A business built on experience

Taking the first step on the ladder to starting a new business is a daunting prospect for anyone, regardless of how well they may know the industry which they have worked in for many years.

John Spiers has an extensive wealth of experience in the metalworking industry, firstly as a time-served machine tool builder, international service engineer, then moving on to work for the likes of Mills CNC and DMG Mori in sales. However, when it came to founding Southern Engineering Equipment (S.E.E.), based in Poole, he still had to consider carefully whether he was going down the right path.

“The company, originally set up in 2016, only started trading in late 2017,” he says. “I was nervous but felt it was the right thing to do. This adventure was a big step in my life, however it was the right one.”

Fortunately for the new enterprise Mr Spiers had the backing of co-director/owner Andrew Trotter, of AET Transport Services who he had known for over 30 years. This was a key factor behind the formation of the business as the initial intention was that S.E.E. would buy and sell used industrial equipment and with its logistic and factory moving experience, AET made the ideal partner.

“The original concept was to buy and sell used machines and equipment and AET would take care of all the logistics not only locally in the UK, but globally. They have moved equipment to and from locations all over the world and have 40 years’ experience in the machine tool moving industry which also includes decommissioning and recommissioning of machine tools.”

Mr Spiers’ confidence in the new business’s prospects were also boosted when he was joined by former work colleague Colin Moon to help run the business: “I have known Colin for 25 years. We both have very broad technical engineering backgrounds and can easily identify solutions and process methods to help our customers’ manufacturing process. This means we are able to give best practice advice on how to integrate finishing and machining solutions together.”

Adding agencies

Although used equipment was, and still is, an important part of what S.E.E. offers, it wasn’t long before Mr Spiers was being approached by new engineering equipment manufacturers and suppliers from around the world; being asked to represent them within the UK market as their machinery dealer. The majority of the company’s new equipment is designed for deburring, finishing, grinding and polishing applications. The company is now the sole agent for Euro Fintec, Gecam, Grind Master, Kuhimeyer, KEF, Lissmac, SPMS and Sugino machines in UK and also an agent for VSM Abrasive consumables and Victor CNC machine tools covering the South of the UK.

“Machine manufacturers throughout Europe knew our reputation not only in sales but also as technical engineers. We don’t just sell machines, we prove a process and we sell that whole process, offering the best solution to our customers,” Mr Spiers continues.

“At S.E.E. we believe we have the largest selection of deburring, finishing, grinding and polishing machines in the UK, so rather than a customer going to a company for a single solution, we can offer three or four different options for our customers’ requirements. It could be a simple solution or a more technical one, with additional requirements such as automation, robotics or the installation of a complete manufacturing cell.”

S.E.E has already seen success supplying household OEMs in the automotive, vacuum cleaner, kitchen equipment and electrical industries and also many 1st and 2nd tier subcontractors working in those markets. “We are just as much a consultancy company as an equipment seller,” Mr Moon asserts. “I think that’s why we have a big advantage in the marketplace. We can sit down with customers and talk technically about their process and needs and the type of machinery available to deliver solutions together.”

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the results. We also genuinely believe in the products that we are offering. It’s a question of supporting the customer, doing the leg work and providing them with best solution and supporting them once the machinery has been delivered.”

Mr Spiers adds: “Projects are often driven by our customers and their clients. They want better quality parts, a certain edge rounding or grain finish on a part faster or for less cost, for example. They are always striving to improve their products and in turn their suppliers are coming to us for a solution. It might be improving the process or lowering costs by providing automation or robotics.”

Automation and robotics may be the current trend in industry, but Messrs Spiers and Moon are realistic about whether they always offer the best solution for their customers.

Mr Moon says: “Our suppliers can offer robotic solutions with their machines but it all depends on the application and the part. Not all situations are suited to automation or robotics – there are other methods that mean a part can be completed more quickly and efficiently. An effective integrated solution comes through knowing the whole process, taking account of how many steps are needed to produce the finished result and selecting the correct consumables.”

On time at the right time

Another important factor for S.E.E is keeping equipment delivery times as short as possible: “Our customers have projects and contracts that suddenly are approved and delivery is important. Most of our stock can be delivered within two weeks. Larger machines take a little longer from eight to twelve weeks,” Mr Spiers notes.

However, when it comes to turnkey installations such as an integrated robotic cell, Mr Spiers explains these projects can run into months rather than weeks as it’s not just about supplying the machinery but also the extensive programming, testing and development which is required.

Another customer may have considered buying a new machine for some time, but once they have decided they want it they want it quickly so delivery is important. Most of our stock can be delivered within two weeks. Larger machines take a little longer from eight to twelve weeks,” Mr Spiers notes.

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Of course, selling and supplying machines is only one part of the equation. Smooth installation, service and support is just as important to many of S.E.E.’s customers. To address this the company has built a strong network of engineers to install, commission, service and repair, as well as provide preventative maintenance and service contracts on its new machines.

“We have our own in-house engineers but also we have built a network of independent service engineers around the country with the right skill sets for a particular job,” Mr Spiers explains. “From my experience it’s best to have specialists in Fanuc, Heidenhain or Siemens controls for example. We also have in-house engineers for CNC press brakes, guillotines and their control systems. Customers like this because they only need to make one phone call. This means we have created a one stop shop, including everything from machine sales, servicing, transport, and consumables.”

Breaking ground

The early success of the business also means Mr Spiers can make large-scale plans for the future. S.E.E. intends to build a new two-storey factory at the AET Transport site in Dorset.

He says: “It will be a two-storey factory with a 15,000-20,000ft² showroom/demonstration area and another separate area for the storage of stock machines. It will also give us the chance to bring more development projects and engineers in-house to work on turnkey projects with our machine suppliers.”

So S.E.E.’s ambitions seem all encompassing. It can supply everything from a simple second-hand bench grinder to the latest multi-axis CNC machining centre. Along with more than 80 years’ combined experience in the metalworking industry from its staff.

And Messrs Spiers and Moon believe it can fill a gap in the market that has emerged in the south for the supply of premium machine tools and related equipment.

Mr Moon affirms: “There is a need for a supplier like us as at the moment particularly in the South West. It is less well served than other areas and there are actually a lot of new companies emerging who need what we can offer.”

And regardless of the early success the company has seen in its first year Mr Spiers is keen to grow it steadily.

He concludes: “We hope in future to be able to bring additional engineering support in-house and continue to grow sales as well as employing a full-time consumable specialist.

“Our success is due to listening first to what our customers need and offering the best and most cost-effective solution available, on budget and on time.”

— Southern Engineering Equipment

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