



# Here's how Business Link helped my business

Case studies from [businesslink.gov.uk](https://businesslink.gov.uk)



If you're wondering what Business Link could do for your business, this book is for you. It brings together 10 of the best case studies on the Business Link website. Each one features a real business owner or manager, speaking in their own words, about how their local Business Link service made a real difference to how they tackled a business issue.

### Benchmarking

#### 4 Here's how benchmarking improved my profits

Mike Woods  
Catomance Technologies  
Limited

### Quality management standards

#### 6 Here's how I implemented a quality management system

Angela Hayhurst  
Hazel House Care Home Ltd

### Market entry, selling and promotion overseas

#### 8 Here's how I made the decision to export

Keith Tridgell  
SFM Technology Ltd

### Reorganisations, restructures, and other major changes

#### 10 Here's how I changed my management style as my business grew

Patrick Browne  
HydraPower Dynamics

### Grants: the basics

#### 12 Here's how I applied for a grant

Michael Sekulla  
Pinocchio Toys

### Choose and manage your IT supplier

#### 14 Here's how I chose and managed my IT supplier

Rebecca Cadman-Jones  
KC Jones Conference & Events

Business Link thanks the businesses featured in this book for their expertise, time and cooperation. Thanks also to the local Business Link operators that helped those businesses profiled.

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that the information in this book is accurate, but no responsibility can be accepted for any errors or omissions, or changes in the circumstances of the businesses described.

Because of its general nature the information in this book cannot be taken as comprehensive and should never be used as a substitute for legal or professional advice. We cannot guarantee that the information applies to the individual circumstances of your business. You should consider seeking the advice of independent advisers, and should always check your decisions against your normal business methods and best practice in your field of business. August 2005.

Department of Trade and Industry.  
[www.dti.gov.uk](http://www.dti.gov.uk)

© Crown Copyright. DTI/PUB/05/1545



10

“I NOW LOOK AT OTHER BUSINESSES AND WHAT'S HAPPENING ACROSS THE BOARD IN INDUSTRY”

Patrick Browne



12

“KNOWING EXACTLY WHAT YOU WANT MAKES IT EASIER TO NARROW DOWN THE GRANT OPTIONS AVAILABLE”

Michael Sekulla

## Computer hardware: the basics

### 16 Here's how investing in computer hardware benefited my business

Luckman Ismail  
Tile Mart Limited

## Market your products and services on the web

### 18 Here's how I marketed my products and services on the web

Michael and Utta Brown  
Brown and Forrest

## Trade shows and exhibitions

### 20 Here's how I generated new business by attending trade shows and exhibitions

Elaine Stewart  
Engineering Technologies and Manufacturing Ltd

## Employing family members and voluntary staff

### 22 Here's how my business overcame the pitfalls of employing family members

Matt Rawlingson Plant  
Mill on the Brue Outdoor Pursuits Centre



20

BEFORE YOU START, YOU HAVE TO BE SURE ABOUT WHY YOU'RE EXHIBITING AND WHO YOU'RE TARGETING

Elaine Stewart



22

WE WORK HARD TO COMMUNICATE WITH STAFF AND AVOID ANY HINT OF FAVOURITISM

Matt Rawlingson Plant

# Here's how benchmarking improved my profits

Speciality chemical company **Catomance Technologies Limited** had been manufacturing in Hertfordshire for over 60 years when managing director **Mike Woods** undertook a benchmarking exercise. The results led directly to Catomance outsourcing the bulk of its production and refocusing on R&D and marketing. The outcomes were lower costs, higher profits, and better all round decision-making.

## What I did

### Get advice

"Six years ago, the company was facing financial pressure from heavy overheads and low profits. The management team all had ideas about what could be done, but we needed something more concrete to guide us. I got interested in benchmarking after a discussion with an associate who'd been through the process.

"We got guidance and support from Business Link, who put us on their Benchmark Index programme. The programme helps small companies improve competitiveness and profitability by comparing performance with similar companies. What you end up with is a very detailed analysis of your company's current business position. A Business Link consultant took us through the whole process providing expert advice at every stage."

### Gather information

"By answering the questions raised by the Benchmark Index process, we identified which areas of the business we wanted to compare. The list included profitability, financial management, customer satisfaction, innovation, supplier management and capital investment amongst others. We used a questionnaire to gather information internally and externally from customers and suppliers.

