



lyon heart

‘After 10 minutes of my interview with Mark Sefton, Bonar Floors Managing Director, I told him ‘Your website’s crap, your identity’s crap – we don’t know who you are.’ The reason Bonar Floors hired me is because of my track record solving similar problems at Steelcase.

Just like them, Bonar Floors had grown via acquisition over a 15 year period and thus built a stable of companies, brands and cultures; but they had not developed a clear view of where and how everything was going to fit together. I’ve been hired because of my experience of making it work.’

We’re talking to the ebullient Rodolphe Wittlin, Bonar Floors’ charismatic and determined new Head of Sales and Marketing. This is a man with a plan, and a very aggressive plan it is too.

‘Low and Bonar is a hundred year old company turning over about £450 million, of which Bonar Floors contributes about £120 million. We’re currently ranked about seventh of European contract flooring companies, but our ambition is to be a top five player in 2010. That means we’ve got to increase sales by about £50 million in the next two and a half years. As you’ve already seen recently with Westbond, we’re definitely acquisitive, and we’re going to continue to grow organically too.’





▶▶▶▶▶ We asked Rodolphe his views on whether there was a shake-up in contract flooring in progress, and how Bonar was going to be a leading player.

‘There’s a consolidation happening in our industry, and we clearly want to be part of that. Few of the big Americans have made the quantum leap into Europe, and some very big American companies haven’t come at all. I don’t know why: leadtimes, channels and routes to market are all factors adding up to one question – how are we going to sell the stuff? What we’ve done at Bonar Floors is to grow into a company offering a wide portfolio in terms of solutions, as opposed to products. We have some strong brands – Coral is a market leader, Flotex is another, and in the course of three years Tessera is already well known. Westbond of course is well established as a high end, design oriented brand. When we evaluated our collection of brands we realised that in terms of technical performance we are strong. We’ve added high levels of customer care under the Bonar Floors umbrella to market ourselves as a high performance company in two ways – service performance and product performance.’

Clearly excited by the marketing opportunities and challenges in front of him, Rodolphe Wittlin is a marketer to his fingertips. So we paused a while to find out a little of the background.

‘Originally I’m from Lyon. My father’s career at Pfizer ended up with him in the wonderful role of External Relationships Manager for France. This meant lots of entertainment, a very nice and very cool job flying people around the world. My family all joined in, ▶▶▶▶▶





survive a while without coherency but I think there was always too much debate about cultural differences, debate about the legacy of the brands and their futures. Now I make the decisions. I also think it's interesting Bonar didn't hire a Brit or a carpet guy – I think it's because I bring a new perspective. And furthermore, we're bringing about a critically important cultural shift: we are no longer a British company exporting – we are a European company. That's a big difference and a big change.'

We started by hearing Rodolphe's take on Bonar at interview. So who are Bonar Floors now?

'Bonar Floors stands for something in the market: technical performance, visual performance, service performance. One thing is for sure – we offer high performance solutions, and we will not crack that top five unless we do. I was at Tessera earlier today – I could feel a buzz that said 'We are somebody, we are a major player now.' There's plenty of work to be done but I am pleased that the brand has moved on so much since my comments at the interview!'

Rodolphe is very clear about where Bonar Floors is, where it is going and where it needs to be. And he's disarmingly frank too.

'Our Tessera Direct subset is all about a strong commitment to service. We've committed to punctuality to the extent that if we fail we give the customer 25% of the order value back. It's a huge logistical system and I'm pleased to say that after 10,000 orders we haven't failed once.'

'Our relationship with the trade is very good because our delivery record is proof of our commitment to them.'



