

# Innovating his way through the current recession

Richard Vass of Burland Technology Solutions has two new products ready for market. He tells **Kate McNally** innovation is the best way to survive a tough trading climate

RICHARD Vass, the high end socket specialist, is no stranger to trading through difficult times. In a previous venture, two weeks after he completed a merger with a major manufacturer to take the international power distribution market by storm, two planes flew into the Twin Towers. Everything stalled for the best part of a year, but the merged company survived and went on to thrive before being sold for a tidy sum.

This time last year Richard was in the early throes of getting his latest power distribution – or socket – company, Burland Technology Solutions in Claydon, off the ground. Before the year was out, the UK was entering its worst economic cycle in decades. It could be argued that again his timing wasn't great.

But Richard remains bullish, undoubtedly buoyed by an excellent first year trading which saw turnover reach just shy of £1.2 million, well above the £800,000 target. They took a couple of minor bad debt hits towards the end of year, he admits, but generally the ethos of building excellent client relationships and keeping a tight control on credit resulted in a very successful start.

Burland deals in sockets that provide high levels of power and security and streamline connectivity that give benefits in terms of cost savings, energy savings and office safety. Primarily, they are attractive to large corporate and banking customers with massive technology use in offices across the globe, but they can also make valuable savings for SMEs.

Richard is cautious about what lies ahead, especially as one of his main target markets – the banking sector – continues to struggle to get back on its feet. However, he says there are a number of “very significant projects” on the cards which, if they happen, will mean a second busy year for the company. And if they don't all come through and turnover is half that of the first year, he says “we're fine, we've got an income”.

He is also upbeat because Burland currently has two new products, currently being tested in the market.

The first, the BPS1 Eco Save Unit, is a simple product that works on a passive infrared (PIR) sensor system that automatically turns off electrical equipment at a work station when the user moves away.

“The PIR sits under the desk and can tell if you're here. You can adjust it to react after a minute or half an hour, whatever you want,” explains Richard. “So if I disappear for more than a minute, everything that is plugged into the unit – monitors, chargers, any lights – just turns off



**POWERING ON:** Richard Vass founder of Burland Technology Solutions Ltd. at Claydon Business Park. Photo: OWEN HINES

and the minute I sit down again it all comes back on exactly as I left it. There's no restarting, no rebooting because the computer stays on at all times, you don't mess with that.”

He says the unit is ideal for companies where people are working with two or more screens, with the payback in terms of energy and cost savings at an optimum for trading floors. Prototypes are currently out in the market and the response has been “universally great” says Richard, but, he adds, there may be a wait before companies will commit to purchase.

“The timing is lousy because six to eight months ago people were terribly worried about their carbon footprint and willing to invest vast amounts of money in it. Right now people are more worried about liquidity than their carbon footprint. Even so, forget all the great and good things about

carbon footprint, in straightforward pounds, shillings and pence return, for the right business it's quite quick.”

The second product is one he is very excited about. Again it is a simple concept, but one that can make a huge difference to businesses. It is a locking version of the main socket at the back of computers.

“In data centres, it's the standard international socket – you use the same one everywhere, and there's another one with a higher rating for higher power. It is universal but that socket is notoriously unreliable. The plugs fall out a lot and if you go into reliability sensitive areas, such as medical and data centres, you can't afford that,” explains Richard.

“We have patented a locking device that once the plug is pushed in it, it won't pull out unless you push the

button in the socket. It's a radically simple idea but it's absolutely needed.”

Prototypes are about to go out around the world. Richard hopes to get end users to endorse the locking socket, before taking it to manufacturers to buy from him and sell as one of their subcomponents. He is also in the process of getting a new international certification for the product which he describes as a long and expensive process.

“It's been frustrating because I've had the idea and known it will work for a while now but certification takes forever, the whole design and prototype process takes forever and we just want to get it into the marketplace.”

Still, he is on the cusp now with both the new

products, which is good, because Richard also believes that innovation is important in times of recession.

“My top tip for survival in recession is that you've got to be doing something different. Just doing the same old thing is tough because other people are doing the same old thing and unfortunately when people get desperate they do stupid things on pricing and that's a recipe for disaster.”

“So you have to differentiate to get out of the quagmire and the only way to do that is to bring out new products and innovation. It gives you something to talk about, a reason to exist over and above everybody else, and hopefully people will want to buy lots of them – it's all about getting through to the other side.”

Richard's other tip for survival is to stick to your guns. He says there are many people lining up to give advice when you start a business and when the economy is tough, and while some of it is good advice, you need to use your own knowledge and intuition to filter it.

“One of the singularly smartest things we did last year was to say no to everyone who told us that too much stock is bad – stock's a bad word, it's not good for the numbers,” he says. “But if you're about customer service, giving people what they want when they want it to give your company the edge, then you need to have the stock. And when it comes to margins, the price for something needed tomorrow that will be delivered tomorrow is very different. So we invested hugely in stock and we fairly much got it right.”

“It may sound a little arrogant, but you have to remember why you're in this seat. I imagine much younger people at this stage might panic but I would say stick to your guns, filter the advice, and don't panic.”

It worked for Richard before, and it worked for him last year, so perhaps his advice constitutes the kind that's worth taking on board.

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