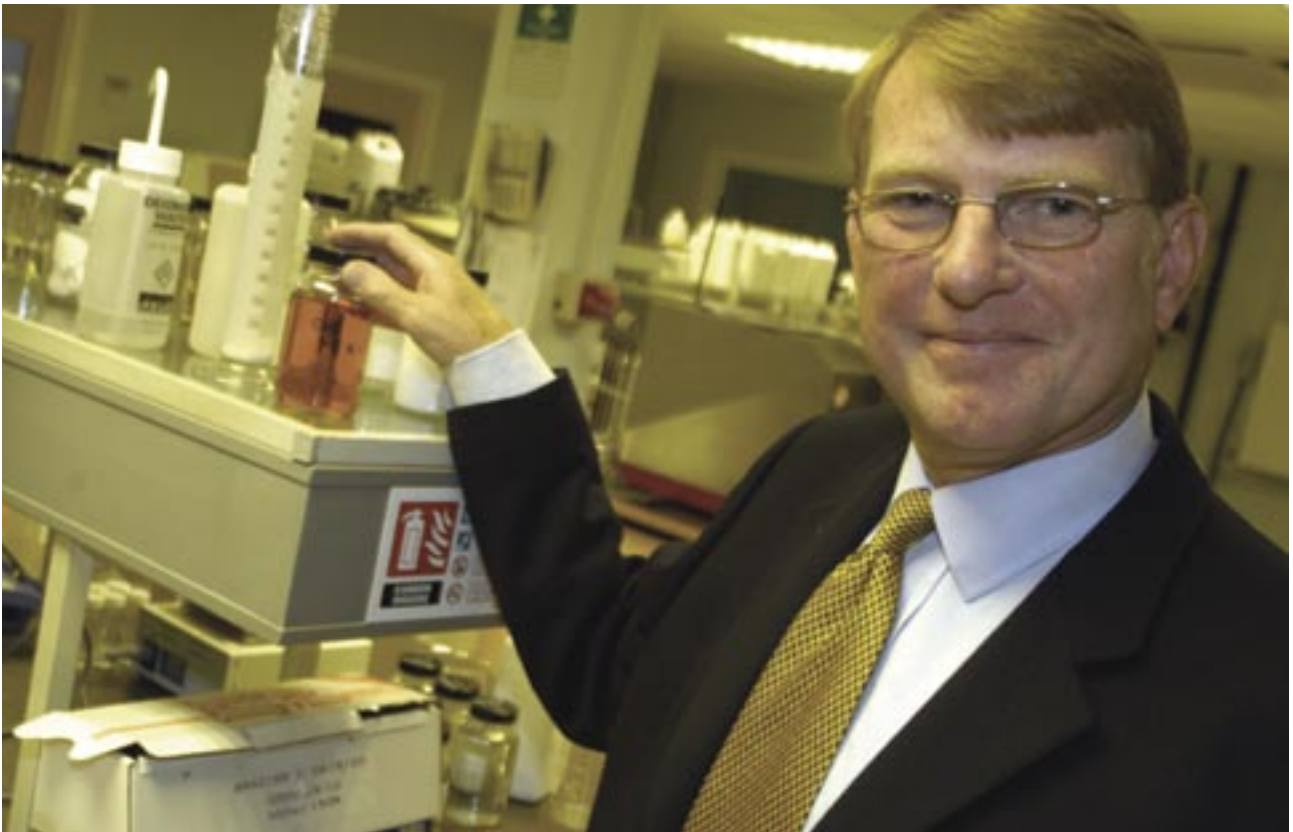
"We decided which companies to compare against. Other chemical manufacturers were an obvious choice, but we also benchmarked against several food processing companies. That may sound strange, but the business model of combining ingredients in a production process to create a finished product was actually very similar to our own."

## MIKE'S TOP TIPS

- "Don't wait until your business is suffering before conducting a benchmarking exercise."
- "Investigate the Business Link Benchmark Index on the Benchmark Index website."
- "Avoid navel-gazing when you get your benchmarking results back – use them to drive change."

### Take action

"When we'd completed the information gathering and comparisons, Business Link helped us to independently analyse the data. It was immediately obvious that some things needed to change. For example, we compared very well on innovation, R&D and customer satisfaction, but badly on managing suppliers and capital investment. The areas of



weakness centred on our manufacturing operation.

“We looked at ways of improving the production process, but the capital investment needed was huge. So we decided to outsource production for all but a handful of products. This cut overheads and capital spending dramatically. We could then concentrate resources on what we were good at, which is creating innovative solutions for our customers and marketing them effectively.

“Outsourcing also resulted in more accurate profit analysis that led to us change our product mix. Decision-making was also improved because we no longer had the pressure of idle production lines to fill.

“Benchmarking was the catalyst for major cultural and operational change. There was some resistance internally, but having the benchmarking results made

it easier to manage the change and convince people of the benefits.”

### **What I'd do differently**

#### **Do it sooner**

“We should have implemented benchmarking as soon as the financial pressures became apparent. There was a bit of fence sitting in the early days.”



#### **Find out more:**

Benchmarking

[businesslink.gov.uk/benchmarking](https://businesslink.gov.uk/benchmarking)

# Here's how I implemented a quality management system

**Hazel House Care Home Ltd** is an established nursing and residential home in Leyland, Lancashire. It decided to undertake ISO 9001 certification, which involved the implementation of a quality management system across its three sites and 100 staff. Senior administration manager **Angela Hayhurst** explains what was involved and how the system has changed the business for the better.

