

Growth based on good value and great service

From humble beginnings – selling a handful of products from the back of a car – Mark Vitow Ltd has developed into a thriving business stocking over 3000 products and offering an expanding range of exclusive brands. We recently caught up with MD Matthew Phillips to find out more about the family-owned supplier to plumbing and heating merchants.

Every business has to start somewhere, but it's fair to say that the early days of Mark Vitow Ltd didn't exactly help to raise expectations about its potential. Today the company is a thriving multi-million pound enterprise, but back in the mid-eighties, when Mark Vitow got together with his son, Brandon, to start selling some pipe freezing kits from the back of their cars, the prospects for future growth appeared to be limited.

Now in the hands of a third generation – company MD and Brandon's stepson, Matthew Phillips – the business has retained its family values and the basis of its success has remained much the same, namely sourcing quality products and selling them at a good price.

"We had very humble beginnings, starting with next to no investment," explains Matthew. "But the basic strategy hasn't changed, and that's to offer quality products at competitive prices, in a friendly and flexible manner."

The product range soon expanded to half a dozen core products and, following a lot of hard work and the building of some solid relationships, the company became limited in 1989.

Early experience

Matthew had a taste of the business from a young age, which helped to prepare him for joining the company as operations manager back in 2011 and assume the responsibilities of MD just three years later.

"I'd always wanted to work in the business," says Matthew,



Matthew Phillips
MD of Mark Vitow Ltd



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whose CV includes stints in accountancy and four years of teaching maths at a Bristol secondary school. "I remember helping to put the freezing kits together when we were kids and I also did summer jobs in the warehouse. I went off to study economics at university, but had a gap year where I worked in the sales and accounts department. I think it was good, though, not to go straight into the business and to first get some life experience outside."

Matthew's stepdad, Brandon, and mother, Melanie, are still company directors and retain their passion for the business, but are happy to no longer be involved in its day to day running. The company is clearly in capable hands, as turnover has more than doubled over the last three years and has grown to the extent that it now stocks over 3000 products.

Bigger network

Providing a reliable service to independent merchants has been and remains the core focus of the business, but the number of different customers the company caters for has widened significantly since those early years.

"Our history is with independent plumbing merchants, but over the last few years we've started working with a number of buying groups," explains Matthew. "We now work well with six of the leading industry buying groups and we do business with nationals as well. I think it's fair to say that most merchants around the country now buy some products from us. We now deliver to all corners of the UK and all with next day delivery."

The expansion of customers and multiplying of the product range has been helped by a decision made some 15 years ago to move away from operating their own warehouse and instead partner with a logistics specialist in Northampton.

"It's proved to be a really good decision," says Matthew. "It's allowed us to focus on the other sides of the business – like customer service, building on our relationships with suppliers and customers, and product development."



▲ The Mark Vitow range includes corrosion inhibitors and system cleansers, all produced in the UK

Exclusive brands

Another key to the company's current success and its plans for further growth is the increasing number of brands that are either owned by the business or manufactured on an exclusive basis for Mark Vitow. There are now two divisions within the business – MV Distribution and MV Manufacturing – although Matthew is keen to emphasise that both sides of the enterprise are of equal importance.

"They work in harmony alongside each other and I don't think either of them are as strong without the other."

Many installers will be familiar with some of the Mark Vitow own brands, including Black Swan PVC cement, FlushDaddy cistern spares, FlowPro macerators and Korona toilet seats.

While the company continues to source product from around the world, recent years have seen the business look closer to home and Matthew is happy to champion the cause of British manufacturing.

"We definitely focus on that when we can," he says. "It's fantastic to have manufacturing here in the UK and it means we're not so reliant on deliveries and lead times."

Recent additions to the range include the new MV250 PLUS, a WRAS-approved multi-purpose jointing compound produced in the UK by MV Manufacturing.

Covid challenge

Like many companies, the business has had to deal with the challenge of continuing to operate during the Covid-imposed lockdown, but Matthew is happy to report that Mark Vitow has not only emerged unscathed but has actually strengthened its operation.

"Make no mistake, we had to work damn hard, but we're a lean, efficient team and were able to adapt quickly. When Covid hit we were pretty blindsided as to how quickly we had to respond, but I'm very proud of the fact that we managed to remain open throughout. In just a few days we had to get everyone set up

for remote working and we didn't close for a single day.

"We used it as an opportunity to improve our efficiency and increase our stock levels. We also pressed the go button on a big investment in order processing software, which went live at the beginning of this year."

Other developments include the launch of a new online merchant portal that enables trade customers to view their account history, see their customised pricing, place orders and download invoices. It's all part of the customer service that has helped to see the company thrive over the last few years – so is further growth the goal?

"We've doubled up to £13m turnover in three years and the plan is to double up to £25m over the next four, and then push on from there," says Matthew.

Social responsibility

Most experts are predicting a period of change and uncertainty for the UK heating industry as the country tries to move away from its reliance on fossil fuels to more sustainable solutions, but Matthew views such shifts in demand as another opportunity.

"A big area of development for us is sustainability and social responsibility," he explains. "So anything that fits in with our offering would be of interest. I'm passionate about having a positive impact – for both our staff and the wider society."

Despite the continued growth of the company over the last 30 years, the family-owned business remains true to its roots and Matthew says he understands that – despite the importance of being able to offer quality brands – success ultimately comes down to the work of individuals and building relationships based on openness and trust.

"We're a family-run business which deals with people as human beings – our staff, our customers and our suppliers – but alongside that we have a hunger and ambition for the business. Not just from myself and the family, but we've got a great team of people who have bought into that. We're proud of where we've come from, but are looking forward to seeing how far the business can go."

■ phamnews.co.uk/1121/37



◀ The FlowPro range of macerators offers a wide choice of waste pumping solutions, with free technical support from a team of experienced installers