

The following is reprinted from and co-credited to Custom Installer Magazine, November 2002 issue.

CUSTOM INSTALLER is the number one magazine in custom installation. Contact Diva Corporation on 01480 469253

AWEsome ambition

- we visit a company with its sights set firmly on delivering more to more custom installers

AWE Europe is often regarded as the 'new kid on the block'. The company seems to have come from nowhere, providing a wholesale and distribution service that is clearly focussed on serving the custom installation market.

Appearances can often be deceptive, however. AWE Europe is a well-established company, whose roots are firmly planted in the home entertainment arena.

The original company, Radiomenders Ltd was founded in 1935 to sell and repair radiograms. With the war, so every company was expected to do its bit for the war effort and this led to the company reinventing itself as a manufacturer, exploiting its experience of all things electrical, and producing transformers and wound components for including products for Decca Navigator in the early days of radar. So successful was this change of direction the company was renamed Electro-Winds Ltd, and as recently as ten years ago its key activity was the manufacture of Aircraft Ground Lighting Transformers for the MoD and British Airport Authority.

With a company as old as this one, changes of management are inevitable, but with each new generation - the company continues to be a privately owned family company - it has adapted itself to keep up with the times, and to reflect the enthusiasms and skills of the new management. The current MD is Barry Tickle, who was responsible (*twenty*) years ago for identifying a new area that the company could explore. That area was background music systems for commercial applications. The system was marketed under the company 'Audiolite Ltd' and certainly caused a stir among leisure installers. So successful was it that the trendiest leading lights in the High Street used the system - companies such as River Island, Mark One and Deep Pan Pizza.

So far so good, but for a company that takes pride in its dynamism and market awareness, there had to be additional opportunities to be enjoyed. It was then that CD technology took off and recognising the potential in commercial installations for CD's, Audiolite Ltd added the Pioneer multi-disc player to its range. By the nineties, the company had developed the range of Pioneer products it stocked and added Jamo loudspeakers to its portfolio. The company was by now also manufacturing 19" racks to house the equipment in a way that gave installers a practical and effective solution to many installation problems.

So it was that the stage was set for the next generation to make its mark. When Stuart Tickle joined, twelve years ago, his sights were firmly set on the future - and for him, the future meant high performance systems delivering superlative a/v experiences. The two companies were combined to form AWE Europe Ltd, and at that time 80% of the turnover was delivered by the manufacturing arm, but Stuart had a keen interest in the distribution division where his experience was being gained. Confident of his vision, Stuart worked hard to develop a portfolio of products and support for installers that would be unbeatable. The company benefited from its experience supplying installers with the background music system as they had a level of experience and understanding that enabled them to leap several stages when introducing the new raft of products for custom installation.

The new direction for the company has been a breathtaking success. The AV division has grown by 40-50% year on year every year for the last five years. Recognising that distribution is the way forward for a company in today's climate, the company has relocated to a 6,500 sq foot premises in Epsom that provide all the facilities necessary for a growing distribution operation. "We are delighted with the move. With the focus on distribution here, we can provide installers with the service they require, or better! Our demo room is one of Europe's first THX Ultra 2 specified systems, and is a prime example of the sort of equipment we deal with daily. Customers and their key clients can visit us to see products working and chat to our staff who have hands-on experience working with the kit, and making it integrate correctly."

"We are very proud that we have a strong knowledge of what installers need from their suppliers, and we go out of our way to make sure that we can satisfy them," explained Stuart.

The company started working with audio-visual products back in the days of VCR's and Dolby Pro-logic, then laser disc with AC-3, so they know their business and each new step in technology adds to the wealth of knowledge that the company is building up.

It is with some pride that Stuart tells us that the staff turnover at AWE is very low. The eight existing staff have all stayed with the company during the move and both the continuity and quality of the staff is part of AWE's success. "We know our customers and we know what they need from us - we are fortunate to have staff who recognise the importance of this and will go out their way for them wherever possible. We are actively seeking two more members to join the team" commented Stuart.

The product portfolio supplied by AWE is impressive indeed - it encompasses some of the best known and best performing brands currently available. AWE are able to offer them at trade pricing because they work successfully alongside the brands established retail distribution network by supplying to specialist installation companies with a very different type of service from that provided to retailers by the manufacturers.

Some of the products available from AWE currently - and the list is under controlled growth - include: Acoustic Solution speakers, Denon AV components, Jamo loudspeakers, Mode lighting systems, Onkyo AV components, Philips plasma; TV's; Pronto remotes, Pioneer Plasma and A/V components, Sharp LCD screens, Unicol custom brackets and Yamaha projectors. In fact, so great is the product list that they publish a 'Hot List' of top selling products regularly, keeping the full price list for the trade only website - all 50 pages of it!

Recognising the importance of a reliable supply, AWE carries all key products in stock, which are available with various delivery options including same day, next day or collection. For Plasma screens AWE uses a specialist logistics company to ensure that the possibility of transit damage is avoided. They also operate a reservation or holding service for installers who are booking equipment for installation to ensure they can meet project schedules.

All key product servicing is carried out in-house with a good turnaround that meets the criteria for each job. "We have been known to repair a unit while the customer waits," said Stuart. "This isn't normal practice, obviously, but we will always do our best to recognise how urgent any job is and react accordingly."

Stuart also assures me that AWE operates very competitively in this competitive market place, offering some of the best trading terms in the business on both credit and pro-forma accounts. The company only deals with accredited trade customers, something essential for building good relationships.

So, twelve years after Stuart joined the family firm, and introduced the next stage of its evolution, AV distribution accounts for 95% of the company's turnover today - and it is still growing apace.

As Stuart observed: "The infra structure is in place now, and we have proved our worth to customers and to suppliers without disrupting their established retail chains. In fact, for many of them we are now the biggest supplier to this very specialised custom installation market. Our customer base is growing with the market - and we believe there's a long way for both to go yet!"

AWE Europe - new kid on the block - I don't think so. Maybe you weren't looking in the right place. Whatever, with 50% growth every year - the signs are you'll be dealing with them soon!