



NEW PRODUCTS HAVE BEEN INTRODUCED AND FRESH MARKETING STRATEGIES ADOPTED AT THE BRICOS GROUP AS A NEW GENERATION LEADS THE WAY. **DAWN ADAMS REPORTS.**

DAVID SYMONS AND NICK BIPPUS remain committed to the core values established at the Bricos Group over more than three decades in business, but they are also taking strong steps to advance into an innovative future. Symons' parents, Brian and Diane, started the business 37 years ago and retired in 2005 handing over the daily operation and future direction to their son David and son-in-law Nick. Long-standing business relationships stretch back more than 30 years, almost to the days when the firm was first established. Bippus and Symons are determined to continue the tradition of working with companies that operate in a similar way to the Bricos Group; those with a strong moral compass who put their heart and soul into their work, keen to see their efforts grow and succeed. Their commitment to stand behind their products enables the Bricos Group to work with factories and mills around the world. "We were eager to continue with the core values and principles that the business ran on," Symons says. "We were also keen to introduce a new and fresh slant on products in our range and in our marketing." Symons points to several examples that suggest that the Bricos Group has been a leader in establishing certain trends. He claims that it was the first company in Australia to introduce a 2.8-metre-wide blackout fabric around six years ago, and that it was the first to recognise a need for texture. Symons and Bippus travel extensively each year to keep up-to-

date with the latest developments in texture, colour and design, but they are also keenly aware that Australia is a unique market and that overseas trends may not easily translate into significant domestic sales. "The wider width was a trend we recognised as coming, but we hadn't seen it overseas," Bippus says. "Bricos Group and the Australian market led the way with that trend." Today, the company exports wide-width fabric to Southeast Asia and southern Europe.

#### MARKETING MULTI-TIERED

A multi-tiered marketing strategy is designed to ensure that information about the company's product offering is relayed across the supply chain, including retailers, manufacturers, interior designers, specifiers and architects for commercial and residential buildings. The company has staged extensive marketing campaigns over the past five to six years, tailor-making the information to suit each group; for example, brochures for end consumers have focused on practical information rather than technical data. "We promote the range on all levels," Bippus says. "And it's also important to spend time with the people who manufacture the product." A recent initiative to engage retail, interior-designer and specifier interest was a roadshow promoting the Sunshadow collection of sunscreen fabrics for blinds from Alkenz from Korea. "They work at the coalface

with the end consumer [who needs] to be educated about the product," Symons says. Bricos Group recently became the brand's Australian and New Zealand distributor, and training days were held in Queensland, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth. "We work with the best mills from all continents and still continue to buy from every region in the world," Bippus says. In a bid to better service the market, the firm recently opened a new warehouse in Melbourne to complement existing facilities in Queensland and Auckland, New Zealand. "The response has been fantastic. People are happy we have stock on the ground," Bippus says. "While we are Queensland-based, Victoria is our biggest market, which is why we made this commitment."

#### LISTENING TO THE MARKET

The pair notes how product preferences across the country vary; they suggest that the southern states gravitate towards blockouts while New South Wales and Queensland prefer translucent or light filtering products due to their climates. "We often get feedback on ranges before we make a strong commitment to them," Symons says. "There is a trend towards fabric blinds rather than harder styles of products like timber or aluminium. Fabric is 'in' for roman, roller and panel glides." Textured and wide-width fabrics up to 2.8 metres or 3 metres continue to command market share.

Bicheno and Scarborough are new selections that offer textured designs, while EcoBalance is a 'green' alternative, part of the EcoLogic selection. "The trend for fabrics targeted at a 'green' market is being driven by the commercial sector, but we're seeing it cross over into the residential applications," Symons says. "There can be growth in this area in the years ahead as people look for eco-friendly fabrics, but you have to be able to back it up with credentials." Bippus points out that EcoBalance took three years to develop. "To be innovative, you have to be a long way ahead of the market because of the lengthy development time required," he says. The idea for EcoBalance was first jotted down on a "scribbly piece of paper" after a brainstorming session. "Nick and I spend a lot of time finding out what the market is looking for and then coming up with what the market is asking for," Symons says. "We worked on EcoBalance from concept to completion. We came up with the original concept and asked the mill to weave and design it."

#### RIGOROUS QUALITY CONTROL

Meanwhile, the patented roman blind baton system Roman Ezy, a 'no sew' system, was developed with a customer who was a well known blind maker. "Our philosophy is to always look at improving what we're doing," Bippus says. "When we launched Roman Ezy, we knew you can





never stand still to be progressive, you have to keep looking at how to improve products." Roman Ezy has undergone regular refinements to the original product since its release eight years ago. The firm also markets linings for curtain fabrics under its Just Linings division. Symons points to three ideals for the firm's success: company culture, quality and consistency. A rigorous quality-control system involves four to five people checking fabrics against a master sample

before they are permitted to be sold. "We have a lab on site to test the textiles in many ways, and every batch that arrives is checked," Symons says. "If they don't pass that test, they get returned for replacement."

A flexible sampling program enables larger or smaller options as well as custom samples with a company name on them. A cut-length service is offered because many businesses are unable to carry stock for their needs. "If they need 10 or 12 metres

of fabric, we can provide that," Bippus says. Also offered is a skins service to provide the exact size of fabric required for a particular job.

Looking into the future, Symons says the firm will continue to be proactive about new opportunities. "The last thing we want is to be a 'me too' company," he says. "People look at us for something exciting that is different to everyone else's products. We keep an eye on what's happening in the market and then go in our own direction."



Nick Bippus, Danny Kwon – Export and sales manager, Alkenz, Kevin Chong – Operations manager, Alkenz, Mark Wood – National sales manager, The Bricos Group

## ALKENZ ROADSHOW

THE BRICOS GROUP spent last month touring Australia to speak with retailers and manufacturers about Alkenz's Sunshadow collection of sunscreen fabrics for blinds.

The roadshow, which took in Queensland, Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, outlined some of the key selling features of the Sunshadow collection, as well as outlining the commitment that the Bricos Group has made to this distributorship.

"The Bricos Group is a specialist fabric distributor with warehousing in Queensland, Melbourne and Auckland," Nick Bippus told attendees at one a number of presentations in Melbourne.

"We have made a big commitment to the Alkenz product, and to give you an idea of how big, we stock 2-2,500 rolls of Sunscreen in Melbourne alone."

Bippus then presented an overview of South Korea and its manufacturing capabilities, to dispel myths and distinguish the advanced nation from other Asian countries.

Also a chemicals company, Alkenz, according to Bippus, is the only sunscreen weaver in the world that produces its own PVC; it's also the biggest sunscreen supplier in Asia and third biggest overall.

"Alkenz has been weaving for 13 years now and has a state-of-the-art manufacturing facility.

"Alkenz carries around 500-600,000 square metres of stock and offers a five-year warranty on all Sunshadow Sunscreen ranges – including white.

"This is down to Alkenz's chemical background – they are obviously confident to back this."

Alkenz fabrics are certified to Oeko-tex and Greenguard (the American standard for air quality) standards.

Questions came thick and fast from attendees of the roadshow, including one which prompted Alkenz's Danny Kwon, the company's export and sales manager, to claim that the company was confident enough to guarantee the Net Series (Screen Optic), 2x2 basket weave fabric even if used in a railroad application.

Another question asking Bippus to compare the Sunscreen product to a competitor's product resulted in this analogy:

"It's like cola. There has been this Coke brand in the market for a long time; I see Alkenz as the Pepsi of the market. However, as we all know, Pepsi tastes better," he joked. **WFA**