

Neptune Classics may make traditional-styled English kitchens, but its business approach is as contemporary as it gets. Andrew Davies met managing director John Sims Hilditch...

Modern classic



Fipping through its brochures or website, you'd be forgiven for thinking that the Neptune story is probably a classic tale of cabinetmaker turned kitchen furniture producer.

Its kitchens are the country-style kind that the English do so well, and its marketing unashamedly plays on this fact - lots of Agas, cornices and Belfast sinks, you know the kind of thing.

But once past the shop window it becomes clear that the business behind the brand is actually far from traditional. Admittedly, its origins do sound like they've been written for an episode of Midsomer Murders - business partners John Sims Hilditch and Giles Redman started in a Wiltshire back garden designing "a truly comfortable classic hammock for the English garden".

This strange ambition turned out to be a very successful one and as the team grew further outdoor furniture designs hit the shelves of participating garden centres - the Rocking Deckchair followed by the Double Deckchair, Kids Deckchair, and a wide range of other products.

Six years ago the company expanded into a purpose built warehouse and more recently launched the kitchen collection that went down so well at kbb Birmingham in March.

The company's approach is to offer value-for-money quality kitchens using modern volume production techniques sold via independent dealers, but, according to John Sims Hilditch, pleasing the end customer is much more important than pleasing the retailer...



Q: How did you move from the garden to the kitchen?

A We wanted to get out of the cyclical nature of the garden furniture market, and we thought 'what else can we do?' Having thought of a lot of bonkers ideas we could explore for garden centres - like fireworks or Christmas crackers - we decided it wasn't really our skillset and we'd be probably blow up the warehouse. What we really knew was furniture so we decided to move inside the house and started with products like dressers, tables, chairs and it was all quite kitchen oriented so that's how we ended up in there.

Q: What's your background? Are you a cabinetmaker by trade?

A No, I was a soldier, but I was always very interested in business and how to set good ones up. In terms of product, I like stuff that's extremely well made and if it's not the best, I'm not interested really and that's kind of the starting point we come from. My business partner [Giles Redman] is very interested in making sure it's very cost effective so it's a good mix. I've made stuff all my life so I'm a very practical person but I'm not a cabinetmaker by trade however I am passionate about getting it right, and I'm a very quality oriented person. They're the two attributes that lead where we go with the product. My wife is also a very experienced interior designer, so we have a very integrated approach to how we do things.



Q: Do you manufacture everything?

A Yes, we make everything from first principles. We start with the drawing, then CAD, and up to fully rendered images. And then we have end-to-end manufacturing, so the wood comes in one end and the furniture goes out the other. We try to outsource as little as possible and do make virtually everything ourselves - we make our own handles for example. We don't make Blum's runners but if we could, we would. We believe in doing it ourselves as that's how you get the value for money to the customer, the more you subcontract the more profit margins you have to pass on, which is fine, but where we can in-source we will.

Q: But you don't do any bespoke elements?

A No, it's all fully standard, nothing is bespoke. Another key principle is our standardisation and that goes a long way towards our value for money. I don't want to make one drawer, I want to make thousands. Our concept in the original designs was, I think, pretty unique, partly because we went into it with no kitchen experience. I just locked myself away for a couple of months and worked with a very experienced cabinetmaker and I had my particular ideas about what I wanted. I was looking for something that we could produce in volume but still gave you a genuinely customised look so, from the customer's point of view, each kitchen is unique.

One of the ideas I came up with, which drove everyone completely insane, was that no two cabinets should be the same size. So whereas all kitchen manufacturers make all their cabinets 150mm, 300mm, 600mm or whatever, I specifically choose sizes that are non-standard. The idea being that at the small end of the range you have lots of little 'salami slices' going up and from there they get bigger and it starts to spread out. So in terms of the whole design, it's not about getting everything to line up as you'll get a very dull and regulated look - and that's not what we're after. It works very well, and we provide enough standardised cabinets that we can pretty much design anything.

Q: It must be difficult to persuade experienced retailers to do it that way?

A You have to get across the idea that it's about having foresight and you're not just selling a kitchen, it's a different concept, and once

people get into it they're complete converts. It'll take time for us to build our dealer network because we're trying to hand-pick those dealers and partners that buy into that idea.

Q: And who are those 'partners'?

A We're completely open-minded in who we're going with, we do want people who get the whole Neptune concept in a bigger way than it just being another kitchen in the corner of a showroom with eight other displays - that's really not our angle. If a studio wants to do that, we'll never say never, but we'd expect them to slowly push the other kitchens out.

With the partners we've been with for a while, they're starting to get the value of Neptune and the approach that we have. More and more of them are starting to give us more floorspace. Right from the beginning we've banged on that the dealers are not our customers, it's a relationship. The customer is the person getting the kitchen fitted in their home, that's why all our brochures are aimed at them. They are not there for the retailer at all.

Q: That's apparent from the fact that the brochures have prices in them

A There's actually real thinking behind that. I've had arguments with retailers where they've said 'why have you put prices in there, why can't we put our own prices in?' but that's not the point, we're working with them to give the consumer what they want. When consumers want to buy something the first thing they want to know is 'how much?' I can't hide the price from them.

We're not after a quick buck today, our intention is that long term this company becomes an extremely well known furniture brand in kitchens, interiors, bedrooms and other areas of the home. You can't do that by cheating people, you have to be 100% genuine and do the right thing by the person buying from you.

Q: So it's all about reputation

A Yes, and quality. Is the customer going to be as delighted years after they've bought it as the day after? That's at the core of our philosophy and why I'm so passionate about quality. I've got a wood-burning stove that cost me a fortune when I got it, but every time I use it I think 'that was a really good buy' because I've had it for over 15 years.

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