

IN THE DRIVING SEAT

As specialist seating provider Repose Furniture looks to expand its production capacity, AMP hears how it is flying the flag for British manufacturing and developing new ways of helping dealers convert enquiries into sales.



A selection of bespoke chairs in Repose's showroom in the West Midlands.

To anybody passing Repose Furniture's headquarters in Cradley Heath, there is no clue from the outside that behind

its four walls a small army of workers is assembling customised seating solutions for the healthcare market. But it is here that the best of British manufacturing is alive and well.

The company's pathway to success has taken a handful of defining turns during its 18 years in operation, but the one thing that has always rang true is that it remains a family business. And for managing director, Lisa Wardley, that remains a key part of who and what Repose stands for.

"It's a real strength for us that we are a family business," she tells AMP. "A lot of people that we speak to like to work with family businesses, especially when they know the history, where we have

come from and the experience we have got. There is a longstanding tradition of proper, fine upholstery and we are very personal. We don't hide behind a desk in a fancy office upstairs; all the directors and owners of the business are all very hands-on. Customers can ring us up and speak to any of us."

This dedicated approach has served the business well as it has found its way around the mobility and healthcare market place. Roughly a quarter of its income comes from supplying the high street retail trade, with a similar proportion derived from direct sales companies. The rest is linked to its work in the healthcare sector, where there is constant appetite for specialist seating products among NHS authorities, care homes and hospices.

Wardley says the company is committed to expanding the mobility retail channel and has been throwing its weight behind growing this part



of its business. "We try and offer as much training as possible, including promotions every month to help retailers engage with customers, point-of-sale material and brochures. We are doing a lot of marketing."

The fact that Repose's turnover isn't dependent on one segment or channel has been good for business. When it moved into its current 23,500 square foot premises four years ago it was producing close to 80 units a week. It now churns out double that figure and is looking for ways to expand its capacity further in order to avoid turning down orders.

"We do everything on site," explains Wardley. "We have got our own woodmill making our own frames, we have got our own foam converting plant to convert our own foam from blocks into all the individual components, and all our design and development work is done on site. We have got two major CNC cutting machines on the shop floor and we are just in the process of buying a third one. And then obviously all the upholstery, sewing and assembly work is all done on site here. The only thing we don't manufacture from scratch is the mechanisms. 98% of our mechanisms come from a UK-sourced manufacturer based in Swansea."

Wardley joined the family business in 2005 during a period that ended up becoming a turning point for the business. At the time it was focused on supplying mainstream high street furniture products and was struggling to deal with the influx of low-priced Chinese imports. It realised it could no longer survive on the back of selling mainstream three-piece suites but it did have relationships with a handful of mobility shops, who were buying riser recliner chairs from it.

Repose decided to focus its efforts on this part of the market and launched a range of adjustable lift and rise reclining chairs at Naidex, its first ever trade show as a business. While it deemed the exhibition a massive success and made dozens of contacts, it didn't take a single order. Fortunately it didn't have to wait long. "The following week after the show, the phone

didn't stop ringing. It just went crazy. At the time we were probably producing about 15 units a week. Now we are up to 160 units a week and we employ 45 members of staff," she says.

As well as the new CNC machine it is in the process of purchasing, Repose plans to upgrade its IT system and reorganise the internal factory space – including the addition of a mezzanine floor – to create additional capacity and bandwidth for growth.

Its portfolio is certainly impressive. With trade prices starting from £500 for a basic lift and rise recliner chair right up to £5,000 for a bespoke bariatric chair, the company produces seats, sofas and furniture tailored to customers' exact requirements.

However, it has also moved recently to develop a standard seating offering called the 'Olympia Collection' for dealers, which is based on seven standard sizes that are prefixed at the factory. The range includes a three-seat sofa, two-seat sofa, fixed chair, footstool as well as optional extra furniture to go with it. "It is very much



Repose carries out the entire production process at its UK factory.

UK MANUFACTURING

All of Repose's chairs are manufactured at its West Midlands factory, where it controls every process and every chair through its business to ensure the highest standards of quality are upheld. When dealers place an order, it will manufacture and deliver the customised chair within two to three weeks. Some specialist chairs can take three to four weeks but dealers will always be advised when they place the order.

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aimed at high street dealers that don't really want to get involved in bespoke, which might be because sales staff on the shop floor find it difficult to manage the sort of measuring experienced needed to do a real bespoke chair.

"The Olympia Collection means they can actually have three or four chairs on the shop floor and the customers can try them out to see which ones feel best for them," she adds.

Although it is a standard collection, customers are still given plenty of choice if they opt for the Olympia line. They can select from more than 50 fabrics, three ranges, two internal mechanisms and three back styles.

Wardley is delighted with how the range has been received so far, with companies such as Midlands mobility equipment chain Clark & Partners among the dealers to roll it out across its stores. But is she worried about it cannibalising core bespoke sales?

"No, not at all," she responds. "It is designed to win business in places where people are very confused over Repose's portfolio for bespoke. It is going to allow retailers to comfortably give support to staff on the shop floor that there is a range of different sized chairs without the complex measuring that goes along with it." AMP