



When the going gets tough

Alan Palmer, Bridgford Interior's business development director, uncovers the formula to the company's continuing success...

At the start of 2011, specialist interior fit-out and refurbishment contractor Bridgford was said to be hungrier and leaner than ever. The company were ready to combat the year ahead, and has managed yet again to maintain a steady turnover approaching £30m, which is no mean feat given the current economic climate.

Whilst the company is fortunate enough to be working with the people spending money in this period of uncertainty, the market it operates in has not proved any easier over the past 12 months. Various issues have impacted on opportunities classified under the umbrella of "the economy" – fewer shops required as consumer spending declines and habits change to embrace the brave new world of multi-channel retailing. An abundance of shopfitters far greater than the availability of projects, those clients that have been brave and bold enough to press forward with expansion plans and refurbishments during the downturn have taken every opportunity to drive down costs, taking advantage of fiercely competitive, sometimes cut-throat tendering. To add insult to injury, there has been a visible shift towards night working and trading store phased refits to minimise disruption to trade. This is certainly a barren landscape.

"Recent trade surveys indicate that 50 per cent of shopfitting businesses have seen a drop in revenue from 2009 to 2010, the average margin across the top 30 contractors was nought per cent, and 29 per cent of businesses have experienced a negative profit – not very pleasant reading for those of us firmly entrenched in retail/leisure fit out!" comments Alan Palmer, Bridgford Interior's business development director.

Fortunately, in a sector that is typically reliant on a small number of long-standing relationships, Bridgford has bucked the trend, working for 28 prestigious clients in 2011 – 20 of which are retained, some in excess of ten years.

Palmer adds, "The key performance indicator for this company is the level of repeat business and relationships with its clients and project teams – producing a balanced and considered result time after time."

In the current market it is a given that a business has to be competent in its chosen field to stay afloat and needs to add value where possible and to offer more than the next man – Bridgford, whilst embracing the competitive margins has remained fiscally stable and has sought to enhance its standing in terms of sustainability and training. 2011 saw third-party UKAS accreditation for its ISO 14001 Environmental Management System and has accredited the company's projects teams to the Association of Project Managers. Not sitting back on its laurels, the business has now committed to produce a fully Integrated Management System encompassing both Health & Safety (OHSAS 18001) and Quality (ISO 9001).

"The project comes first every single time, sometimes at the detriment to ourselves, but project delivery and relationships formed as a result are the key to our success," says Palmer.

"Relationships are not formed overnight but take years to nurture. We are extremely lucky to be engaged in long-term working relationships built on trust and open communication, providing consistency and reliability,

supporting our clients every step of the way on their journey to success."

Bridgford's managing director, Paul Cockle puts the business offer in simple terms: "Offering an end-to-end solution, we have full engagement at all levels throughout any project cycle. Everything we do is focused on relationships; we strip away the corporate brand names and deal with the people at the coalface, continuing to develop both new and existing business relationships by consistently providing commercially viable solutions to a range of clients."

Martin Fahey, commercial director, cites his experience of a five per cent increase in enquiries, "Tender activity this year has been at record levels as retail and leisure clients alike look outside of their existing supply chain towards contractors such as Bridgford in search of better value, this has led to new opportunities with clients such as Aegon, British Airways Pension Trust, Jonathan Adler, Maplin Electronics, Superdrug, Wilkinson's and Working Links."

Flagship schemes completed by the business in 2011 include a number of design-led projects at Westfield Stratford City – Vue Multiplex Cinema, Strada Restaurant and Currys PC World 2 in 1 store, together with and not forgetting the staple diet of projects for TK Maxx, Best Buy, BHS, Dixons Retail, Asda Living, O2 and Starbucks to name but a few.

The formula is simple – Bridgford provides a fit-out and management service, we add value where it counts ensuring the optimum balance of time, cost and quality. The business has the flexibility to adapt to and to manage changing expectations and objectives with the benefit of competent and experienced handpicked site teams, which in turn enhance client relationships.

"Our people are our most valuable asset – they genuinely get excited about their work. The majority of our people are from a trade background and understand the issues that are faced on site, having learnt the business from the bottom up. Our ability to plan, organise and deliver projects in a professional manner has led to a high proportion of repeat business which is true testimony to performance," says Palmer.

"Our strategy given the lack of foresight, inability to plan and resource efficiently for the future has got to be 'head down and get on with it', he concludes, "strengthening existing relationships and winning new business whilst looking to secure premium work through recommendation and in complimentary sectors. A focus on longer-term agreements and preferred contractor status has been the key to our success."

With the Bank of England stating in November that "while the worst risks had not so far crystallised, the threat of their so doing had increased" the forecast for the year ahead can only be described as uncertain. What will the retail landscape look like in five years' time?

That said, Bridgford says it will continue with a concentrated effort on marketing to improve its new business pipeline and seek to stay closer than ever to its existing contacts.

No better words summarise the current market we find ourselves in than the famous Forrest Gump quote: *Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you are going to get.*