

# Boss Nova

There's one well-worn phrase that seems to sum up the furniture market right now - one step forward, two steps back. There have been some genuinely positive signs over the past few months - from product developments through to major project wins. Then, a tall timber falls; another established brand disappears into the clutches of the recession.



So how do you counter this? What is the ‘winning formula’? Well, whether we’re flying in a buoyant market, or working hard through recession, a combination of factors appears to be prevalent in the majority of successful companies; strong leadership, established, tight team, reliability, great service levels and a little bit of something else.

Sorry if ‘something else’ sounds a little vague, but it is the extra mile that often determines continued success in this market. This can take the shape of aggressive marketing, smart product development or well-considered acquisition – something different. Whatever the route, such a policy takes shrewdness, careful consideration and a lot of bottle.

So let’s take a look at the clues: bottle; different; aggression. Which company epitomises such a stance, such an eyes-forward approach? Many of you won’t be the slightest bit surprised that we’ve come to Boss Design’s Clerkenwell showspace to speak with supremo Brian Murray.

Whilst some have run for cover – and others didn’t even make it – Boss has continued forward, developing and introducing new products for both its Boss Design and Komac brands, whilst also debuting in Milan recently and being acquisitive.

‘This has been our biggest year,’ Brian proudly tells us. ‘We’re 25% up. We’ve achieved this through products, showroom and quality salespeople. I think the showroom has been brilliant for us, we’ve

got the best team of salespeople we’ve ever had and the products that we’ve introduced over the past couple of years are going great.

‘If you haven’t got the people, you haven’t got the business – it’s as simple as that. At the same time, you’ve got to have something worth selling – if you’re ‘me too’ right now, you’re screwed basically. We’ve introduced the Starr chair, for example, and it’s sold immediately. We’ve had instant orders. There are a lot of commodity products against it, but this is a well-designed, well-priced and well-positioned product. We wanted to introduce something

that sits better, looks better and costs less – that makes it difficult for architects to say no to it. I really believe this can take on the best stacking chairs in the market and beat them hands down.

‘People then look to see what’s backing a product up; in this case it’s Boss. So many companies are going ‘tits up’ that people aren’t looking at just the product, they’re also looking to see whether the company is going to be here next year to service that product and cover any guarantees.

‘The accountants are now getting involved in the buying process. There are millions of pounds worth of products out ▶▶▶▶▶▶





what am I doing?’ – I still knew that the spec we were building to could only do us good. And that’s proved to be the case.

‘If you’ve got capital and you’ve got resources, you need to spend it more in hard times than in good times. That’ll get you through. It’s easy to spend money when you’ve got a lot of it and business is good, but when you’re going through a hard time...

‘When times are hard you’ve got to try to be the best. You’ve got to get the best products out there. If you’ve got the wherewithal to fund that, then fund it. Don’t sit on your money, because your money will disappear. There are a lot of household names who did precisely that – and now their money’s gone. They haven’t invested in new products and new technology – they’ve just sat on their cash.

‘It is a question of balance though. We haven’t gone to the extent where we’ve gone to the bank and asked them to lend us a load of money. We’ve done our tooling out of our own profits. Sure, on a £4 million building spend like this you take out>>>



>>>there now that have no guarantees because the companies have gone under – you only have to look at the government sector.  
 ‘The big thing for me – because government spend is probably 25% of the market – is why it has been restricted to six companies. I think we’re probably the biggest and the best UK seating manufacturer now – we supply products for warships, we’ve got Queen’s Awards – and yet we’re not allowed to supply our own government. We have to go through one of these six chosen companies. The chairs we do eventually get to the government then have another margin on them because it makes it easier for the buyer to have a one-stop shop. The fact that it’s going to cost the

tax payer millions because people won’t place separate orders is neither here nor there. I think this will change though – it’s got to open up.’  
 We move on to talk about the Boss blueprint for beating the recession. ‘I’ve been in the trade since 1973 – with Boss from 1983 of course – and I’ve never experienced anything like the last two and half to three years. I’m very happy that we’ve come through it the way we have,’ Brian reflects. ‘We’ve put £4 million into this building – and for a company of our size, that’s a lot of money. Even when we were in the depths of the bank crash and the recession, I was outside here with a hard hat on and I never once thought ‘Oh God,

▶▶▶▶ your regular commercial mortgage. We've got a 150 year lease here!

'But, more than anything, I've been very pleased with the people we've acquired over the past two years and the team we've got in place now is pretty formidable.

'We try to make this business a nice place to work. We know our targets, we know what we want to do, but there's no reason why we can't achieve this in a nice, civilised way. We like people to come here and come to the factory and feel relaxed. There's no heavy sell.

'We've won a lot of new corporate clients – and I'm very proud of that. In the same way that you have to have new product, you have to find new customers. I think the two have gone hand-in-hand with us.'

Brian goes on to tell us that the company has expanded both its workforce and its business in export markets –

including, intriguingly, major successes in the likes of Mexico. Not that the former accountant's feet have left the ground. 'I'm a pessimist by nature,' Brian admits, 'and I'm still waiting for the edge of the cliff to arrive – but it's not arriving, so we'll carry on regardless.'

We spoke at the start about new product introductions – including the Starr stacking chair, the Apollo and Pegasus tables and the Komac Q task chair – and acquisitions. Whilst the former is, as Brian has already explained, incredibly significant to the continued success of the group (after all, we are now talking about the Boss Group of brands) it is the latter that especially intrigues.

'It's quite ironic,' Brian begins to tell us about the acquisition of Lyndon Design. 'I started Lyndon in 1982 with Richard Pugh and then I had this idea about starting another company – called Boss Design,



which would produce good, modern contract furniture – so I sold my shares in Lyndon and started Boss. Richard has built up a bespoke business over 25 years – he's just done The Dorchester and St Pancras – it's traditional, bespoke with a solid wood facility, so we can now do solid wood frames. So I did a deal with him.

'They're a really good niche company based in Cheltenham, but they didn't have any salespeople, apart from Richard. It's always a little bit difficult trying to run a business without any salespeople! Anyway, they now have 16 salespeople, because all the Boss people are selling that product. We've carved out a little area in the showroom for the product and I'm pleasantly surprised by the reaction. My people love it – it gives us a bigger spread.

'We're looking to build on this now. We can now do a good solid wood product and we'll continue to invest in the product and the machinery.'

Don't for one second go thinking that this was a business decision made from the heart – this is very much a head-screwed-on decision, aimed at increasing the Boss offering further still. And another example of how to tackle a difficult market.

'We want to compete with the best,' Brian reiterates. 'We want to grow the Lyndon brand – we're not just going to leave it there. We believe we can grow it significantly in its own right. It's been a word-of-mouth company, but we're going to give it as high a profile as we can. We've only just started.' ●