## What I did

### Analyse existing systems

"In our industry, reputation and trust are paramount in gaining and retaining customers. Although we already had Investors in People accreditation, ISO certification was the logical next step.

"We had several management meetings to review current systems and decide the way forward. Although management commitment is essential, it's also important that one person has ownership of quality management or things don't get done.

"We also sought advice from our local Business Link and they put us in touch with a specialist consultant. Working closely with him, a thorough analysis identified nine specific areas to tackle, including control of documentation, purchasing practices, and managing customer feedback. He also helped us to estimate costs so that we could allocate the necessary resources."

### Decide new processes

"It took around four months to decide on and implement new processes. All new processes were collated in a quality control manual, which is now always on-site and easily accessible.

"We set targets for as many processes as possible, so that we could measure our progress. For example, on customer service, our target was to increase the number of positive responses on customer questionnaires by 25%.

"Communicating our aims to staff was crucial. We had a general staff meeting, arranged a presentation by Business Link and circulated a letter to all employees. There was some resistance initially, but talking to them helped to overcome that."

### Measure and review

"Once new processes are up and running, that's not the end of the story. We gave the system six months

to 'bed down' and inevitably there were changes to be made. Measuring progress against the targets we'd set helped us identify what needed to be done. Now we constantly review the system internally, on top of the external audits that are required to retain our ISO certification.

## ANGELA'S TOP TIPS

- "Set clear objectives."
- "Be committed, and instil that commitment in your staff."
- "Keep things simple."



“OUR LOCAL BUSINESS LINK PUT US IN TOUCH WITH A SPECIALIST CONSULTANT. A THOROUGH ANALYSIS IDENTIFIED NINE SPECIFIC AREAS TO TACKLE.”

“In addition, because ISO is an internationally recognised standard, certification has opened the door to expansion. The regular audits we’re subject to are useful too. They ensure that standards don’t slip and provide a spur for further improvements.”

### **What I’d do differently**

#### **Make the decision earlier**

“Implementing a quality management system does take time and money but it’s a great catalyst for change. We wish we’d done it sooner.”

#### **Don’t over-complicate**

“When you’re looking at different ways to improve processes, you can end up over-complicating things. At the start of the project, we should have been more ruthless in weeding out extra processes that seemed like a nice idea, but that we didn’t actually need.”



#### **Find out more:**

Quality management standards

[businesslink.gov.uk/qualitymanagement](https://businesslink.gov.uk/qualitymanagement)

# Here's how I made the decision to export

Engineering solutions company **SFM Technology Ltd** had a shrewd idea that there was an overseas market for its advanced soft fruit harvesting machinery. With the help of the International Trade Team at his local Business Link, sales and marketing director **Keith Tridgell** put the company's ideas into practice. The company has already shipped its first machine to New Zealand and another is en-route.

## What I did

### Get the right advice

"We couldn't have achieved what we have without the help of the Business Link Somerset International Trade Team. Previously we'd been reactive rather than proactive when it came to exporting, but the International Trade Team really got us focused.

"The first thing they did was to assess our readiness for exporting with an export health check. We were given the green light and accepted for the Your Passport to Export Success programme, which is funded by UK Trade & Investment (UKTI), an agency of the DTI. The programme provides mentoring, training and matched funding for novice exporters and includes help with all aspects of exporting. The

contacts provided by our local export mentor, as well as his overall advice and input, were invaluable."

### Research the market

"Armed with a list of contacts, we spent months researching the market and putting together an export plan. We wanted to concentrate initially on New Zealand, since they produce a lot of soft fruit and have similar growing conditions to the UK. We also wanted to start in a market where there was no language barrier.

