



Designing Demand | Case Study | Southsea Deckchairs

Revolutionary deckchair design is an open and shut case

Background

Since launching Southsea Deckchairs in 1991 Stephen Davies, together with his wife Roma, has built up a highly successful company selling a range of high-quality traditional deckchairs and other outdoor furniture.

The challenge

Following the last-minute cancellation of an order by a French company on safety grounds, Southsea Deckchairs needed to produce a lockable deckchair to ensure compliance with EU regulations while not compromising the strength of the product or its stacking capability.

The response

A design company was employed to devise a locking mechanism that would improve the safety of the traditional deckchair without changing the build quality or aesthetics. Three other areas where design expertise could help grow the business were also identified.

The outcome

The design brief has been fully met with the revolutionary DeckLock, a lift and slide system positioned inside the rear legs of the traditional deckchair. Additional design projects include revamping the corporate logo, producing a table to complement the outdoor chairs and a deckchair for the 21st century.

“ The design doesn't alter the strength or compromise our original design in any way... ”

'Result shows importance of design on profitability'

Stephen Davies stumbled across his 'ideal job' by accident. While at university he did a summer stint as a deckchair attendant and enjoyed it so much that when the local council put the running of the seafront's deckchair operation up for tender, he didn't hesitate to apply.

After he won the contract the council helped him find premises, install power and get started by selling him two old deckchair manufacturing machines – although it took him three weeks to complete his first chair.

His next step was to pitch for business to other local authorities and he got his first big break with a contract from Torbay Council for 1,100 deckchairs.

Since 1991 he and his wife Roma have built up a very successful business, manufacturing and selling a complete range of high-quality outdoor furniture from the traditional deckchair to modern variations like the two-seater 'Wide Boy'.

They have three well-defined marketplaces – the contract market supplying local councils, a corporate market supplying branded chairs for corporate events and a consumer market through mainly smaller retailers.

A meeting with Business Link in April 2008 gave the operation a significant boost, leading to a doubling of profits by April 2009. Business adviser Stephen Blamire provided a number of services, including Train to Gain and helping Southsea Deckchairs apply for the UKTI Passport to Export programme – Roma has recently finished the course.

However, the biggest challenge to the company's export potential was highlighted by the eleventh-hour cancellation of the contract with a French company, as Stephen Davies explains.

"They pulled out at the very last minute, explaining that our deckchairs weren't legal in France because they didn't meet EU safety standards. The problem was that traditional deckchairs don't lock in the open position. Department stores do sell versions with a catch but this compromises the original design as well as the strength of the product. What's more, the catch prevents stacking and, as any deckchair attendant knows, that's a very serious flaw."

Stephen Blamire came to the rescue by introducing Southsea Deckchairs to Designing Demand, the programme developed by the Design Council, funded by SEEDA and delivered by Business Link. The initiative helps businesses to increase competitiveness, performance and profitability through improved design.

After a one-day workshop that demonstrates the benefits of good design, Designing Demand provides intensive, bespoke services from industry experts to businesses with specific design issues.

Working with James Duguid, the Design Associate who was to oversee the design and prototyping of the new integrated lock, Southsea Deckchairs identified three other areas where design expertise could help grow the business apart from the all-important locking device for the traditional deckchair. These include the company's logo, a table to complement its outdoor chairs and a deckchair for the 21st century.

"We met three product design companies introduced to us by Designing Demand," says Stephen Davies. "They were all impressive but Stefan Knox from Bang Creations in Haslemere immediately felt right. He was all over the chair, turning it upside down, examining it from every angle and sitting in it. It was clear he shared our passion for the product.

"The fact that Stefan is local and a small business like us meant that Bang Creations was a good fit – just as well because we set a very demanding brief for the locking device."

What Bang came up with is the DeckLock, a lift and slide system that is positioned inside the rear legs of a traditional deckchair to lock it in the open position.

Stephen is delighted. "The design doesn't alter the strength or compromise our original design in any way," he said. "And the fact that it's located inside the rear legs means it's integrated into the frame as much as possible. By complying with EU health & safety regulations we'll widen our potential market as well as increasing the general appeal of our products."

Roma and Stephen launched the DeckLock at Solex (Summer Outdoor Living Exhibition) in Telford in July to great industry interest.

Jackie Walker, regional programme manager for Designing Demand in the South East, is impressed by the way in which the design issues have been addressed.

"Making changes to a design icon is a huge challenge," she said. "But this is an excellent example of a dynamic small British company striving to grow and prepared to take advice and be proactive in order to succeed. By producing the first truly safe traditional deckchair the company will reap the rewards of its greater focus on the importance of design on profitability."

For more information about the Designing Demand programme contact design@businesslinksoutheast.co.uk or visit www.designingdemand.org.uk

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