

Launching a company in less than booming times requires expertise and a lot of faith. Sonia Soltani talks to Graham Southall, a man with both

Clear vision



Graham Southall: 'moving into contemporary glass furniture was a big step'

Is Graham Southall a daredevil for launching a furniture company in the current climate of retail gloom, or a man convinced that the gap in the UK market for glass furniture design will make GlassDomain a surefire success?

Talking to the 52 year-old md of the new online retail venture, one soon realises that besides a genuine passion for glass and extensive market research, the strongest asset of GlassDomain is to be the furniture branch of an established Midlands exterior glass and glazing manufacturer.

Southall might have good reasons to be optimistic about the commercial potential of his brainchild – GlassDomain was launched earlier this summer, so it is too soon to evaluate the impact it will make on the market. But, if he achieves his goal, established UK firms such as Greenapple and the Italians will have a strong contender.

From long experience in glass making and trips to continental design exhibitions sprung the idea for GlassDomain.

'I have been in glass all my life. When I left school I went to work for a glass manufacturer in the West Midlands. I have always been working with glass,' says Southall. 'But when I saw pieces by Italian designers at Salone de Mobile and GlassTech in Düsseldorf I thought, if they can do it, the British can do it as well, if not better.'

And so he decided there was a market for glass furniture. 'Glass hasn't been dominant in the UK furniture industry except at the highest level through the Italian designers. I think that if

you put ideas in front of people they'd see the benefit of glass.'

Here is a man who doesn't dread a challenge. The founder of Bromsgrove Glass and Windows some 25 years ago, says he thought that technology could certainly be used for purposes other than glazed windows.

'We already use UV bonding techniques but it has been developing only for commercial applications such as jewellery, for example. I thought, we have the technology, the know-how and manpower, we just need the design ideas.'

Two years ago Southall contacted design universities and chose Peter Wardleworth, who had graduated from Birmingham's UCE with a first class BA honours degree in furniture design and an MA in product design, to be the designer of GlassDomain furniture. Bromsgrove Glass and Windows, which employs 58 people, was helped in this by Business Link West Mercia under its business diversification programme.

'As a company traditionally specialising in exterior windows and conservatories, moving into the arena of contemporary glass furniture was a big step to take. However, I was confident our experience of working with glass, combined with Peter's eye for innovative design, would result in the creation of a really eye-catching furniture collection that is a million miles away from the glazing products we usually produce at our factory. And I was right,' Southall declares not without some pride.



GlassDomain has transferred technology used in glazing to furniture



‘We offer a bespoke service. We can provide a tailor-made table at any time. That’s the difference with the Italian designers... none of them are able to offer bespoke service, while we deliver and set up the product’

He thinks his manufacturing experience enables him ‘to create sound items of furniture, which are functional’. He insists that GlassDomain, which has four members of staff including himself, has been set up as a separate enterprise from the home company to give it a higher profile.

Wardleworth is responsible for the design of the 30-strong collection, while Southall deals with the practical aspects of manufacturing. ‘A drawing may look brilliant, but it’s important to see the technical weaknesses,’ he points out.

He is adamant that glass offers great advantages to contemporary urban limited space. ‘In smaller apartments, the transparency of glass lightens up the space and makes rooms look larger. The sharp angles also create a minimalist look,’ he says.

A lot of market research was done before launching the company which reinforces Southall in his conviction that there is a market for glass furniture among professionals.

‘Products speak for themselves and suit people’s aspirations. They are designed for a lifestyle or loft apartment living,’ he underlines. The names of the three current ranges – Soho, Contemporary and

Apartment – do not leave any doubt about the branding of the outlet.

Southall thinks his new company can compete with the Italian designers because it relies on a more local and personalised service.

‘We offer a bespoke service. We can provide a tailor-made table at any time. That’s the difference with the Italian designers. Because they export to this country, none of them are able to offer bespoke service, while we deliver and set up the product for the customers.’

Is GlassDomain competitive in the pricing arena as well? Prices range from £400 to £2,000 which is the norm for specialist design. It can also boast some unique techniques. For the sideboard cabinets, in white, black or red, it has worked with paint manufacturers to use a special hardener to spray colour on the glass. Southall claims that as far as he knows, no-one else is using this specific technique. The effect of spraying paint on the inside of the glass furniture is to create a striking depth to the painted background.

Southall also hopes to set GlassDomain apart through his distribution strategy. The furniture is

on display in a small showroom in Bromsgrove. ‘We prefer to sell the product direct,’ he says. ‘But if a retailer comes to us and wants to get some supply, we might work together.’

Southall is in talks with a retailer to set up such a collaboration, which is an encouraging sign considering the short existence of his company. Later he intends to open regional showrooms – first in London, then Manchester and Birmingham.

Currently, all the efforts are focused on using the website, designed by Wardleworth, as a marketing tool to sell the products. ‘We are using a lot of PR, a limited amount of advertising and we hope to get a high ranking on Google,’ Southall explains.

Other exposure is likely to come from exhibiting at design led trade shows, such as London Interiors. Southall and Wardleworth would welcome the extra publicity a design award would bring. Indeed, the products have been nominated for the Birmingham Design Association’s annual awards.

GlassDomain aspires to making a design statement and Southall expresses a somehow contagious enthusiasm. He admits a soft spot for one particular piece. ‘My favourite piece of furniture is the Soho range’s desk. It looks so good. Dressed correctly it is absolutely superb. When I get round to do my new office very soon, I’ll have one.’

The furniture industry may have experienced more buoyant times, but Southall’s obvious determination to crack a difficult market with his glass furniture is refreshing.