

Business trebled its workforce and quadrupled its turnover

Many small companies that reach a certain size find themselves the subject of a takeover bid by a larger concern – but that was never part of Paul Grist's plan.

As managing director of the Kent-based Swift Alarms Group, Paul is determined not to be swallowed up by the big boys but to join them in the top flight.

It's a determination that is backed up by the obvious potential of the business, which has trebled its workforce and quadrupled its turnover in the past six years.

With 75 direct employees and a turnover of £8 million, Paul believes that the Swift Alarms Group is well-placed to expand still further over the next few years by providing top quality, state-of-the-art fire and security systems to its rapidly-growing customer base.

"Our biggest investment to date was acquiring a fire alarm installer called Safyre three years ago – just as the recession started," he recalled. "The timing could not have been worse, but the decision has paid big dividends and has contributed enormously to our current strength."

In fact, the three years of the recession have been the company's best. This July was the group's best ever month for new business, with sales reaching £1.2m. The company has acquired two new businesses this year and is planning more acquisitions over the coming 12 months to strengthen the group further on both a regional and national basis.

The Swift Alarms Group was established by its current chairman, Roger Rawlings, in 1978 and is one of the UK's longest established privately-owned electronic fire and security companies.

The group is made up of three companies; Safyre, which deals with fire protection systems; the original Swift Alarms business that provides electronic security systems, and Swift Auto-Gates, which provides automated gate and barrier systems.

This structure enables the group to protect everything from a small residential property through to a commercial warehouse or a national chain; as a result it numbers John Lewis, Waitrose, Lidl and Pret A Manger among its many high-profile customers.

"While we look after a number of large chains, we value our domestic and smaller commercial customers just as highly and I believe those customers benefit greatly from the experience and expertise we have gained in dealing with our larger contracts," explained Paul.

To make sure the group continues to develop the expertise it needs, it runs its own apprenticeship scheme and is including new training facilities in a substantial extension to its premises at Bedgebury Park, Goudhurst, Kent.

Swift took over Safyre as part of a deliberate policy to switch the company's primary focus towards fire protection systems to complement its existing place in the security systems market.

"Security systems are still very important to us but we see more growth opportunities in installing and maintaining fire alarms and fire suppression systems," said Paul.

"Fire protection is mandatory – unlike security alarms – and companies have to meet the requirements of the Fire Safety Act (2005). This makes companies responsible for assessing



their own fire safety risks and for engaging a suitably accredited fire protection company to implement and maintain the necessary systems.

"The stakes are much higher now when it comes to protecting staff and the public from fire and we believe that as an experienced and properly accredited fire protection company we can provide the reassurance businesses need," Paul said.

The Swift Alarms Group achieved British Approvals for Fire Equipment (BAFE) SP203 accreditation five years ago, which makes it well qualified to install and maintain fire protection systems.

The company also brought in Alan Neenan, one of the fire protection industry's most respected and experienced people, to establish a new division of Safyre called Safyre

Suppression Systems, which installs the latest fire suppression technology in commercial and industrial premises throughout the UK.

The new division has been so successful that Alan has since been made Safyre's managing director. Alongside its UK operation, Safyre has major projects running in both France and Iceland and has further contracts lined up in Belgium and Holland.

In addition, Safyre has created a unique product called Seraph, an intelligent fire alarm system that is able to offer full remote diagnostic capabilities between Safyre's service department and a customer's premises.

This sophisticated system enables Safyre to provide its customers with a prompt and cost-effective fault diagnosis facility without needing to dispatch an engineer immediately.

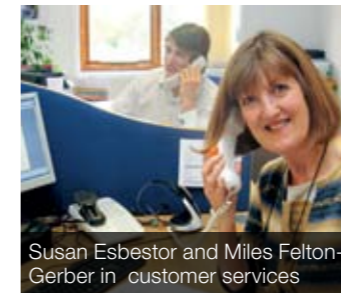
Swift Alarms' range of unique security solutions includes second generation biometric scanning technology. The Swift Verifier can read fingerprints up to three millimetres below the surface, allowing even the grubbist, most battle-scarred builder's finger to be read accurately.

"This is a great product for keeping track of who is on site," Paul explained. "Electronic tags can be swiped by a mate, but only someone who is prepared to remove a finger can overcome our system!"

Alongside all of this high



Larry Cliff (front) and Tim Hudson



Susan Esbestor and Miles Felton-Gerber in customer services

gates for schools and colleges that combine security with maximum user safety. These gates incorporate special safety edges and infra-red beams to prevent them closing when a child or any other obstruction is in the way.

Both Swift Alarms and Safyre offer state-of-the-art wire-free intruder and fire alarm systems that are particularly useful where a traditional hard-wired system might risk damaging a fragile building or where there is no practical way of concealing cabling. Listed buildings, museums and art galleries are all good examples.

Whatever the solution, Paul believes in offering customers real value for money, an approach that includes thinking carefully about the long-term running costs as much as the initial capital outlay.

"Saving money by installing a cheaper product that costs more to maintain in future years is not good for our customers," he explained. "We think all our advice through carefully and make sure that it results in the best possible long-term solution for our customers."

The company's special projects division provides a range of systems and services designed to protect less conventional risks.

They include specialised water-mist extinguishing systems that can be used on



Paul Grist

high voltage power generation and distribution equipment and intruder protection systems for transformers and high tension electrical systems within the UK's power distribution and public transportation industries.

"With the theft of copper and other non-ferrous metals at an all-time high, keeping them secure is more important than

ever, and we have the know-how to stop these disruptive and damaging thefts," Paul commented.

The Swift Alarms Group is one of the UK's few 'elite' fire and security groups that is accredited to the NSI GOLD standard in all four core disciplines. "This is something that we are rightfully very proud of," said Paul.



Alan Neenan





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