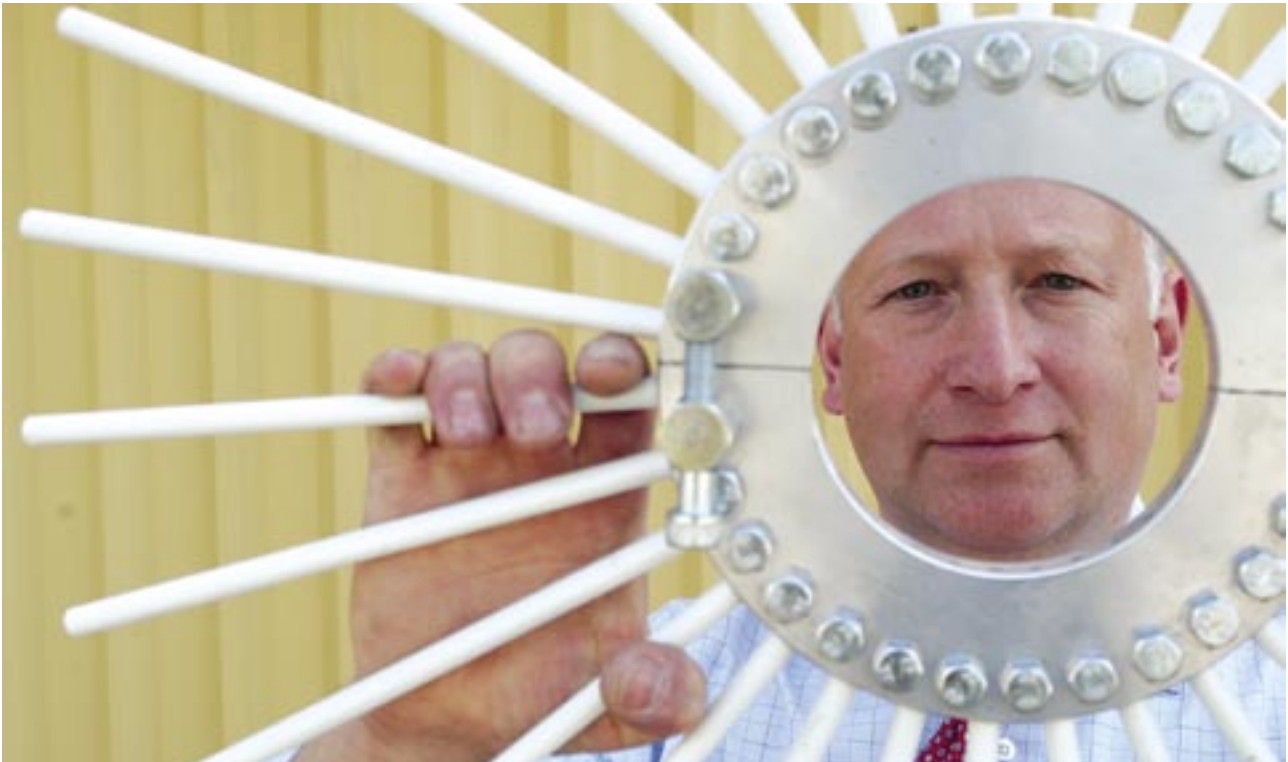
"The Your Passport to Export Success programme put us in touch with the British Consulate in New Zealand and from there I planned my first market visit, which the Passport scheme partially funded. I made

three subsequent trips, which we paid for ourselves. Local knowledge is everything and each visit turned up new information, information we would not have gathered without face-to-face meetings.

"Among many other things, the visits enabled us to research competitors, investigate a sales support system and talk to potential customers in depth. Having UKTI support opened doors and put us in direct communication with all the key people."

## KEITH'S TOP TIPS

- "Understand your target market and make sure you research everything from competitors, through pricing to logistics."
- "Commit resources and think about the investment you need to carry on once you finish a Your Passport to Export Success programme."
- "Communicate regularly with your contacts in the country, since this will make sure your network remains fresh and new opportunities are taken."



### **Appoint an agent**

“It soon became clear that we would need an agent to handle things for us in New Zealand. At that distance it’s hard to do everything yourself, even in these days of email and the Internet. The network of contacts built up during my market visits enabled us to find exactly the right person. Our agent provides on-the-spot customer contact, handles front-line maintenance issues and helps to streamline the paperwork. As well as several meetings in New Zealand, we arranged for our agent to visit our UK site. This underlined his confidence in the product and cemented the relationship.”

### **What I’d do differently**

#### **Allow plenty of time for visits**

“On my first visit to New Zealand I thought I’d allowed

plenty of time, but it wasn’t enough. That first visit is crucial and you can save yourself time and money later by making the most of it.”

### **Invest more**

“When exporting is unknown territory it’s easy to be over-cautious. The resources we allocated were adequate but perhaps, with the value of hindsight, we should have had the confidence to make a bigger initial investment.”



### **Find out more:**

Market entry, selling and promotion overseas

[businesslink.gov.uk/sellingoverseas](https://businesslink.gov.uk/sellingoverseas)

# Here's how I changed my management style as my business grew

Birmingham-based **HydraPower Dynamics** was set up to offer fluid-power technology products alongside design and technological services to blue-chip customers such as BAe and Rolls Royce. The business grew rapidly and had twice changed direction when founder and managing director **Patrick Browne** realised it was time to take a hard look at his company. Being much larger now, he found big management changes were called for.

## What I did

### Bring in a new management layer

"Two of the tutors from a Business Link strategic management course I went on suggested I was looking too much at the finances rather than the strategic management of the company. It was clear that I needed to take some of the hands-on pressure away from my role and focus on strategy instead.

"There are two key elements that drive the business - the technical side and of course, the sales side. So we took on a new executive director to manage each of these key functions. This has given me the time to have a good overview of the company, rather than the day-to-day detail. Having the directors

now allows me to identify the business' weak areas and decide where we have to go."

