

Plain sailing

Boat parts manufacturer Cooney Marine is set to be one of the fastest growing companies in the region.

Claire Greenshields investigates in our latest of our Enterprise Panel series



IN A NICHE Sims believes that Cooney can only get better

Family-owned business Cooney Marine was founded in 1969 with just three staff. Almost four decades later the company, which operates from its 34,000 sq ft facility in Kettering, employs more than 80 people and has established itself as a leading marine manufacturer.

It produces fabricated stainless steel yacht equipment and deck fittings, supplying major boat manufacturers, but also meeting bespoke individual requirements from around the world.

"We've carved out a real niche market," says Cooney's operations director, Andrew Sims. "Many of our competitors concentrate on high-volume standardised products, but we've concentrated on stainless steel. It's about working out what you're good at and doing all you can to get better at it."

But like many manufacturers, Cooney has struggled to retain market position and remain competitive in an ever-challenging market. To guarantee continued

growth, it's been forced to address some major challenges, not least a shortage of skilled labour.

Sims recalls: "The Midlands has lost much of its manufacturing base in recent years and in the late 1990s we were faced with a real shortage of suitably qualified people. We established a relationship with local colleges and training providers, but at first the standard of applicants was quite poor."

Since then Cooney has worked hard at improving the image of manufacturing and introduced its own apprenticeship training school. Based at Cooney's own site in Kettering, the programme puts young engineers through a four-year programme that trains them up in all areas of the business.

"When you can show someone a shiny new £1m boat it's far easier to get them excited about choosing engineering as a career," says Sims. "We now have A level students choosing to join us after

they finish school rather than going onto university. They get a recognised qualification on a structured vocational course. Both myself and fellow director James Cooney went down the apprenticeship route, which is unusual in senior management and means we really recognise its value."

As well as skills, Cooney's investment programme has also had to incorporate new technology. Staying ahead of the competition in such a fast-moving niche market is essential and the manufacturer boasts some of the highest spec equipment in the industry.

"We started investing heavily in technology in 2002 when we spent £1m on our CNC 3D tube bender and there's been a continual programme ever since," says Sims. "This year we're introducing robotic welding and finishing equipment."

The tube-bending machine was imported from Japan and is the only one

"We've worked on efficiencies so not all extra costs are passed on to the customer." ANDREW SIMS

of its kind in the country. "Together with our laser-cutting unit, the technology gives us a unique capability," says Sims. "It's not only helped us deliver a better product, but has opened the door for a lot of sub-contracting work."

Such investment has helped win Cooney the reputation of being far more than a typical metal basher. It has both the expertise and flexibility to take on work many of its competitors would be forced to turn away.

It recently designed and manufactured four special deck cranes for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, taking the total supplied to 50. Designed for lifting on and off the rescue charity's Severn Class boats, the cranes will be returned to Cooney for a complete refurbishment every four years and constitute a multi-million-pound contract.

Cooney is always ready to innovate. Visitors to September's Southampton

Boat Show were introduced to the manufacturer's new Cobra CAD-styled davit, while the company uses its 3D modelling systems to design a range of other specialist items for sailing craft, mono-hulls, multi-hulls, yachts and runabouts.

It is keen to transfer this expertise to other sectors. In recent years it has begun diversifying into providing stainless steel products to both the architecture and food industries.

When Cooney acquired its laser-cutting machine it was approached to supply the frame for a two-storey London restaurant, while it can also boast supplying the stainless steel for the recent extension to the Welsh Assembly building. Looking ahead, Sims sees potential to extend the reach yet further to industrial sectors such as aerospace.

And, Cooney is exploring the use of new raw materials. "Nickel prices have

gone through the roof recently," says Sims, "with costs rocketing from £9,000 a tonne to £34,000. We've worked hard on our efficiencies so not all those extra costs are passed on to the customer and we are investigating materials such as perspex to deliver a greater range of products."

Three years ago the company was introduced to the Manufacturing Advisory Service (MAS) East Midlands. The subsidised help incorporated a range of efficiency drives from a new shop floor layout to reducing waste.

Cooney is now part of the East Midlands Development Agency-backed High Growth Company Support Programme. Set to grow by up to 20 per cent per year over the next five years, it was the only marine manufacturing company to be selected.

The programme helps businesses with tailored support packages. Adds Sims: "We'll continue to invest in skills, processes and technology while we have planning permission to add 9,000 sq ft to our production facilities and are looking to boost exports." ▀

Our panel of experts give their views...

ANNE PARRY

regional managing director,
Freshwater UK

Cooney has a good name among leading manufacturers, but is missing a trick in maximising its reputation as an expanding group. Key areas to support international activity and strengthen positioning with the trade would be to redesign the website and implement a profile-raising media relations programme. Websites are the first port of call and theirs would benefit from having a stronger identity. Offering language options would give the website a more global feel.

A focused approach to media relations is essential. This includes news about the group, its product range, as well as opinion features. An advertising presence in key titles should be considered. Targeted VIP hospitality at the Southampton International Boat Show and Cowes Week is worth exploring, together with sponsorship.



DR JOHN COLLINS

Business Adviser, Ology

The main challenge in the future will be to drive and sustain Cooney's growth rate profitably. Continued investment in manufacturing capability gives a good basis for expansion, but success will also require a strong focus on market development and on building organisational capability. Cooney will need to target its marketing effort on developing the right, profitable, markets. In the marine sector, its market knowledge and excellent reputation will aid continued international expansion. In other sectors, marketing should focus on both generating awareness of Cooney's capabilities and on understanding the dynamics and key players in the sectors.

Doubling the size of the business in three or four years will require new people and also the existing staff to operate differently, so clear leadership will be essential. The management team should invest effort developing a clear, quantified vision of what they want the business to be and then identify what needs to change to deliver that vision.

JOHN RANSFORD

MAS practitioner

My work with the company looked at all aspects of its process and suggested ways of making improvements. One major element was lean manufacturing, which looks to drive waste out of the business.

I also examined its workshop and suggested a more logical layout to improve workflow. I looked at visual management, which includes outing work schedules onto boards so people know exactly what's happening and what's due. Finally, I looked at how it was buying in stock, which it was doing too early and I helped it to introduce changes to its process to get it to buy in materials when needed rather than stockpiling.

One of the most important aspects of what we do is getting staff to buy in to the changes that we suggest. Staff on the shop floor have to take on board the changes, so much of the work we do is in staff development and communication.

