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# Event caterer battles the age barrier

It is taking time for Aspire to be treated seriously, despite a deal at the motor racing circuit Silverstone, reports Philip Smith

## CASE STUDY

**F**ORMER corporate catering chief Sean Valentine and master chef Steven Saunders were hoping to build on their success supplying fine dining to outdoor events at Silverstone, the motor racing circuit, by winning the contract to supply the Goodwood estate.

It would have meant turnover and margins significantly increasing at their Hampshire-based business from its current £4.5m. "If we had got that contract it would be worth another £7.2m," said Valentine, "but we were up against major companies and we are just a small player."

"We were probably viewed as too young, too small and our balance sheet was seen as weak. We'd only had the Silverstone contract for six months and although we'd had a great Grand Prix, Goodwood may have seen that as just a bit of good luck."

It was particularly galling for the pair – as the pitch had taken months to prepare, working closely with the Goodwood team – but it sums up the challenge facing their Aspire company.

Valentine and Saunders are finding it hard to convince potential clients to put their faith in their fledgling firm, despite having won the Silverstone contract from one of the world's biggest suppliers. "We are in a highly competitive and mature market. We are tendering for a contract now and we are up against 11 caterers," said Valentine.

"Over the past two years we have put our name forward for around £20m worth of business. One of the reasons why we are not moving forward quickly is because it takes time for people to take you seriously. Every opportunity we go for, they say 'send us three years of accounts'."

Well, we can't as we've only been trading for two. Silverstone gave us a chance but they took a massive risk," said Saunders, a Michelin rated chef whose career has included TV stints on *Ready Steady Cook* and *Saturday Kitchen*.

The pair fear that too few event managers will take such a gamble on a young company as they have too much to lose if it all goes wrong. What pains the pair most, is knowing that it simply won't go wrong. "We delivered 20,000 lunches over three days during the Grand Prix at Silverstone," said Saunders. "That had never been done before by such a small company." Despite good individual track records – Saunders, for example, now 47, opened his first restaurant aged 23 – it is the company that would-

**“**We were probably viewed as too young, and our balance sheet was seen as weak

**”** be clients would employ and it is the company's credentials they look at.

"When you tender for business the finance director will go straight to the balance sheet and look at the viability of your company. But we have no history and so don't have a strong credit rating. We have to get them to understand that it's not about the balance sheet," says Valentine, "but about our ability to deliver."

The hesitation on the part of those awarding the contracts is understandable. While it is the race goers, for example, who will benefit from the quality cuisine, it is the event managers who are the Aspire customers. They are the



Sean Valentine, left, and Steven Saunders are finding it difficult to convince potential clients

ones who have to be convinced that a small business based at a mill restaurant can deliver. They are the ones who stand to lose the most if Aspire fails.

"When you go to a stadium you don't care who is doing the catering. But if you have a bad experience it reflects on the venue. It's the venue that gets tarnished," said Valentine, 40.

It's not all a struggle. Last autumn, Aspire has won the contract to supply the Towcester racecourse and at £3m, Silverstone and Towcester together account for the bulk of the revenues. Its £2m New Mill restaurant, which acts as head office and shop window for the firm, accounts for most of the remainder. It employs 55 full-time staff and 2,000 on a part-time casual basis to cover the event days.

It's the events business that underpins Aspire's aspirations. "We want five good clients where we can work in a strong partnership," said Valentine. "What we don't want to be doing is haring up and down the country doing lots of little jobs. We'd be very happy if that brought in between £12m and £20m in turnover."

There are a few options open to Aspire, but none appeals to Valentine and Saunders. One way is to form a joint venture with an established firm but with a poor market image. "It would bring the level of perception of that company up and we would benefit from their strong balance sheet. But that will dilute what we are doing," said Saunders.

Aspire could also acquire a business with a long trading record. "But we may as well have done that in the first place and not grown organically," added Saunders. "I think we will just have to sit it out and do the time," said Valentine. "How else can a small business grow if the large companies don't give us a chance?"

## EXPERT VIEW

**Bob Barbour**  
Chief executive,  
Centre for Competitiveness

**IN ORDER** for Aspire to achieve its ambition of supplying a small number of larger customers it must address at least four areas of concern: capacity; capability; relationships and risk. This problem is typical of what fledgling companies and most SMEs face when attempting to do business with big customers and this becomes a "road block" to growth. Large purchasers need to be satisfied that the supplier can deliver on time, every time, on cost with the highest quality of service possible.



To overcome these issues Aspire could consider a novel approach by creating critical mass through collaboration. This will reduce the level of risk to the customer while building significant capability. Aspire should consider bringing its best and appropriate suppliers into a collaborative network as part of its overall tendering process. This will require trust, teamwork and a focus on tangible results. The strength of the network should have a significant impact in the overall purchasing decision. This is best managed in the early stages with the help of an independent facilitator until trust and relationships are established.

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**Colin Farrington**  
Director general,  
Chartered Institute  
of Public Relations

**THERE** may be resilience in events catering in 2009. Companies are looking to get every ounce of value from their events and sponsorship pound. More are staying in the UK. There will be a premium on quality, not just cost. I see no reason at all why a young company cannot continue to break into this market. But to do so it will have to set aside any sense of having "rights" to a share of the business. Aspire must focus relentlessly on the positive – looking at every detail to ensure



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excellent quality; consistency; exceptional levels of service and customer skill by beautifully attired, attentive and smiling staff.

Offering traditional food and wine with a slight "twist" (like a Paul Smith suit) would work to differentiate from long established competition. When ready it should use a good public relations adviser to organise presentations to hospitality, food and wine magazines and journalists; offer free events and samples; get really persuasive endorsements, possibly in "e" or video format. Don't be obsessed by competitors. The business is there to win.