### Introduce new methods of internal communication

"It was difficult in the beginning. I tended to interfere a lot of the time in what they were trying to achieve - especially as the staff were used to coming to me with problems they had. Fortunately we sat down and had a discussion about this and in the end we decided to move my office a bit further away, giving me that bit of real distance from day-to-day business.

"We never used to have any proper processes for discussing issues or problems with our employees.

People would just come to see us about them. Now

we actually ask our staff about things. We

brought in what we call Quality Bubbles

in which a small number of people and at

least one management person talk about

any problems there might be, not just in the

workplace but in the company in general

- basically, little focus groups. It works very

well."

## PATRICK'S TOP TIPS

- "Put people in place to manage the day-to-day business so you can concentrate on strategy."
- "Communicate clearly to everyone in the business how the changes to management style will affect them and the company."
- "Make use of best-practice schemes to get you on the right road more quickly."

### Take a broader view

"I like to think I've become more professional



“I LIKE TO THINK I’VE BECOME MORE PROFESSIONAL AS I NOW LOOK AT OTHER BUSINESSES AND AT WHAT’S HAPPENING ACROSS THE BOARD IN INDUSTRY.”

as I now look at other businesses and at what’s happening across the board in industry. Before I was very focused on one specific area, looking at the financials and work for my own business, rather than looking at the way companies are brought on generally and at best-practice procedures. It’s a whole different way of doing things.”

### **What I’d do differently**

#### **Communicate changes from Day One**

“One thing I realise now is the importance of making

certain you inform your staff of exactly how your business is going to change. If our communication had been better there would have been a shorter bedding-in period, with our people immediately knowing how the new management team was structured and speaking with the right people about the right issues, first time.”



#### **Find out more:**

Reorganisations, restructures,  
and other major changes

[businesslink.gov.uk/reorganisations](https://businesslink.gov.uk/reorganisations)

# Here's how I applied for a grant

**Michael Sekulla's** traditional toyshop, **Pinocchio Toys**, had been trading in Dunster, Somerset for less than a year when he began looking for ways to reach more customers. A website was the obvious route, but with no computer and limited funds the path seemed blocked. With help from his local Business Link, Michael successfully applied for a grant to help buy the hardware he needed. The company now runs a thriving website, [www.pinocchio-toys.co.uk](http://www.pinocchio-toys.co.uk), alongside the original shop.

## What I did

### Set clear objectives

"We'd always planned to sell online, but we couldn't afford to invest a lot in computer equipment during the early months. Around that time, we had a visit from our local Business Link adviser who got us thinking about grants. The first thing Business Link asked us to do was to fill in a form setting out what we wanted and why. We also wrote our own plan outlining the business benefits we expected to gain from a grant. Putting our objectives on paper focussed our thoughts and helped with filling in applications later on."

### Explore the options

"We were very specific about our requirements. Knowing exactly what you want makes it easier to narrow down the grant options available. We looked at local authority websites, approached rural development agencies and, most helpful of all, used Business Link's Grants and Support Directory. We were prepared to put in what money we could afford, which was important because we found that few grants cover the full cost of a project."

### Target the application

"Once we'd narrowed down the possibilities, we went through each grant's eligibility criteria in detail. We only wanted to apply for something that we had a realistic chance of getting. We finally went for a Rural Business Chest grant from Somerset District Council. The application process was quite rigorous, but the groundwork we'd done paid dividends.

"Grant bodies want to see that you're committed and that you've thought everything through from a business

## MICHAEL'S TOP TIPS

- "Be clear about why you want the grant and put your objectives down in writing."
- "Use the Business Link Grants and Support Directory – it saves on legwork and will point you in the right direction."
- "Don't apply for lots of grants – it's very time consuming and your efforts are better spent doing a tailored application for the grant you want most."



point of view. Getting the grant was a big boost. It enabled us to start on the website 6 to 9 months earlier than we'd planned and meant we had e-commerce capabilities in time for the key Christmas selling period."

### **What I'd do differently**

#### **Don't write a novel**

"The plan we wrote was useful, but too wordy. Next time I'd make it shorter. I'd also produce a condensed version on a single page of A4 to attach as supporting material. Grant bodies get thousands of requests. They're more likely to read one page of bullet points than plough through a 20-page epic, unless that's what they've asked for."

#### **Think bigger**

"Looking back, we probably had a good chance of getting some money for software and website design as well. But at the time we didn't want to push our luck. I'm not suggesting the sky's the limit, but we thought 'small' when we should have been thinking 'medium'".



#### **Find out more:**

Grants: the basics

[businesslink.gov.uk/grantsbasics](https://businesslink.gov.uk/grantsbasics)

# Here's how I chose and managed my IT supplier

**Rebecca Cadman-Jones** is managing director of the Derbyshire-based business **KC Jones Conference & Events**. The company has five employees. Here Rebecca explains how the business benefited from managing their relationship with an IT supplier.