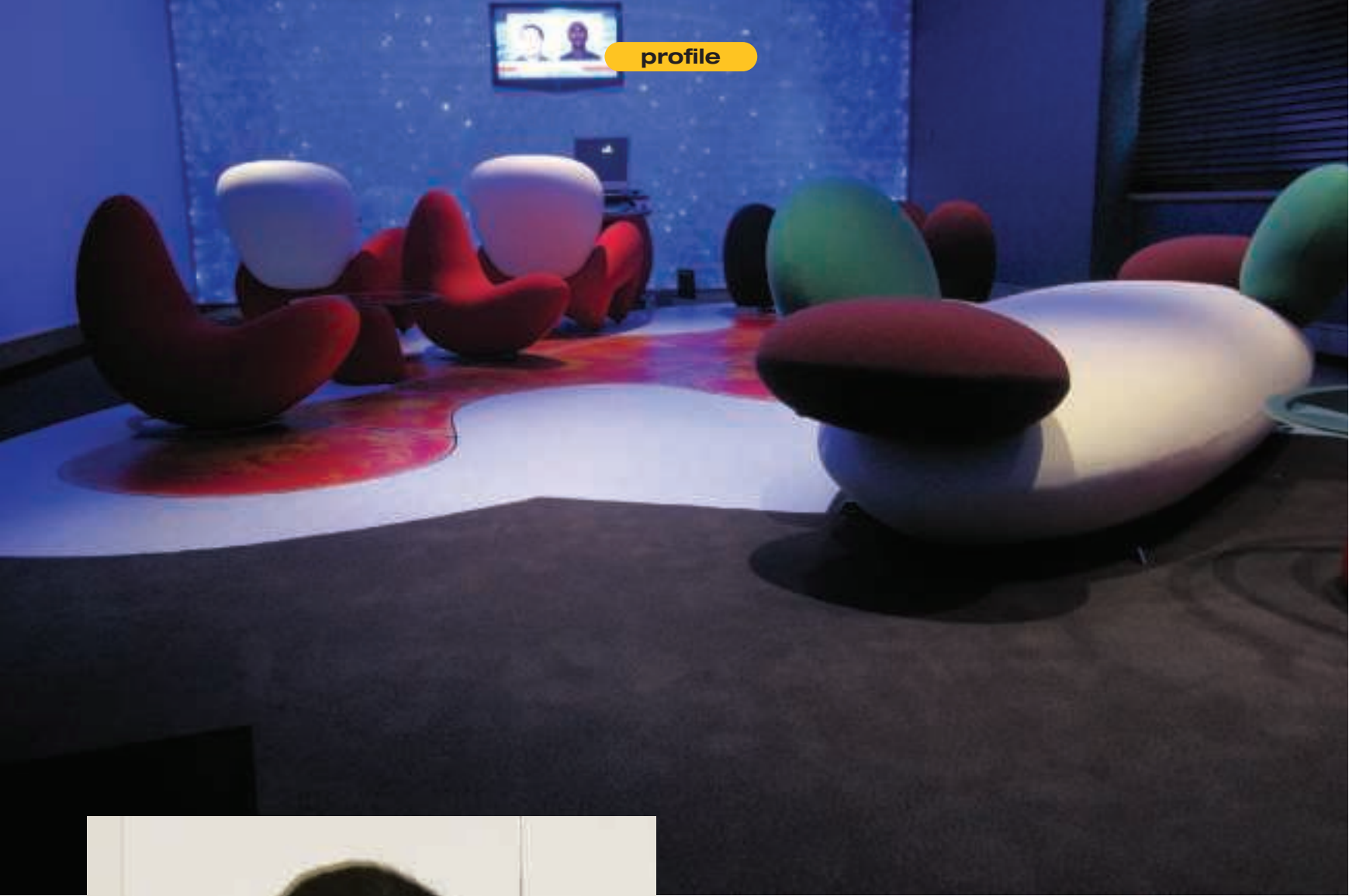
▶▶▶▶ helping with the entertaining. Actually, because of that time probably, cooking is my number one hobby – I'm really looking forward to a French cooking evening at Bonar Floors' (and formerly Westbond's) EC1 showroom!

'I did a business studies degree at ESCP in Paris, intending to stay in that city for three years but ended up staying for 18 years. I started working in a small IT company while I was still studying, and then after I graduated in 1986 stayed on for a couple of years until I thought I should be doing something better. I got into product marketing for Kazed, a company making good quality tailor made domestic furniture. I moved up with them, but wanted international experience – I have to say I've never felt French, I'm not restricted to a French view and I've always felt more European.'

'I joined Skandinavisk in France, which was an interesting time. The French company in the office furniture group was Vinco, for whom I was Marketing Manager, but what the job was about was seeking shared platforms across various European companies such as Gispén, President, Vario and others. I was headhunted by Steelcase to train up and take on a dealership. The mid to late '90's was seeing the end of the first cycle of dealership owners and Steelcase was quite exposed so they wanted a new generation of young fighters. But after a couple of years I was put into key account management, then in charge of seating, then everything else (systems and storage) for Europe. My final key role at Steelcase was the launch of Forward.'

'I think it's interesting that Mark Sefton brought me in as the one Head of Sales and Marketing – it's clearly about coherency. You can





▶▶▶▶▶ Our next step within the M25 is to grow from just professional supplier solutions to practical and nice solutions. We've made heavy investment in design on several fronts – such as our Sottsass collection – but we're not giving up our strong edge in practicality. We offer a very logical construction so that at the top of the pyramid, the high end, we can do bespoke and work with the A&D community. Meanwhile in the big middle part of the market we offer lots of choice for day to day business – for example we've expanded the Flotex offer from 200 part numbers to 1,000 in the past year. At the other extremity of the pyramid is our contractor driven business, which is all about availability. Price matters of course, but punctuality matters even more as was evidenced over the last years by our Customer Satisfaction Survey. It's about being the most reliable backed by commitment – pick from the standard range and if we're not there you get your money back.

'In my opinion the reality of our competitors' fast track programmes is not proven. As far as I'm concerned our options are simple: either we pretend and fail and do it right 95% of the time or we just do it right 99.9% of the time. It's interesting to look at it another way round: either accept failure five times out of 100 or grudgingly accept failure one time in a thousand. It's a challenge to perform, and it's radically different!

'We think our customers care more about punctuality than they do about leadtimes, so our medium term aim is to roll this out across our entire portfolio. Westbond fits into that logic for us going into the upper end of the market; backed by service we're going to build on those A&D relationships.'

We believe him too! ●