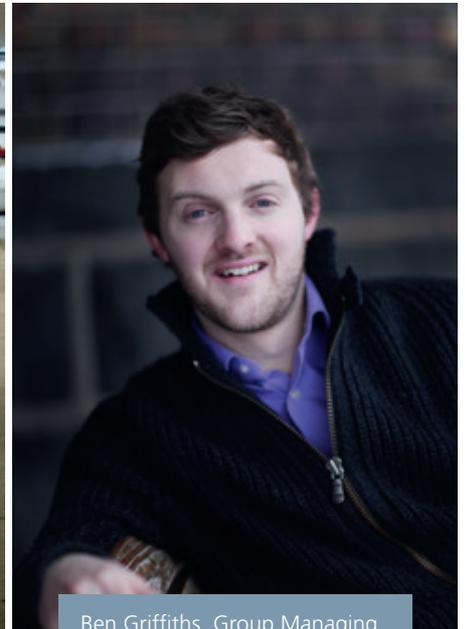


Neatcrown



With over 35 years of service, Geraint Griffiths doing a final quality check



Ben Griffiths, Group Managing Director

Bugs on your roses, weeds on a driveway or tomatoes wilting in the greenhouse are a gardener’s worst nightmare. They can ruin months of careful planning and for over 40 years our factory has produced some of the leading brands to take care of these problems. In fact we produce the worldwide majority under licence for Bayer Garden of household names such as Baby Bio Houseplant food, Phostrogen plant food and the Provado bug killer range.

My father Vaughan Griffiths purchased the business 13 years ago due to a Mergers and Monopolies requirement for the previous owners to sell, preventing the loss of 45 jobs and we have since grown it into an International operation. We now sell into 35 countries from the Caribbean to Australasia, and during our busiest times of year provide employment for over 100 people in the small North Wales town of Corwen. With unemployment in the area significantly higher than the national average, it has been important that we have provided stable jobs for local people - and in some cases for three generations of families in the area.

Lean Manufacturing

However this could have been a very different story. When in 2007 the recession hit hard and commodity prices rose drastically this had a consequence of making the business potentially unviable in the long term. With the assistance of the Welsh Assembly we were partnered with Toyota who spent 12 months on site,

FACTS ABOUT NEATCROWN

- » Produced leading garden care brands for over 40 years
- » Mentored by Toyota in Lean Manufacturing
- » Delivers into 35 countries
- » Track record in reducing product cost even in pre-production stage
- » Employs over 100 people
- » 40% exports
- » Staff paid one day per year volunteering for local charity or community project of their choice



Baby Bio has been an iconic gardening brand for over 40 years

sharing their understanding of lean manufacturing and directly mentoring our team members.

Change is never simple, and it is a testament to our teams that our greatest savings came in the years after our collaboration with Toyota. Over the past five years we have taken 30% of fixed and variable costs from the business whilst improving the Gross Profit by 25%. This has allowed us to stay competitive through a difficult recession with many currency swings both in Europe and further afield.

Keeping it simple

Our success is due entirely to the people we have in the business, and I believe that it has been easier for every team member to contribute due to a simple set of beliefs.

- » Provide a service for our customers that no one else can;
- » Help our team members achieve more than they thought possible;
- » Remind the local community how thankful we are for their support

I believe it has been this mantra that has kept us profitable for over eight years. Too many directors see their wage bill in terms of an expense on the Profit and Loss, rather than rewarding the asset their team members

represent. You do not go into a Gold Mine looking for dirt, and it is the same with teams. They all have the ability to contribute, but it is up to your culture and structure to ensure that they do.

In any business it is important to understand how and who makes you money. In our business it is the operators on the production lines and no other team member including myself, directly 'adds value'. Of course indirectly we do, but one of the biggest transformations was for everyone to accept that if they weren't working directly on the production line, then their role was to make the production operatives' lives easier.

If I could choose a single document to run the business, it would be our production schedule. It can show whether the lines are running as efficiently as they should, whether suppliers are delivering on time and of a good quality, and whether our support departments are doing what they should be. Without a stable production schedule, we cannot properly understand where our problems and inefficiencies are. For different businesses there will be a different key document. From our experiences of owning businesses across a variety of sectors, there is always one key document that can be used to gauge the health of a company.



Our daily operations meeting ensures everyone is aligned on daily targets, and has also reduced misunderstandings between departments

A changing market place

The garden industry is very well established in the UK and gardeners have a large range of products to choose from. As European regulations change, the range of products and chemicals on the market has decreased and our job is to ensure that when gardeners are deciding what to buy, they choose ours. This is a challenge in any market, but especially in a highly seasonal market where brand recognition is lower and consumers may be new to the hobby. As a factory we work very closely with the relevant Government agencies across the world to ensure we meet the different product and safety regulations.

In an industry with many competitors with similar products, I believe it is telling that the majority of our customers have been with us for more than 13 years. Our ability to react quickly and efficiently to the seasonality of the garden market has been the backbone of our long term relationships.

Working closely with customers

One of our most successful projects has been the redesign of a larger bottle with an inbuilt sprayer. When our customers first brought the concept to us, we could see that in order to reduce the cost, we would need to suggest redesigns of the shape and dimensions of the bottle. This was a great example of the collaborative approach we have with our customers, where there is a clear benefit for both parties. In this case we reduced the cost by around 20% whilst improving the quality of the product.

So what does the future hold for Neatcrown? We have not just survived the recession, but remained profitable and built a very robust infrastructure



Provado, the UK's best selling Bug Killer

for growth. One of our key strategic targets is to expand our range of products outside gardening, with soap based products and hobby supplies showing our greatest area of growth.

Where next?

The ongoing success of a company cannot be left to chance – a successful past by no means guarantees a successful future. Our strategy of continued investment in our staff coupled with machinery investment has been key to our success, and we believe it will allow us to provide a service that no one else can provide.



Final bottle design after R&D project with customer