

COVER STORY RLI

Child's play



TOYS R US, EXETER



ALAN PALMER

DESPITE A CHALLENGING MARKETPLACE, RETAIL AND LEISURE FIT-OUT SPECIALIST **BRIDGFORD INTERIORS LTD** REMAINS UPBEAT, BUILDING UPON ITS PROVEN TRACK RECORD AND ENVIABLE REPUTATION WITHIN THE INDUSTRY. RLI CATCHES UP WITH BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR ALAN PALMER TO FIND A COMPANY THAT CONTINUES TO PRODUCE RESULTS.

As the UK and much of the rest of the world wallows in recession, there is an air of uncertainty; last year, Bridgford Interior Ltd's Business Development Director, Alan Palmer predicted a trend towards increased competition as work streams dry up and labour becomes abundant.

Whilst the past year has been tough for all across the sector, Bridgford Interiors has been comparatively protected from this 'annus horribilis',

having maintained its existing client base (18 clients, accounting for approximately 90 per cent of turnover) by continuing to deliver on time and on budget. Simultaneously, the company has continued to develop new business relationships by consistently providing commercially viable solutions to a range of retail clients.

Whilst there has been a trend towards the postponement or curtailment of shopfitting projects, retail development is, says Palmer,

inevitable. Such development is changing, with entertainment featuring heavily on the agenda in terms of cafes, restaurants and cinemas attached to the retail offer, attracting and increasing dwell times.

The marketplace is constantly evolving as retailers attempt to steal market share from competitors and to create additional sales. "This does not necessarily mean wholesale store refits," explains Palmer. "Simple cost-effective design enhancements and initiatives can result in higher returns per square foot." As was the case with the WNR (Winning New Revenue) stores delivered for DSGi.

Bridgford's Commercial Director, Martin Fahey reports that 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, to counter the reduced spend generated by current low consumer confidence.

"This all points to increased competition for the lucrative programmes and success for those who are both lean and efficient enough to deliver them," he says.

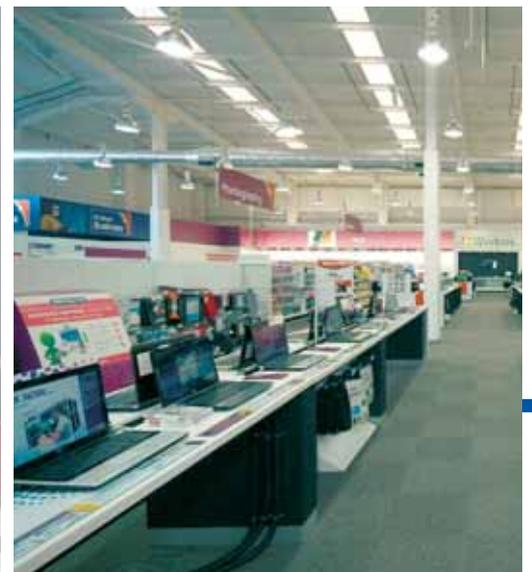
CALZEDONIA, WESTFIELD



PRET A MANGER, ALDERSGATE



PC WORLD, NORTHOLT





ASDA, STOWMARKET

There is no quick fix to the recession, instead sensible and sustainable strategies need to be agreed that do not include suicidal tender prices or knee-jerk reactions.

There is currently an environment in which customers have less money to invest, where there is high volatility in material and commodity prices and where there is pressure to reduce costs. Rising unemployment is now a factor that will continue to hold back consumer spending.

"One hot topic at present is that of Price (what you pay) vs Value (what you demand)," says Palmer. "We hope that procurement teams stick with focus on quality and not on lowest price."

Whilst clients have generally continued to take a more sensible long-term view, the market is such that some rival contractors are willing to tender at ridiculously low and unsustainable levels in order to win work, leading to problems in the future. Conversely, those contractors still pricing realistically with margins sufficient to enable them to maintain training and an emphasis on quality, safety and environment will struggle in the short term.

M&S OUTLET, LEEDS



The challenge for Bridgford is to encourage clients to become more effective in assessing the difference between cost and value.

"Our ability to plan, organise and deliver projects in a professional manner has led to a high proportion of repeat business, which is a true testimony to performance," says Managing Director, Paul Cockle.

"Our teams genuinely get excited about their work – they are satisfied that they are producing something worthwhile, notwithstanding the many, many tiny efforts that nobody sees or appreciates."

"The volume of interiors projects undertaken in 2009 rose by 20 per cent as a result of a concentration on the core retail market and attention to customer requirements," continues Palmer. "We have noticed that project volumes are up similar to 2008 on previous years as a result of a shift in

HOMESENSE, STAPLES CORNER



PC WORLD, NORTHOLT



our workload towards refit or refurbishment schemes."

The workload generated from retained clients has seen over 200 projects undertaken across the UK for the likes of TK Maxx, O2, Orange, M&S, Starbucks, Boots, DSGi, Toys R Us, Cotswold Outdoor, Asda and Vue Cinema. In addition, projects have been undertaken for new clients, including popular UK high street brands such as Pret a Manger, Adidas and Welcome Break.

"Our strategy for the future has got to be 'more of the same'," says Palmer, "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 key to our success."

Having maintained a stable financial base over the past three years, Bridgford is now positioning itself for the future. "We are a market leading business that thoroughly understands the demands of the retail industry, with a proven track record of providing a professional offer, executed to the highest standard," says Palmer. "Given our cash-positive position and excellent client satisfaction record we have been able to improve our position over the past year where others have not."

The pipeline is very healthy, with an order book for the first quarter above the same period last year – the plan is to build upon the stability and strength of the business to continue to grow market share, adding value to current relationships whilst seeking those clients who wish to enter into mature sustainable relationships.

"In the struggle for survival, the fittest win at the expense of their rivals because they succeed in adapting themselves best to their environment," concludes Palmer.

We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars - Oscar Wilde.