

(Unique Business) UNIQUE SCREENS

A SHORT BREAK AWAY FROM THE WINDOW FURNISHINGS INDUSTRY CONVINCED THREE MEMBERS OF THE TSALACOPOULOS FAMILY THAT THE SECTOR WAS 'FLOWING THROUGH THEIR VEINS'. THEY ESTABLISHED UNIQUE SCREENS WHEN THEY RETURNED TO THE INDUSTRY AFTER SEVERAL YEARS.

DAWN ADAMS REPORTS

THE FORMATION OF Unique Screens in 2003 represented a homecoming for three Tsalacopoulos family members. Brothers Theo and George and father Peter decided to join forces to create the company after a four-year break away from the industry. "When we left the industry, we spent time doing other things, and then we realised window furnishings was in the blood flowing through our veins," says Theo. "We'd been in the industry for such a long time and we missed it. We knew the game, we had the history and experience so we decided to go back to the things we knew and were passionate about."

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TheoTsalacopoulos - Unique Screens

Tsalacopoulos says they felt a huge weight lift off their shoulders when they decided to return to the sector. They began to research developments in the industry and to contact suppliers they had dealt with in the past. "We rented a premises when we had no clients and no contracts, just four concrete walls," he says. "We'd made a commitment to get back into the industry; it was a leap of faith." After renting the premises in April 2003, their first invoice was completed in August that year, but Tsalacopoulos says they never felt overwhelmed by the challenges. "There were just the three of us in those early days and we lived on adrenaline," he says. Today, nine people work in the business, including its founders, and it caters to the commercial and residential markets including retailers and designers. "There's still quite a bit of work to be had in the commercial sector," Tsalacopoulos says. "The residential area is fiercely competitive." The firm is determined to stand out in the marketplace by establishing strong relationships with its clients. "Based on our history and knowledge of the retail sector, we are able to understand where our clients sit," he says. "We can walk in their shoes and understand the difficulties they face. They need to deal with suppliers and handle installations; we are aware of that chain of events that takes place until delivery to the end user. We establish a partnership with our clients, show them that we understand their business and that they're not just another number to us. We rely on them as much as they rely on us."

A CHALLENGE SOLVED

When Unique Screens was asked to send a six-metre-long motorised curtain track to the Northern Territory, the company obliged.

"We had to send the curtain track, with its bends and curves that went in all directions, to the Northern Territory," he says. Asked how he accomplished the task, he laughs and says, "We packaged it very carefully and sent it by courier; it was definitely a challenge".

Tsalacopoulos highlights that the size of the company makes it able to respond to queries quickly. "We're small enough to be able to adapt; there's not too much procedural governance," he says. "It's what I like about this business: the challenges thrown at us on a regular basis. That's what excites us and keeps the adrenaline and the enthusiasm going. It's not just pushing out blinds but adapting what we do to suit our clients and finding resolutions to a challenge they face. We do that on a regular basis."

"It's easy to do when you're smaller but more challenging as you grow," he says. "We can react very quickly if a client rings about a problem. We have a small infrastructure and cut the red tape to respond to clients' needs and emergency projects." The firm started in business producing roller blinds and these remain its key products. "That's how we started and that is our core product range," he says. "We also do external roller systems. In addition, we manufacture standard roman blinds."

The firm is also a Victorian program partner with Somfy for Glydea motorised curtain tracks. He explains that the experience amassed in soft furnishings retail helps to inform the knowledge about curtain tracks in the business. As a user of Somfy motors for roller blinds, he also suggests that moving into its motorised curtain tracks was a natural evolution. "We are a Somfy user and understand how their products integrate with different applications like remote control or detailed building management systems," he says.

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OPPORTUNITIES IN AUTOMATION

Tsalacopoulos sees clear opportunities in motorised product. "Any sort of automation will have a huge growth factor within this country," he says. "We're behind the US and Europe and some parts of Asia in this area and we see motorisation as a big part of our business in the future." Interestingly, that four-year break away from the industry before Unique Screens was established helped to cement knowledge in this area for the company founders. "When we were out of the industry, we were involved in the electronic field doing everything from security to home automation," he says.

This additional insight is helping the founders to make motorisation an easier option for their clients. They offer to take charge of dealings with the integrator and builder on behalf of clients. This strategy eliminates the need for their clients to need to know the technical aspects of motorisation, allowing them to focus on other aspects such as colour, design and concept if they wish. "Our clients don't always want to know the technical aspects of a motor or how it links with a building management system," he says.

The firm is in the process of building a new factory that will be operational next year. "This factory is part of an expansion because we have run out of space," he says. "It's the normal type of progression where you're bursting at the seams and need to move to another facility to allow a bit more growth." Plans are to grow the business opportunities within the firm's current product range and to continue to manage a streamlined manufacturing operation. "We want to maintain service and support to our clients as we progressively grow," he says.

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