

It's real socket science

Richard Vass is not the man they think he is at home, oh no, no, no. He's a socket man.... He talks to **Kate McNally** about the business of power distribution

LIKE many entrepreneurs, Richard Vass built a business, sold it for a nice enough cash offer (he'd have liked more but recognised the value of a bird in the hand) and is now doing it all over again. For some, it seems, launching a new business is in the blood. Besides, he says, he's not old enough to "pack it in".

His business is power distribution or, put more simply, sockets. Not the straightforward sockets you can pick up in your local DIY centre. These, he says, could provide neither the high levels of power nor the high levels of reliability required in the workplace.

His sockets provide the power, the security and a streamline connectivity that has benefits in terms of cost savings, energy savings and office safety.

Richard designed the first products about 15 years ago now when he set up Burland Solutions first time around. (He has been able to keep the Burland name for his latest foray, with the new company called Burland Technology Solutions.) Having worked in the office furniture industry for more than a decade, he noticed how poorly the electrical element in offices was serviced. Wires were everywhere, coming out of floors, ceilings, he says, and as offices became more and more IT intensive, the situation grew worse.

"So I designed the Burland Box. It would sit on a desk grouping of up to eight desks, so instead of all these floor boxes and multiple wires, you would just have one hole through which came one high powered cable and from that point it's all what I used to term 'above floor localised distribution'.

"In other words, you use the cable management in the furniture to distribute cables around but you only connect to the building once. That gives very significant savings in terms of material and labour, and in addition it has a massive impact on a company's carbon footprint."

Richard doesn't have an engineering background, but admits to being "a bit of a techie" on the quiet. He used to build radios and was part of the electronics club at school.

"And a lot of it isn't rocket science. It's application," he points out. "You don't need to be an electronics engineer but it helps if you know how to wire a plug – I sit somewhere between those two. It's about seeing a need and understanding enough about it that you can identify with the problem and know how to fix it."

"As I used to say to our sales teams, people don't buy drills because they love them. They need a hole, that's why they buy a drill."

Richard's principal role in the business of sockets has always been sales and marketing. Along his previous socket journey, he teamed up with a company called Aphel, which was Burland's main product supplier. Aphel was about to launch a product it had designed for the office projects market, he explains, but they were principally a manufacturer



POWERING THE BUSINESS: Richard Vass, founder of Burland Technology Solutions Ltd. at Claydon Business Park
Photo: OWEN HINES

without significant sales and marketing expertise. At this stage, Burland accounted for about a third of Aphel's turnover and he and Aphel's owner regularly talked about getting together but would stall when it came to the worth of each company.

"Eventually we decided we had to do it 50-50. The accountants and lawyers said no but we had a specific goal to build the business up over five years and sell it, so in our minds if there was a decision to be made there would only ever be one right way to do it to achieve that goal. That concept worked very well."

Two weeks after they sealed the merger deal, 9/11 happened.

"Post 9/11 nothing was ever cancelled, people just said they were

delaying orders a week or two. So we kept running at double capacity for nearly six months before cutting ourselves down to the size we needed to be. All the orders on the cards did happen but about 12 months later. It was a huge mistake – running at double capacity is money down the drain. But we learnt the lesson and decided that we were not allowed to lose money two months running. You cut early and if it is a glitch then you have to rehire which is expensive, but you stay in control."

Within a year the merged company, known as Aphel but with the socket products retaining the Burland brand name, began to recover and within 18 months it was enjoying significant growth. The two directors were

grooming the business for sale a few years down the line when one of their customers – a company called Eaton – made the cash offer that the pair accepted.

Richard left Eaton to start up again on his own with the company's blessing. Effectively the more business Richard's company secures, the more manufacturing orders he puts their way. Eaton focuses more on power distribution in the data centre market anyway – the huge data warehouses housing major servers – and was looking to grow its share in the office projects market.

"They wanted me to rebuild the office projects side, which is the area where I really have the expertise," he explains.

"Their approach is always to go through channels so I would have had to go out and find appropriate partners, train them up and if they were successful they would buy products from Eaton. I felt the path of least resistance was for me to be that channel, to go out and work at what I had done before and continue to buy from Eaton – it was a win-win."

He doesn't say it exactly, but there is more than a hint that he knew he wasn't cut out for big corporate life. Eaton wasn't surprised when he suggested the move, he says, but there's a lot of mutual respect.

So second time around, the principles remain the same. Routes to market are through electrical contractors, both smaller ones fitting out a medical practice for example, and larger ones who do the major fit-outs in large company buildings, plus in some cases targeting the end user.

The Burland brand has a good reputation in the industry and Richard has added some impressive names to the client portfolio over the years, including Citigroup (his longest-standing customer), Ernst & Young and Barclays Capital.

"For those sorts of international clients, we do work all over the world for them because the systems do translate. When Barclays Capital had a major expansion a few years ago, we were doing jobs in South Africa, Hong Kong, Singapore and Bahrain."

Richards sees mainland Europe and Scandinavia as a major opportunity for Burland's growth. He believes certain countries are behind the times in terms of power distribution and if he develops local distribution partnerships in order to overcome what he calls the "parochial nature" of mainland Europeans who prefer to do business with their own, then he can tap into significant business.

Being based in Suffolk is ideal for European travel, he says.

"I'm having a love affair with Norwich airport and I have residency at Schiphol airport in Amsterdam. It's 45 minutes to Norwich airport. I can get there five minutes before their close the gate, within 15 minutes I'm on the airplane and 40 minutes later I'm in Schiphol. I can go anywhere in the world from there. I don't need to go near London."

He is also keen to develop business locally where possible.

"If I could start establishing relationships with contractors, distributors and end users, I'd be delighted. My ideal would be to get as much business as I could out of the local area."

Richard's long-term goal is to build Burland Technology Solutions up into a £3million business, as he did previously, and hopefully double that figure if his European aspirations go to plan.

The product works for all size of business, he says, because it operates like a lego set in that it can be configured to suit all needs. And he makes no apology for the humble socket which, he says, is a critical piece of equipment in any office.

"I'm a socket salesman and it doesn't get much more exciting than that. But it's really important because all these flashy people who've got big banks probably couldn't do their jobs if the power distribution isn't reliable. The next time they have a power quality issue or a connectivity issue, they might think about the socket salesman because if they had talked to him the problem might never have happened."