

A POSITIVE OUTLOOK

Andrew Smith, joint managing director, sales and marketing, at OWA (UK), is FIS's new president. **Dean Gurden** hears what he plans for his new role

What's your day job and how did your career get here?

I'm the joint managing director of OWA (UK), the UK's sales office for the largest manufacturer of ceilings in Germany. In the 12 years I've been here, we've invested in developing the brand and business in the UK.

I've worked in sales and marketing roles for manufacturers in construction during my whole career. I started with glassmaker Pilkington as a graduate trainee about 32 years ago. After seven years there, I spent another seven in a joint venture between Pilkington and ceilings manufacturer Ecophon.

And then I had another seven years – the sevens are purely coincidental! – with fire protection material manufacturer Promat UK.

Finally, 12 years ago I was approached by OWA. They weren't a very visible brand then, but I went over to look at their set-up in Germany and it was stunning.

So here I am and it's grown very nicely since then.

Where do you see yourself going professionally in the next few years?

This is a good place to be at the moment. We've still got a lot of growth potential; and I'm 54 and still feel young, energetic and committed to the business.

My plan is to grow this business to become a much bigger player than it is now. We've tripled in size in the past 12 years, but there's still tremendous scope to grow more.

We're what you would call a full-hand player. We manufacture mineral fibre and metal ceilings, and specialist products as well. Our view is that if we are going to become a major player in our markets, we need to have a breadth of product range. So we are not targeting just one or two niches.

Obviously when you're quite small, you do focus on specific areas to develop. We've done quite well in the retail sector, for example – we're the exclusive supplier for Aldi and we supply over a dozen major retail brands in the UK.

Why did you stand for FIS president?

It's been a progression really. It started when I was at Ecophon and I was on the board of the Suspended Ceilings Association.

I've always supported trade associations and I've been on the board of FIS, or the AIS as it was previously known, for about six years. I believe in

the role of professional trade bodies and want to support the future development of FIS too.

The most valuable thing about being an FIS member is being able to network with other professionals and major industry players in the UK, which I enjoy. It's also useful – it's the place for people who want to be involved with quality. That suits our business and me as a person.

What are your priorities as president?

In a general sense, it's to continue the development of the organisation. We are lucky to have David Frise as a charismatic ambassador for the organisation – it's been great to work with David during the past few years.

But it's not simply about having achieved something and we're now satisfied; it needs to be a continuous process of development in a dynamic way – and 'dynamic' isn't a word you always associate with trade associations!

Therefore, one of my priorities as president is to keep encouraging change and continuous improvement within the organisation.

Specifically, we need to shape the organisation to reflect the tremendous opportunities we've got with the skills and apprenticeship work we're doing.

The big news is that we've received quite a large sum of money from the CITB recently (see page 22 for more details). Admittedly, it was like pulling teeth, but we've got it.

We now need to be respectful about that and collaborate with the CITB. But

CAREER

- 2005-2017** OWA (UK), joint managing director
- 2005-08** MBA, University of Southampton
- 1998-2005** Promat, UK sales director/Cape, European marketing director
- 1992-1998** Ecophon, marketing manager and commercial manager
- 1985-1992** Pilkington, sales and marketing manager
- 1986** Diploma, marketing, CIM
- 1985** Pilkington, graduate marketing trainee
- 1985** BA (Hons) business studies, Staffordshire University



“One of my priorities as president is to keep encouraging change and continuous improvement within the organisation”

make no mistake, this is a real game-changer for us. It was a brave move on our part – the fact that we invested some of our reserves in a group of people to bid for the funds.

But it was a risk we took to support our industry. There’s a chronic skills shortage and it’s even more important to address this following the vote for Brexit. We need to be in a position where we can support our sector.

We have three priorities as an organisation at the moment. The skills gap is obviously one, but another is technical advice – we want to show that FIS supports and drives technical issues that affect our members. We’re doing a great job in this respect, but more needs to be done.

The third element is about community and bringing people together across the sector through events and projects.

Again, we’re pretty good at that too, but both these things can be developed further.

What do you see as the key issues for FIS members during the two years of your presidency?

One is skills, which I’ve already talked about. The second is economic uncertainty following Brexit.

I think there is a cyclical nature to recessions and we’re kind of due another one. It’s not for me to predict the future, but asset prices are very overvalued at the moment and consumer debt is rising again.

At a certain point, it’s quite possible that there will be a correction. Nobody



knows when that will happen – the point at which people lose confidence and stop investing and the recession starts – but it is quite likely.

That’s something the organisation needs to be aware of and we need to be able to support our members through the next difficult period.

What impact has the Grenfell Tower fire had on the sector?

There’s the technical impact of Grenfell to consider – what we might call the need for traceability as to what is built and what is installed.

It’s going to put a big burden on manufacturers, as well as the distributors that sold the products, and the installers that have to demonstrate what went into a building.

It doesn’t mean there won’t be value to be had, providing the systems are compliant and properly tested.

You’ve already touched on it, but what do you think will be the main impact of Brexit on the sector?

The only real impact in the past 15 months – I read about this every day and take an interest in economics and business – has been the exchange rate, which has affected us very badly.

A lot of the major manufacturers of building materials are bringing supplies in from mainland Europe. They’ve had a shock since the Brexit vote.

I look at the dollar rate every day. That’s how significant it is for us – when it drops, it really hurts us. People have got to make changes and price increases.

Having said that, it has recovered a bit and is a lot better than it was six months ago. You just have to adjust and adapt to reflect the new reality.

What’s been amazing – and something I didn’t predict – is that employment is at a record level. We’re pretty much at full employment. As the negotiations do (or do not) make progress in the next 18 months – and there’s a chance that they won’t – it will bring uncertainty and could cause a lack of investment in the short term.

But in the medium term, I’m still quite optimistic. I think Britain will be fine, and I still think immigrants will come here to work and fill the roles that we need. I really think they’ll find a way for that to happen.

Ironically, I think the devalued pound will possibly even help the economy, with more exporting and less importing. I’m always an optimist!

Andrew Smith in action at the FIS Conference

What makes you happy?

As I say, I’m blessed with not having a negative outlook on things. I’m a very positive person. I also think I’m very inclusive. I enjoy working with people much more than just being on my own analysing information – although I can do that too.

But I guess I get my psychological payoff from being with, and engaging with, people. I would also say I’m a very committed individual when I do something, and I like to make a difference.

What makes you angry?

I don’t know about making me angry, but what frustrates me is when politics and blockers get in the way of change.

I accept the fact that as you get older and face more challenges, you have to manage change and find ways and strategies around those challenges. I studied managing change during my MBA and it’s been very helpful in my career.

How do you relax outside of work?

I’m a family man. I married my wife Sue back in 1985 and we started a family three years later.

My son and daughter are grown up now. My wife was very ill about five years ago, but I’m so thankful to say she was finally discharged last week. We might have lost her.

As for me, I just love being outside. I’ve always enjoyed playing and watching sports. I play golf, but I’m most happy when I’m in the sea in my kayak, swimming around in a river or walking up a hill.

Growing up in Yorkshire has given me a real taste for the outdoors. So, when I lay back in my kayak on a sunny day, I think there’s simply nowhere better to be.

ANDREW SMITH'S FAVOURITES...

Reading material: *Sunday Times*

iPod track: *Supper's Ready* by Genesis

Holiday location: The UK's south-west coastline

City: London

TV show: *Match of the Day*

Hobby: Outdoor pursuits

Drink: Real ale





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