**David James**  
Director of School of Growth,  
Henley Business School

**THE** risk averse strategy at tender and the rule of the balance sheet is madness. Business is about delivering the goods not the past numbers. This short sightedness is symptomatic of poor management across much of British industry. Aspire needs to work much closer with its potential clients to build strong personal relationships. Valentine and Saunders have one big advantage over their larger competitors and that is their huge personalities. They should capitalise on their personal



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brands when selling the concept of Aspire to potential new clients. Aspire is as much about the two owners as it is the catering, and they need to promote themselves and build their profiles with a wider audience than just the event managers and focus on other key influencers within the businesses. They should sell-in the buzz and excitement of a new catering concept, pushing the value of energy and enthusiasm

over traditional companies who are old and too complacent, lazy and probably a touch arrogant. Friendly, caring and high energy. Aspire will really work when Valentine and Saunders recognise the power of their personal brands.

## SECRETS OF SUCCESS

# Roofing specialists shine a light on new ways of working

By Philip Smith

**WHEN** Jon Shooter joined Suffolk-based glass roof manufacturer Glazing Vision five years ago, income was £1m, pay was low and morale was rock bottom. "The company was stifled," he said.

The owner and founder of the 14-year-old firm decided to take a step back, appoint a new managing director and gave Shooter, as sales and marketing director, free rein to do whatever it took to revitalise the business. Last year, after a 60pc growth over a 12-month period, income had risen to £5.2m. This year, said Shooter, the firm is looking at 30pc growth, despite the recession.

It was down simply to a change in focus, moving away from product and technical based marketing, and changing the target market.

"When I joined the company it was run by those with a manufacturing background. They were all engineers. For example, the design team was full of ideas but the lid was on and the management was firmly sat on that lid. The marketing was controlled by cost rather than results, was product orientated and targeted builders."

"I was given the freedom to do what I wanted with marketing and sales and everyone else had to keep up. I removed the shackles and we have now learnt to work together." Today the 70 staff – almost half of whom are in production – are motivated by a package of bonuses and profit sharing.

With prices ranging from £1,500 to £20,000 for a sliding roof light, £40,000 for an entire glass roof, the bulk of the business comes from well-off customers



Shackles off: Jon Shooter of Glazing Vision

in London and the South East. Clients include the likes of actors Martin Clunes and Orlando Bloom. "We also did work at the Eden project and we have contracts in US, Kuwait and France," he said.

"I gave the production staff new uniforms, new tools and a bonus structure then challenged them to make more units in a day than they had done in a month. We had to convince everyone it was the right move but once they started to see the orders coming in it created excitement. When we started with work with a different calibre of client, it created a real buzz."

"I gave the design team and management the freedom to share and implement ideas. I chose the best guy in marketing, gave him the budget and set him free. People buy from people. They want to see people in ads. Not just the

product, but see it in use – a lifestyle that they can buy into. I saw the potential to reach the higher market by targeting just the architects," he said. "Once an architect puts you into a specification, it's very hard for anyone to get you out."

"We also had to increase the sales force so I got people in with passion and motivation. I was looking for that rather than aptitude. Marketing now drives everything." *Glass Vision was a finalist in this year's National Business Awards, sponsored by The Daily Telegraph.*

**ONLINE**  
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What's new for club members this week

### Business Clinic

Club member Robert Burton from London logged on to the Business Clinic for advice. "I am one of two directors of a newly established limited company," he said. "I know there are 100 shares to divvy out but would normal practice be to divvy all 100 shares out between the two directors or just a set number? What happens to the rest of the shares? Can anyone just go to Companies House and purchase these?"

Clive Lewis, head of SME issues at the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales, replied: "The new shareholders subscribe for the share capital. So if the share capital is £100 and there are two shareholders you would each need to contribute £50. The role of Companies House is to keep a public record of companies incorporated in England and Wales. This enables people who wish to trade with the company to search the records to establish how credit-worthy it is." To read his full reply or to pose your own question, log on now.

### Confidence low

Business leaders believe attempts to kick-start the economy are likely to stall. Research from the Chartered Management Institute shows 80pc believe consumer spending will fall sharply this year. Go to the website for the full report.

### Passage to India

UK Trade & Investment's London International Trade Team is staging a conference on January 27 to highlight exciting developments in India's dynamic, consumer-led retail sector. It will provide retailers and associated service industries – logistics, infrastructure, supply chain management – with an overview of the changing Indian market, focusing on its growing middle class. The event also marks the launch of the UKTI report *The Retail Opportunity in India 2009*. Speakers include Sameer Prasad, CEO of Planet Retail. For more information, go to [www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk/ukti/highgrowthmarkets](http://www.uktradeinvest.gov.uk/ukti/highgrowthmarkets).

### Save on utility bills

Members can save up to 25pc on business costs for electricity and gas by using the free contract management service from the Business Advisory Service utility buying team. Go to the member benefits section for details.

### People Finder

The new People Finder service available through the website allows businesses to search among 15,000 freelance professionals. Details from the member benefits section.

### Invest to survive

Redundancies should be the last resort, according to experts on the latest Business Club video masterclass. "My advice to surviving the downturn is that you should be investing in the things you think you should be cutting. Invest in your staff. Invest in yourself so you can lead your staff," said Karen Gill, co-founder of Everywoman. "For us it's investing in technology and the people we have here. It's not a case of 'can you afford to have it', but 'can you afford not to have it'," said Charley Downey, general manager of Tele Products. Go to the masterclass section to view.

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