

Nominee: David Bobbett HK International



ORIGINALLY AMERICAN owned, HK International is a leading global supplier of stainless steel kitchen equipment to the food service industry.

As chief executive, David Bobbett led an Irish management buyout in 2002. He describes his biggest business achievement as dealing with a 50 per cent drop in sales 10 days after completing the buyout, when their largest customer decided on a sudden change of strategy with a drastic cutback in capital expenditure. Bobbett restructured HK to provide total restaurant solutions, incorporating manufacturing and logistics, and the company now employs 970 worldwide, with manufacturing and service office operations in Mexico, US, Canada, UK and most recently Indonesia.

The group's management and European marketing is based in Dublin. HK sales reached \$345 million in 2007 and Bobbett says the outlook for HK is very good, with its strong global positioning and constant focus on innovation and competitiveness.

Product/Service:

HK's business combines manufacturing and logistics. With a team of 50 engineers, they are closely involved in the development of new restaurant concepts and provide significant RD support to customers. The manufactured product is high-quality stainless steel fabrication, durable for a high-volume restaurant. The logistics business can bring together a complete package of equipment, deliver it to a restaurant anywhere in the world and have it up and running in a matter of weeks. This capability allows big chains to open restaurants and grow very quickly. As well as supplying kitchens, they provide project management, making extensive use of web-based technology.

Customers:

With a long-established reputation for quality products, precision manufacturing and exceptional customer support, HK delivers flexible, value-driven restaurant equipment solutions into 70 countries, supporting 20,000 restaurants with their equipment needs. HK International's biggest customer is McDonald's. They supply and install the equipment package you see behind the counter and manufacture one-third of it. Other big customers are Subway, Ikea, Jason's, Applebee's and IHOP.

Express the biggest challenge your industry faces?

Commodity costs present the biggest challenge. For HK, steel costs and freight costs are a concern and as the restaurant industry is our main market, we also have to be concerned about the escalating costs of commodities such as food items.

What motivates you to succeed?

Solid growth in sales and profit is a great motivator, but equally important for me is to see the fundamental changes achieved in the business over the last five years. Having seen the business go through difficult times, it is great to see the team participating in this ongoing success. We measure our success against both new standards which we set for ourselves annually and the level of customer satisfaction achieved.

Which personal attributes do you think have contributed most to your success?

Maintaining a focus on the key commercial issues which drive the business forward and surrounding myself with a team of professionals who subscribe to the same high-performance, non-political culture.

Has your Irishness contributed to your success?

Absolutely. I come from Meath with a farming background and I am used to straight talking and facing up to problems immediately as they arise. I have found that Irish people enjoy an enormous amount of goodwill around the world.