

Business Working Life

Making the most of made in Britain

PASSING THE BATON

Covid-19 has switched the focus to what domestic companies can offer, reports **Caroline Bullock**

The riskiest thing you can do in business is set up a factory, according to John Pearce, chief executive of Made in Britain, “and Britain must be one of the riskiest places to do it in”. That, though, is a good thing. In the view of the head of a trade body promoting British manufacturing, a high-stakes environment builds resilience and adaptability, leaving the sector better placed than most to handle the once-in-a-generation curve ball that is Covid-19.

“Many of the factories we represent have over a hundred years’ heritage and have survived crises before,” he said. “Those with £10 million turnovers that generally have to have cash reserves to fund complex machinery are running at a different level of risk assessment, anyway, and, whether it’s dealing with new materials or designs, they’re hands-on and used to change.”

Anecdotal evidence among the 1,311 members of the not-for-profit organisation, 90 per cent of which are small or mid-sized companies, bears this out, but adapting has been done in very different ways. Those making products for high street retailers found themselves in survival mode: Fracino, a Birmingham-based espresso machine maker, switched production to gas-powered mobile machines to serve a coffee bar market operating outside in small vans and trailers; Wham, a plastic box storage company from Lancashire, churned out safety visors at a rate of 60,000 week, alongside its regular products.

Such efforts have not gone unnoticed and Made in Britain is keen to consolidate a growing interest in what UK manufacturers can do. “First and foremost, our members look to us to boost their visibility and never more so than at the moment,” Mr Pearce, 53, said. “It’s about talking to local authorities’ procurement departments and letting them know they can buy park benches made from recycled milk bottles in Yorkshire; or that there’s a business shipping plastic storage systems to over hundred countries based in Lancashire, rather than China.

“Many factories do not have a marketing department and rely on word of mouth for sales, so it is a huge challenge getting their voice heard in a chaotic marketing place. It’s about getting them on social media and in touch with marketing specialists and networking.”

This is Mr Pearce’s forte. He has a 27-year track record in media, sales and marketing. He was part of the QVC launch team and was the founder of Plie Europe, the underwear business. He also led the government’s Great Britain Campaign, an overseas business, tourism and education



John Pearce leads Made in Britain at a crucial time



Edward Sexton, of Glencroft Countrywear, has noted that the company’s overseas markets have not unravelled amid the pandemic as much as the domestic arena

No pulling the rug from under these firms

Stamping the Made in Britain mark on the back of a sheepskin rug is a satisfying final detail for Edward Sexton (Caroline Bullock writes). “It’s a nice seal of approval that we do what we say we do – and with more customers than ever asking us where things are made, this proof is vital,” the 38-year-old said of Glencroft Countrywear, based in the village of Clapham in the Yorkshire Dales.

Founded by his parents 36 years ago in a converted cow barn, Mr Sexton is pragmatic that his growing role at the helm of the company – one

that also produces knitwear and tweed clothing, working with factories across the north – has coincided with a global pandemic and the severance of core revenue streams, including many castle gift shops across Scotland.

“We manufacture most of our range in January for the rest of the year, so, combined with less trade, we have a lot of stock at the moment. But on the plus side, it doesn’t go off like food.

“I’m expecting our online revenue to pick up between September and December, usually our busiest time, and

our export markets in Japan and the US have not taken quite the same hit. I’m packing 100 sheepskin rugs for one customer in Tokyo right now.”

A core lesson from Covid-19 has been the renewed awareness of materials. As such, he is working on a “sustainable Christmas jumper” as alternative to the disposable, acrylic iterations that flood the shops every year, as well as a Yorkshire Tweed, polyester-free flat cap.

“I must get a call literally every week asking if we do caps with a cotton lining, so there’s definitely interest there

and clearly there are not many people making them.”

The green agenda is equally pressing for Fracino, a coffee machine maker from Birmingham, whose British-sourced, stainless steel machines are used by Pizza Express, Subway and Greene King restaurants, among others.

Peter Atmore, its head of sales and marketing, is hopeful that Made in Britain’s recently formed Green Marketing Working Group will help to consolidate the business’s eco-friendly credentials. “Unlike most

European manufacturers, who outsource components and then assemble, we even make our own boilers in-house, which is completely unique and ensures minimal carbon footprint for materials procurement,” he said.

“Through our Made in Britain membership, we have a voice and an opportunity to raise awareness of what eco and environmental manufacturing actually involves to help to give confidence to the consumer of how to source legitimate ‘green’ products from bona fide manufacturers.”

initiative, overseeing commercial relationships with the Foreign Office, UK Trade & Investment, the former government department, and Visit Britain, the national tourism agency. Collaboration continues to drive his approach now, having forged partnerships with the All-Party

Manufacturing Group and the Institute of Export and International Trade to give members a greater voice at government level.

Yet he places equal importance on member networking and sharing best practice via online groups. “Someone

selling nuts and bolts to the Middle East may learn something from someone selling coffee machines to Australia and vice versa. We’ve even had businesses at the peak of the pandemic giving advice and running webinars for those faring less well on how to digitalise their operation. It’s a real community.”

From billion-pound powerhouses such as Tarmac to a family concern making sheepskin rugs in the Yorkshire Dales, the unifying factor remains the Made in Britain mark, an accreditation that appears on a product as an indicator of quality and reliability. To qualify, members pay a licence fee, must have a UK factory and must share data, including detailed supply chain and employee information, to “reveal what’s under the bonnet of their business”. It is a level of transparency that chimes with a focus on product origin. A consumer survey conducted by the

organisation found that two thirds of respondents were more likely to buy more British goods post-Covid-19 to stimulate the economy, with two fifths preferring to buy British regardless of cost.

“The PPE shortage has been a game-changer because this equipment had to work and be safe and obviously it far easier to check product compliance in a factory that’s two hours’ drive away than one on the other side of the world. I think we’re seeing now that we can do things better, but it’s taken 30 years for all the production in certain categories to move overseas and it’s going to take a long time to bring it all back. People are prepared to pay more as long as they know what it is and where it comes from.”

Mr Pearce wants to see the same transparency extended to big projects, with an emphasis on policies and buying decisions that make better use

of resources and talent on the doorstep. He believes that HS2, the multibillion-pound railway network, should be an opportunity to prioritise home-based suppliers.

To support this, he is on a mission to join the dots. British manufacturing has long been associated with northern and Midlands-based clusters — think Sheffield steel and Stoke pottery — but to exploit this heritage Mr Pearce wants to highlight connections and opportunities for slicker, simpler supply chains. “We will be working on a manufacturing map that can show the proximity of fabrics manufactured in Lancashire to where they are sewn in the Midlands and how this links to a company in the south that will export them. Highlighting the availability of things is useful to the consumer and procurement specialist and construction sector, as movement of materials remains a great burden.”