## What I did

### Seek as much advice as possible

"As a business we are heavily reliant on IT. Last year we had 10,000 delegates sign up to our conferences - many of whom came via our bespoke online registration service. Our website is fundamental to reaching new customers.

"When we first started we had a limited budget with which to buy the IT equipment we needed, so selecting the right suppliers was crucial. We had to get value for money - service was a secondary factor.

"Before choosing our IT suppliers I spoke to friends and colleagues about the type of system we needed. I also talked to a Business Link adviser who helped us select the hardware we needed, as well as recommending a software supplier."

### Select a supplier

"I found most hardware suppliers offer similar packages at similar costs. We looked at several suppliers and the main difference in price was in the after-sales support. In the end, we chose a local company that was recommended to us as being cost effective but reliable.

"We decided to go elsewhere for our software, as we needed a bespoke package tailored to our individual needs. The software supplier Simple Solutions was recommended to us by our Business Link adviser. They visited us and we briefed them on our strategic IT objectives.

"They were prepared to adapt to our needs and offered us a list of options with associated costs. This

enabled us to start with the basic essentials and then bolt on extras as we could afford them."

## REBECCA'S TOP TIPS

- "Look at several suppliers to get a picture of what's available. But it's worth having an idea of what you want beforehand, as it will save you spending too much time on your search."
- "Consider how much IT support you actually need - this will depend on how much IT expertise you have in-house and how much you can afford to pay for a support contract."
- "Use a single supplier where possible and build a good working relationship with them."

### Build the relationship

"Building a good working relationship with our suppliers has been key to our IT system's success. But I still review the deals we've got to see whether there are better alternatives.

"It's worth having a signed contract which you both agree to. Then you both



know your obligations and what should happen in the event of a disagreement or dispute.”

### **What I'd do differently**

#### **Plan for growth**

“It would have been helpful to plan our longer-term hardware requirements at the outset.

“For example, we didn't buy a server for our computers straight away and in hindsight we should have done. We told our supplier we couldn't afford one, but as our business grew, we expanded beyond two people and needed a server to meet our IT requirements. We didn't plan for this growth.

“If we'd had one from the beginning, it would have saved time and expense later on when we had to transfer a lot of information to the server.”



#### **Find out more:**

Choose and manage your IT supplier

[businesslink.gov.uk/chooseITsupplier](https://businesslink.gov.uk/chooseITsupplier)

# Here's how investing in computer hardware benefited my business

When **Luckman Ismail** joined tile retailer and wholesaler **Tile Mart Limited** as business development manager, he believed that a measured investment in IT could bring efficiency and customer-service improvements to the company. Here Luckman explains how he went about it.

## What we did

### Analyse the business' needs

"I believed there were ways we could improve our customer relations, supplier management and stock control by introducing electronic systems. All our information was paper-based or in our directors' heads. We did a lot of investigation work, making sure we understood how Tile Mart works, what our suppliers wanted and what our customers needed, and used that to set out our overall objectives."

### Make use of the advice and support available

"We got our local Business Link involved quite early on. While it was easy for us to generate the ideas

- such as unifying our stock control and ordering processes - turning them into a real system can be difficult. Our adviser worked very hard for us, suggesting practical approaches to introduce our IT hardware and systems. And he introduced us to Preston Business Venture and the Asian Business Federation, which helped us with grants for equipment."

### Introduce IT systems progressively

"Previously we had one PC sitting in a corner, hardly used. Now we've got four networked PCs, a printer that we use for statements, invoices and promotional material and a laptop that our sales team can use on the road. While our overall objective was large - to

use and share all our company data effectively - we broke it down into small parts. Our accounting systems were first and we bought an off-the-shelf software system, which helped us manage credit control more effectively and allowed us to raise invoices in a matter of minutes.

"Then we converted the purchase ledger system. The reports from the software

## LUCKMAN'S TOP TIPS

- "Take a long-term view – any investment you make on IT will pay for itself over time."
- "Don't be afraid to review and start again when necessary – we're a 10-year-old business, but we're new to IT and have already found it's better to backtrack and start again if things aren't right."
- "Introduce staff to the systems slowly – if you change working methods overnight, people will find it very difficult. Make sure staff see how the systems will make their jobs easier."



“REPORTS HELP US TO ACCURATELY ANALYSE OUR ORDERING AND BOOST OUR CASHFLOW THROUGH SMARTER STOCKHOLDING. WE’VE GOT INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL EMAIL NOW TOO, WHICH MAKES COMMUNICATION BETWEEN OUR THREE SITES FASTER”

package helped us to accurately analyse our ordering and boost our cashflow through smarter stockholding. We’ve got internal and external email now too, which makes communication between our three sites faster and more reliable.

