



Designing Demand | Case Study | Neptune Outdoor Furniture

## Traditional outdoor seat design gets a lucrative modern twist

### Background

Neptune was launched in 1963 to supply paving and swimming pools. However, after being invited by Southampton City Council to manufacture an outdoor seat Neptune found a whole new market making heavy-duty urban furniture. In 1982 the business was split and the swimming pool side was sold off. The furniture business was developed further and in 1992 changed its name to Neptune Outdoor Furniture to reflect the nature of the business.

### The challenge

While a programme of expansion and diversification proved successful, with Neptune's products being used by local authorities, in schools, parks and playgrounds, the company had drifted away from its original customer base. The directors wanted to reclaim Neptune's share of more prominent markets such as town centres, hotels and shopping malls by targeting design-led clientele like developers, architects and local authorities looking for a modern offering.

### The response

The initial task was envisaged as a re-design of the company brochure and a re-branding exercise, but this developed into a decision to manufacture a new, more prestigious product and devise a separate marketing and sales campaign targeted at the potential customer base.

### The outcome

The result is an innovative, more elegant seat called CERRO – together with a matching bench – that herald the next generation of outdoor seating for Neptune. The premium quality and aesthetics of the new seat also make it appropriate for the more affluent private sector.

“We’re very excited about this new premium product which is a crucial part of Neptune’s future strategic development.”

## New generation of outdoor furniture targets wider market

When you've been producing successful products for many years it's easy to slip into a rut and even slightly lose your way. Recognising that is half the battle – then comes the task of getting back on track.

Launched in 1963 as a specialist in paving and swimming pools, Neptune diversified into street furniture after being invited by Southampton City Council to manufacture a public seat. The resulting 'Southampton Seat', with its hardwood slatted seats and aggregate base which is concreted into the ground, has been one of Neptune's best-selling lines. In 1982 the company was divided and, while the swimming pool side of the business was later sold, Neptune Outdoor Furniture embarked on a programme of expansion, adding park benches, planters, commercial outdoor seating, litter bins, tree seats, picnic tables and bollards to its product base. All items are traditional and conservative and designed to be fixed into place for extra strength and security.

However, while 'traditional and conservative' is exactly what appeals to many of Neptune's customers, by 2007 sales and technical director Richard Jastrzebski saw the potential for expanding the customer base.

"I realised that our original market had been somewhat neglected so I approached the South East Manufacturing Advisory Service (MAS) to see how they might help us recapture our share of the large council contracts," he said. "I also wanted to infiltrate the growing hotel and shopping mall market."

MAS provided support for a re-branding exercise and subsequently introduced Richard to Designing Demand, a programme developed by the Design Council, funded by SEEDA and delivered by Business Link. The programme aims to help businesses realise the potential of design to drive competitiveness and improve performance, as well as providing solutions for design in product, brand, and business processes.

Further discussions led to the conclusion that a new, more contemporary range of products would hold greater appeal for developers, architects, specifiers and local authorities seeking a more stylish product.

Once Richard had signed up to the Designing Demand programme he met James Duguid, the design associate who was to oversee the design and development of the prototype for a new premium-range outdoor seat.

From a shortlist provided by James, Richard chose Hampshire-based product design and development consultancy Rodd which has over two decades of design experience, an international client base, plus a good understanding of manufacturing processes and material specification. Richard was particularly impressed by Rodd's work with Transport for London and its furniture design for the Portsmouth Millennium Harbour Renaissance.

The award-winning company's managing director Ben Davies and designer Adam Eager have now completed the design of the first of Neptune's next generation of urban furniture.

Richard expects the new product to be the first of many in an innovative range that will sell by design excellence and open up another business line for the company. He anticipates the current turnover of £410,000 will rise by around 15% within two years and expects to increase the workforce from seven to nine.

"The quality and aesthetics of this seat have the potential to open a completely new private sector-based market to Neptune. With this in mind James has been helping us devise a separate marketing and sales approach to launch the new product," he said.

Jackie Walker, regional programme manager at Business Link for Designing Demand in the South East, is full of praise for Neptune's positive approach.

She said: "This is a superb example of a capable and dynamic small British company striving to improve and grow rather than merely resting on its laurels. Neptune recognised the need to be proactive and was prepared to take advice on the strategic, effective use of design in its quest for increased success. With research showing that money spent on design measurably increases turnover, this is clearly a sound move."



For more information about the Designing Demand programme contact [design@businesslinksoutheast.co.uk](mailto:design@businesslinksoutheast.co.uk) or visit [www.designingdemand.org.uk](http://www.designingdemand.org.uk)

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