



A HAPPY ACCIDENT

THIS ISSUE, WFA'S NEW 'INDUSTRY RISING STAR' SLOT FOCUSES ON BEN BOYCE, FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF PERTH RETAILER WA BLINDS. BELINDA SMART REPORTS.

AT THE AGE OF 28, Ben Boyce is already something of a veteran in the window furnishings retail sector.

Ben founded WA Blinds in 2006 aged 22, after completing a degree in cartography, and, as this incongruous chain of events suggests, his entrée into the window furnishings sector was something of a happy accident.

"I was a salesperson in the window furnishings department of Freedom Furniture for a couple of years while I was at uni. After a while I realised there was an opportunity to value add to Freedom's offer by offering a measuring and fitting service. Obviously this was good news for Freedom as it meant increased uptake of their product, and eventually it became the reason I went into the industry."

Ben's stint at Freedom was also his first link with Lifestyle Blinds and Shutters, a link that remains today with Lifestyle still a key supplier for WA Blinds, along with local WA suppliers such as Mr Venetian ADG.

Strong relationships with suppliers and a market responsive approach are the keys to WA Blinds' year on year growth in profit and turnover since it was founded, he says.

"I think our point of difference lies in the fact that we're a lot smaller than some of the players out there, and we're able to respond quickly to the market. Whereas some traditional players might take the approach of having a big range and seeing who they can sell to, we tend to start with the client's needs, with a focus on offering a tailor made solution."

The early days of WA Blinds coincided with Perth's property boom, a fact that "accelerated us into the market" and led to steady business in residential and smaller commercial projects. In 2009 WA Blinds reached a key milestone, securing its first major commercial project; the fit-out of the new Perth premises of WA's Department of the Environment and Conservation.



"In terms of the logistics and sheer volume of product, that was a real learning curve," Ben says.

Today the local climate in Perth presents new challenges, including a tight labour market, cost of living rises and the resultant squeeze on consumer confidence. In addition housing starts have been down for the last couple of years.

"It's much more competitive now and you've really got to know your market and know your product. It's about having the right product at the right price and the right time. Instead of simply going for something they like at a price they like, consumers are really doing their homework now. They're getting three or four quotes and comparing them on product and price."

With the internet playing a strong role in educating consumers, it's perhaps no surprise that WA Blinds recently invested in enhancing its website to showcase a comprehensive product range. Social media marketing will also play a key role in the company's strategy going forward, Ben says.

His grasp of business is impressive for a cartography graduate, but Ben attributes his success to an innate knack with finances and an organic, step-by-step approach to growth. Working in a business that he enjoys also helps.

"I certainly didn't dream of window furnishings when I was a kid. I really love what I do though. I like the variety of it; the fact that one day I might be sitting in someone's home going through products with them, and the next day I might be going through a really complex tender document for a major commercial project."

"A lot of my friends who I studied cartography with are travelling all the time and working unusual hours. I like running my own show and being in Perth. It seems to suit me."

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