“Our next project is to introduce a stock control and point-of-sale system to make it easier to share stock

across the branches and improve availability for our customers.”

### What I’d do differently

#### Pilot systems first to make sure they work

“We devised a stock-code system that we thought would save time when inputting product details to the software. However, after six months we realised that it just wasn’t going to work as it stood, so we scrapped it.”



### Find out more:

Computer hardware: the basics  
[businesslink.gov.uk/  
computerhardware](https://businesslink.gov.uk/computerhardware)

# Here's how I marketed my products and services on the web

**Brown and Forrest** has been producing its traditional range of hand-smoked fish and meats for over 20 years near Langport, Somerset. Owners **Michael** and **Utta Brown** started their website and online shop [www.smokedeel.co.uk](http://www.smokedeel.co.uk) to complement their existing shop, restaurant and mail order service. Michael explains how they set about it.

## What I did

### Get professional help

"I knew a website could raise our profile, reach more customers and open up a new sales channel, so I went on a Business Link course to learn more about it. The course made me realise that building and maintaining a good e-commerce website needed more time than I had to spare. I began looking for a designer and an IT specialist to work with us.

"The people we chose not only had the technical expertise, they were also in tune with our business. We wanted the website to reflect our company culture and values. Some web developers were more concerned with trying to sell us expensive extras."

### Make content customer-focused

"Once we'd decided on the basic look and feel and

sorted out online ordering and payment systems, we developed the website content. Our typical customer has a natural interest in traditionally produced food so we included sections on the origins of smoked food, the methods used and our company history.

"The site is interactive and we encourage customers to develop a relationship with us. As well as email requests for information and catalogues, we invite visitors to contribute recipes and send us suggestions. We store all customer data we collect, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Managing the database is a key responsibility for our IT manager - she spends as much time on it as she does maintaining the website itself.

"We also use the website to market other aspects of the business that customers might not be aware of, such as our weekly market stall."

## MICHAEL'S TOP TIPS

- "Shop around for web designers and don't get carried away with pricey gimmicks."
- "Keep website content customer-focused and refresh it often."
- "Use the website to market all aspects of your business."

### Promote the website and keep it fresh

"When the website went live, all existing customers were notified via our regular newsletter. The website address was included in all our merchandising and marketing material too.

"To keep customers coming back the website has to be kept fresh. Changing



photos and text design are simple ways to update the look. We also post the latest version of our newsletter on the site so there's something new to read.

"The website complements rather than replaces existing marketing activities, but it's becoming more important every year. Out of our six sales channels, the website has risen from sixth to third in terms of orders generated. It's boosted overall sales as well."

### **What I'd do differently**

#### **Segment the marketing**

"The database we've built up is invaluable but I wish we'd segmented it sooner by product sales, location of customers, and value of purchases. We're now

looking at software to help us refine our online marketing to different sets of customers."

#### **Re-design sooner**

"In retrospect the site was ready for a complete re-design after two years, whereas we left it for three. In future, we'll review it more often."



#### **Find out more:**

Market your products and services on the web

[businesslink.gov.uk/marketontheweb](https://businesslink.gov.uk/marketontheweb)

# Here's how I generated new business by attending trade shows and exhibitions

Preston-based precision engineering company **Engineering Technologies and Manufacturing Ltd** was established in 1998. The company regularly attends trade shows in the UK and overseas to promote its specialist range of tube manipulation tooling. Exhibiting at a US trade show helped the company to tap into the lucrative North American market and has already resulted in a large order. Company secretary **Elaine Stewart** explains how they went about it.

## What I did

### Choose the right trade show

"Before you start, you have to be sure about why you're exhibiting and who you're targeting. Things to ask the show organisers for before you commit include attendance statistics, delegate profiles and which other companies are exhibiting.

"We wanted to exhibit in North America primarily because it has a huge automotive industry. Our target customers are machine manufacturers and the companies that buy the machines, so we needed to be somewhere where we would reach both audiences.

"The exhibition we selected, FABTECH, ticked all the right boxes. We also approached our local Business Link for advice and it helped us to source a UK Trade and Investment (UKTI) Solo Show Support

grant that covered 50 per cent of the set-up costs of exhibiting."

### Plan ahead

"We set a budget and drew up a list of actions and deadlines from the outset, including technology requirements, display materials, promotional literature, stand furniture, advertising and so on. It helped that the FABTECH website had excellent online services, including detailed timelines and booking facilities for equipment.

"Even with financial support from UKTI, costs had to be controlled. Transport and accommodation are two of the biggest expenses and booking early can save you money. We also got written quotes for everything in advance to ensure we didn't get any nasty shocks when the bills came in."

## ELAINE'S TOP TIPS

- "Know in advance what you expect to gain and who your potential customers are."
- "Plan early, plan thoroughly."
- "Rigorously follow up all leads."

