



# Company makeover

The Designing Demand programme can help firms to polish their image to stand out from competitors, as well as improve vital skills in product development. Ben Hargreaves reports

It's the model cow suspended from the ceiling that immediately suggests that Gripple is an unusual factory. Then there's the guitar and the cannon, also hanging above the shopfloor.

The workspace, clean and pleasant with a high level of bespoke automation, is next to a brick-walled, entirely open-plan office. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlook the manufacturing area. Up on the mezzanine level, there's a brainstorming area in pastel shades that would not look out of place at a design agency. In the city of steel, this is no grimy industrial complex.

Gordon Macrae, special projects manager at the Sheffield-based company, says the aesthetically pleasing interior of the old gun works that the manufacturer of wire tensioning products calls home benefited from a £500,000 "refresh" last year. "The business has been founded on innovation," he adds.

The cow represents one of Gripple's key markets, the agricultural sector. The company was founded by an entrepreneur 20 years ago who was challenged by local farmers to find a better method of joining wire fencing together, and came up with a patented product, the Gripple, that is used today all over the world in fencing, trelliswork and industrial applications. The firm's been a serial award-winner in competitions such as the MX Manufacturing Excellence scheme over many years.

So with design already well-established at the heart of the business, Macrae and his colleagues were not immediately convinced that they needed the Design Council's assistance when the local Business Link suggested they undertake the council's Designing Demand programme.

The council, which promotes the British design industry, has been running the scheme for several years. It mainly targets smaller manufacturers, with the aim of increasing their awareness and use of design, for the mutual benefit of the businesses and the design sector.

The programme works by assigning a local mentor, or "design associate", to a business, who is intended to help demonstrate what design can do for the firm.

Businesses can embark on the programme for free, but must show ▶▶

**If cows could fly: Gripple's factory may be a touch unconventional but the business has been founded on innovation**

▶ a willingness to invest and place design at a strategic level within the business.

"When we were approached by Business Link, our initial reaction was: 'this is only going to be of benefit if it's high quality,'" Macrae recalls. "We were already tending to do things in terms of design that businesses of a much bigger size tend to do. If it was going to be mediocre there wasn't going to be a huge amount of interest."

"Design is already fundamental to what we do and comes into everything, from the aesthetics of our buildings through to designing and building our own machinery in-house, to designing our products."

But Gripple decided to take up the challenge after two meetings with design associate Andy Cripps. "The quality of the people that the Design Council and the programme were going to bring convinced us," says Macrae. What followed was a series of brainstorming sessions, with some "leading brains" in the design sector taking a "cold and objective" look at Gripple's business.

"There were no revelations," says Macrae, "but some interesting ideas came out of it. It enabled us to think again about priorities and pressing issues – that was one of the benefits of the programme."

Others came in the form of systematising product development processes, where Gripple already had an "entrepreneurial and innovative" ethos but lacked a system to manage those processes effectively. "Andy Cripps helped our thinking in that area," says Macrae.

The next concept where the programme proved useful was in bedding innovation and design into all areas of the business. Macrae says: "Innovation is not simply the remit of the innovation and ideas team – we can get innovative ideas from anywhere in the organisation."

What followed was a competition modelled on TV's *Dragons' Den*, with groups competing to present ideas for new products to a panel of "dragons" within the business, and a prize for the best idea. Some of those ideas are now in the development phase, says Macrae. "Some of them are wild, radical – they take a bit of thinking about, but there was some really good stuff."

The objective is for Gripple to triple its turnover to £60 million in

## RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Andy Cripps, a design associate with the Designing Demand programme, says both Baldwin and Francis and Gripple were already good users of design in their different ways. "It's fair to say both of them were slightly sceptical initially," he adds. "Both of them are good at what they do and, although they were willing to be challenged, I think they felt they would come out of that challenge positively."

Cripps felt Baldwin and Francis had a solid design and development process from an

engineering perspective, but was lacking in some "softer" customer-facing areas.

"Gripple also had very good design engineering principles, but the interface with marketing wasn't as strong as it could have been," he says.

Cripps says he has been impressed by the way that the two firms have taken Designing Demand to heart. "They have benefited from very successful implementations of work the programme has suggested. Once we get engaged with the businesses, it's mutually

beneficial for both the companies and the design sector."

He adds that the programme allows companies to see areas where they are lacking, and how design can help to fill in those areas.

"There's still a message for manufacturing: having the greatest product in the world is no good if no one's aware of it, or if it's difficult to use, or not emotionally satisfying – however you want to frame it."

He says that the internet makes being able to immediately stand out from

competitors more important than ever, and that's where design can play an important part. "You can visually compare a dozen businesses on screen in half an hour and, if you don't have that impact for a potential customer, you're already on the back foot."

Cripps adds: "Clearly, both Gripple and Baldwin and Francis have great products. It was some of the other stuff, which seems to be peripheral – but from my perspective are core attributes – that we were able to help them with."



**Getting noticed: B&F's new image is helping its products to stand out**

the coming years, for which new product development will be essential. "If we are to grow, we have to accelerate the development of ideas, and the Designing Demand programme was integral to us putting in a framework to get those ideas developed," he says.

Just around the corner from Gripple in Sheffield, electrical control gear manufacturer Baldwin and Francis has also been through the Designing Demand programme. But, like Gripple, Baldwin and Francis already placed a high value on design, and managing director Dave Pattinson admits he was at first reluctant to take part in Designing Demand.

"We spend so much on product design anyway," says Pattinson. He estimates that £400,000 a year of profit is ploughed back into product development. "We are really a design house and manufacturer."

Baldwin and Francis designs and makes electrical switchgear that controls drives in hazardous environments. These include mining and the oil, gas and petrochemicals industries. Another important sector for the company is transport – Network Rail is a major client. Baldwin and Francis supplies the giant boxes of kit at the side of the track that control signalling systems.

Although the company is high-tech and successful, its branding was somewhat nondescript before the involvement of the Design Council, says Pattinson. "Andy Cripps came in as our design associate and we suddenly could really see the benefits of enhancing our brand."

Cripps helped Baldwin and Francis to write a brief for a way to refresh the company's brand which was sent out to three agencies. A local firm, Vivid Creative, was selected to develop new brand architecture and guidelines.

Those designs have subsequently

been employed in every aspect of the company's operations, from the tenders it sends out, to switchgear boxes, to its website, to all its signage. "We did a study with the design agency and quickly realised that most of our competitors used blue, and so did we," says Pattinson. "It's a very conservative industry."

Baldwin and Francis was truncated to "B&F" in the new design, an abbreviation commonly used already by its customers. A new logo was adopted, with subdivisions of the overriding "swish" pattern in different colours for different parts of the business.

Developing a consistent style was crucial, says Pattinson. "You don't want to deviate, so you need guidelines for the brand. When you employ intelligent people like we do – chartered engineers – they are lateral thinkers and can be tempted to do things differently."

Although Baldwin and Francis has had a quiet year, with customers holding back on capital spending, the level of enquiries has shot up since the rebranding exercise took place, suggesting it is helping to differentiate the company.

Pattinson admits that it has at times been a "struggle" to carry on spending on the brand freshening in the midst of a severe recession, but he believes the programme has been worth the effort. "It's given us the ability to hold our own during the recession. What we're seeing is a massive enquiry level, so it's looking like people are gaining confidence in the brand, and the new designs we have are making them interested."