.



David Carter,
managing director



Tagging – brand image in a label



Visible difference – the new Posture catalogue

The research results confirmed the management's view that they needed to develop a more structured approach to the marketplace if they were to gain the longed-for sales success. The priorities agreed were to rationalise the product portfolio; build a stronger dealer base; strengthen the sales and marketing team; integrate the back office sales support activities; and create a high profile design-led brand awareness campaign to include dealer support marketing materials.

Product range rationalised

One year on, the product portfolio has been reduced down to just 15 ranges. The number of catalogues has also been reduced to four, each aimed at a different market sector. Within the 'Pledge Collection', there is Series, the entry-level range; Compendium, the mainstream products; and Posture special needs seating. Then there is 'Edge', the new design-led soft seating. "We believe that presenting dealers with a well designed four-point package will be less confusing for them and their end-user customers".

The content of each catalogue is purpose designed to do a specific job, as Stephen Russell went on to explain: "For example, 'special needs seating' was tucked away at the end of the mainstream catalogue. But though it looks very much like a task chair, it is, in fact, designed specifically for people with back problems and some of our more insightful dealers had seen that as a new sales opportunity. So we have responded to that demand by renaming the range 'Posture' and creating a new brochure that incorporates the new Pledge design signature. Having a dedicated brochure enables us to take a more scientific approach to the marketing, with full explanations of the attributes and benefits. It also enables us to give dealers a better price so they can afford to promote it as solution for back care".

The rationalisation included looking at the pricing structure. Taking Series as an example of change, instead of selling it on a net price basis, which was not popular with dealers, pricing will be on a retail basis: "That will give dealers the flexibility they are looking for and gives us more flexibility to offer better terms to our more supportive dealer customers".

Following the current trend in corporate branding, each chair will in future feature a Pledge designer label. Alternatively, the dealer's name or logo can be incorporated, thereby giving a high degree of exclusivity. "We can even tailor-manufacture if needed". There are also plans to offer a combined personalised tagging and bagging service.

The implications of growing the business, generating increased sales and offering a variety of service options is the pressure on operational management. Pledge has dealt with that aspect, too. In addition to managing director David Carter and sales director Stephen Russell, the Board charged with taking the company forward into a new era of

includes Mick Muglord, technical director; Len Castell, production director; and Chris Ioannou, finance director.

There are also six sales managers covering six territories; a national accounts manager who looks after Pledge's manufacturing partners and corporate customers; and five office-based sales co-ordinators. Another new appointment is Barbora Bonham as sales office manager, who is responsible for ensuring a smooth back-office and logistics operation, which now integrates functions such as administration, sample programmes, order processing, progress chasing, transport, purchasing, and production".

The visible difference

It is Jason Lock, the inhouse marketing manager appointed earlier this year, who has designed the Edge brochure, the most immediate visible difference of the transformation of Pledge into a design-led manufacturer. With new brochures for the revamped Series and Posture ranges also ready for distribution, his plans include helping dealers create their own dynamic sales and marketing materials.

As Stephen Russell explained, a key part of the corporate branding project is to ensure that customers are fully aware that Edge is Pledge. "Launching Edge two years ago before we had finalised the product mix taught us an important lesson about prototypes. Never launch a product until it is ready to go into production; has a catalogue; and is priced to go".

Showing it at Design Prima this year was a completely different story: "Design Prima really was absolutely superb for the volume and quality of people that came through the door. There was a good mix of architects and specifiers, although not many end users. To be controversial, it really has become a dealer show. That does not really concern us as we sell through dealers, but it was definitely an issue for some manufacturers".

Ready to go live

So, having revamped its entire product range "from the grass roots up", reorganised the sales support activities; identified potential new dealer customers; and created the all-important promotional materials, Pledge is ready to go live with its new, dynamic image as a design-led office furniture manufacturer that is "here today and here tomorrow".

But standing still is not an option. David Carter and his management team are already looking at future expansion of the business to include new product lines. For example, the production department is currently working on a genuine certified 24/7 chair with five-year guarantee for the entire structure, including the strength of the mechanisms and durability of the 24/7 Camira fabric.

With single source supply increasingly in mind, Pledge is also planning to introduce a table range in Q1 2008, with mid 2008 pencilled in for an all-encompassing conference/side/business chair range which, again, will be designed, tooled and manufactured inhouse. The company will then be able to discontinue some of its conference-visitor type

ranges which contain a lot of very similar me-too products.

Long-term, the plan is to have a London showroom with other initiatives being considered to increase brand awareness including new Edge and Pledge websites and participation in more promotional events such as factory open days, golf days, case studies and exhibitions. "We will be at Design Prima again next year, and the mission will be to get across that Edge is part of Pledge. You will see things on the stand that will really justify that comment". ■



Stephen Russell, sales director