### Maximise opportunities

"We made sure that all staff on the stand were well briefed. Each visitor was asked pre-qualifying questions to determine whether they were genuine prospects. When a good prospect did turn up, we knew exactly which key strengths we wanted to emphasise, and whether we should focus on



innovation and quality rather than price.

“Samples of our tooling were on hand to illustrate the products’ capabilities and that proved useful for engaging people’s interest. We ensured that all visitors went away with promotional materials and business cards and that we had a record of their details. The networking and fact-finding opportunities were great too and we took time out to visit other stands and talk to potential partners. When we returned to the UK, we followed up each lead by email or letter. We already have a substantial order from one company we met and several others in the pipeline.”

### **What I’d do differently**

#### **Take a laptop**

“We didn’t think we’d need a computer on the stand, but with hindsight it would have been a good idea.

Some potential customers just wanted an informal chat, but there were occasions when a more formal presentation would have been appropriate.”

#### **Attract attention**

“We got lots of ideas from other exhibitors about ways to attract visitors to the stand. Next time around we’ll develop a mechanical device to display, or use a projector with moving images in order to draw more attention to ourselves.”



#### **Find out more:**

Trade shows and exhibitions

[businesslink.gov.uk/tradeshows](https://businesslink.gov.uk/tradeshows)

# Here's how my business overcame the pitfalls of employing family members

**Mill on the Brue Outdoor Pursuits Centre** in Somerset employs three members of the Rawlingson Plant family. The centre welcomes over 7,000 customers every year, ranging from schools to corporate clients. **Matt Rawlingson Plant** explains how planning and good communication have helped the company avoid the potential pitfalls of a family partnership.

## What I did

### Plan ahead

"My parents started the business 23 years ago, so I've grown up with it. While they always left the door open for me and my siblings to join, they were also keen that we should have experience outside the company before making any decisions.

"I spent time as an officer in the Royal Tank Regiment, completed a degree in International Business and Marketing and worked for two years as a financial consultant, specialising in process management.

"Between the army and financial consulting I returned to Mill on the Brue to work on a number of projects for my parents. It was a good opportunity for them to assess my skills and suitability, and for me to prove my worth to other staff members before I joined full time as finance and e-marketing director in 2004."

### Get outside advice

"We got involved with Business Link Somerset and attended several of their Family Business Days for advice on succession planning and other aspects of working with family members. Open discussion with other family businesses has been invaluable.

"We also work with a small business consultant who acts as our mentor and knows our company well. Her input has been extremely useful. She provides an objective, neutral point of view that helps to preclude potential family clashes and keeps us focused on business goals."

### Communicate openly

"We anticipated a certain amount of staff resistance to a family appointment, so we held away-days with the existing management team to plan and discuss the new role. Employing family members does complicate the dynamics of workplace relationships.

We work hard to communicate with staff and avoid any hint of favouritism.

"We have weekly management meetings which include family and non-family members and open discussion is encouraged. Although we rarely have arguments, we do tend to be extremely frank

## MATT'S TOP TIPS

- "Create an open forum for dialogue and discussion."
- "Have a neutral third-party sounding board."
- "Deal sensitively with non-family staff members."



“WEEKLY MANAGEMENT MEETINGS INCLUDE FAMILY AND NON-FAMILY MEMBERS. ALTHOUGH WE RARELY HAVE ARGUMENTS, WE DO TEND TO BE FRANK. HAVING NON-FAMILY PRESENT HELPS TO CURB EXCESS”

with each other. Having non-family members present helps to curb any excess.

“Running a family business also makes it harder to “switch off” at home which can create tensions. It’s important to maintain outside interests to combat this tendency.”

### What I’d do differently

#### Involve staff earlier

“Looking back, we should have started talking to staff

about the options for succession, and the possibility of a family appointment, at an earlier stage.”

#### Use performance-related pay

“Linking financial reward to performance targets is one of the best ways to avoid suspicions of preferential treatment for family members. Performance-related pay would have been a good measure of my contribution to the business in the early stages.”



#### Find out more:

Employing family members  
and voluntary staff

[businesslink.gov.uk/employingfamily](https://businesslink.gov.uk/employingfamily)

If you're wondering what Business Link could do for your business, this book is for you. It brings together 10 of the best case studies on the Business Link website. Each one features a real business owner or manager, speaking in their own words, about how their local Business Link service made a real difference to how they tackled a business issue.

There are 100 more case studies at **[businesslink.gov.uk/casestudies](https://businesslink.gov.uk/casestudies)**. To find your local Business Link operator simply enter your postcode at **[businesslink.gov.uk/fyl](https://businesslink.gov.uk/fyl)**, or call 0845 600 9006.



## **Business Link**

is the **National Business Advice Service** for England

The easy route to impartial advice, support and information to help your business achieve its potential

**0845 600 9006**