





*profile*

## Coleman's Mustard

Do you remember the Mix All Stars? That motley crew represented this august journal in an industry five-a-side competition last winter. And did OK. But just imagine if we'd had an ex semi-pro footballer in the team. This is the story of Terry Coleman, who, subject to negotiations (we haven't asked him yet) may be the final piece in the jigsaw for our expensively assembled squad.

# profile



There's a problem. Terry Coleman is the boss of Era Screens, who are in Hampshire. What's more he's not the kind of guy who clocks off mid-afternoon with a cheery wave and treks up the M3 for an evening kick-about in London. Just like Liverpool FC, we're going to have to make do with a committed, but ageing and injury prone group of players.

Terry Coleman's our kind of guy. Hard working, entrepreneurial, loyal, self-deprecating. So we asked him about how he got to where he is now.

'My dad was a labourer on building sites, mum was an auxiliary nurse. I was brought up in Market Lavington on the Salisbury Plain. At school I was only good at sport. I'm dyslexic, so school was tough – but any sport was fine by me. I played football to quite a high semi-pro standard. I remember getting a £50 bonus for playing in the semi-final of the Wiltshire Cup...but I blew it on the coach on the way home. I'm still no good at pontoon!

'I trained as a plumber, did my City and Guilds, and worked for YJ Lovell, the building firm. I suppose I got my chance when I came to the fore in a project the company organised where the apprentices had to build a house. The bosses must have spotted something in me and gave me a new position in a new division. I found myself supervising the manufacture of worktops for a new company called Office Kit. Set up by Michael Carson, Office Kit bought worksurfaces from us, metalwork from Bisley and so on. It was quite

a pressured environment, with some high profile blue chip clients like Guinness. After a while there was a bit of turmoil, some of the sales reps left and I was asked to go on site to deal with clients. The next thing I knew I was selling office furniture to them!

'I was good at it because I can talk to people. My theory is that it was all based on my limited skills at chatting up women! Maybe it was because I had two big sisters...

'The business got sold after a while and it was time for me to move on. I worked as a salesman for Project based in Bristol, and then briefly at Screenbase – which was where I developed my passion for screens. I left them to spend four years at Alan Cooper, which wasn't the happiest time of my life. I suppose it was my fault, vanity maybe, or naively believing what I was told. I joined as Sales Manager for the South with a carrot dangling that I would become the Regional Director. It didn't happen.

'Sometimes though, good things come out of bad. Towards the end of my time at Alan Cooper I hooked up with some likeminded individuals, and we started developing the idea of a new screen product – called Era.

'The concept was Duncan Kerr's – he was the one who drove it forward. The others in the group were me and Geoff Eagles, who had worked at Screenbase. The three of us got some venture capital investment and we set up in 1997 in the basic surroundings of a World War II Nissen hut. Those early years were hard but fun times →→→→

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▶▶▶we all worked together to make the screens...then we all worked together to sell them.

'We grew the business together from scratch. Due to the success of the company we were able to pay back the investor, which enabled us to change the structure and entice a full time Financial Director, Alan Langford, into the business. Geoff stayed for a few years and we bought Duncan out five years ago. Era Screens is now owned 50:50 by me and Alan.

'We're not the market leaders in our niche, and were not perfect, but our philosophy is always, always about service – and that means there's no secret ingredient, it's just about hard work in a good family atmosphere. There's a good culture of supporting each other in a small team. It's a happy atmosphere too, where we all look out for each other. There are about 45 of us, mostly locals. I feel a responsibility to them to keep the company healthy, stable and strong. I bought a fancy car in the spring of 2008 – then the recession hit later that year and we were forced to make some layoffs. I was too embarrassed to drive that fancy car then.

'I try to lead by example. More often than not I'm last to leave in the evening. I'm a straight talker, but I like to think I'm fair, rewarding success and taking you for who you are as a person. Loyalty is important to me.

'We visited Clerkenwell Design Week and it was a huge eye opener for us. We really want to address the A&D sector in the right way. For a company of our size – we'll do £3.5 million this year – we've already made a huge investment in design. For us that investment is mostly in people. Our business was traditionally dealer based, however, over recent years, is now closer to 50:50 between the dealers and OEMs. Obviously the OEM side to the business requires us to make our products compatible with their products, so that's an awful lot of bespoke design and development work. We've made a leap of faith with undergraduate designers still at university, who can develop with us. When they graduate, they actively want to come back us – and we're proud of that...it's that loyalty factor again. We've got loads of good design ideas coming through, and we're embracing the bigger picture, making sure we're getting the right messages out. There are lots of other things besides – our work on environmentally sound processes, for example. These are exciting times.

We're having this conversation in Smiths, obviously. Suddenly we're both aware that Torode's gaff had done its early evening transmogrification from coffee house to bar. So with a good glass of red each, the salt cellars and pepper pots were suddenly shifting all over the table. Were we planning new tactics for Anfield's mighty reds as they claw their way out of the relegation zone? Were we searching for a solution to the Mix All Stars unworkable 1-1-1-1 formation? No, Terry was enthusiastically talking about time spent relaxing at home with his wife Clare, their two beautiful children Thomas (12) and Beth (7) plus Shadow the Golden Retriever and a long term dream of crossing the Med with them.

'That's the idea,' he grinned. So we decided not to mention the Mix All Stars five a side team after all ●