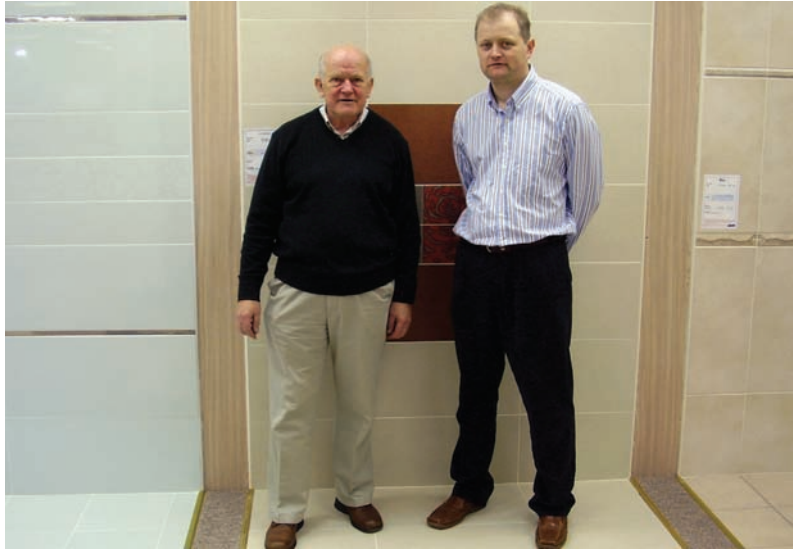


Thinking **big**

Tile Trend is enlarging its stores and improving displays to allow customers to get a better idea of the range of tiles available, as Dennis Flower reports



The display of tiling and natural stone designs in the UK has been placed centre stage as demand increases from both public and contract sectors. Larger formats and advances in the recreation of natural materials have called for more imaginative presentation to illustrate their true potential.

Phillip and David Battin are upgrading showrooms to allow tiles to be displayed to better effect

One retailer which has risen to the challenge is Tile Trend. Run by father and son team Phillip and David Battin, the chain's ethos is to create displays with sufficient space to show the potential of each design.

The company maintains that a large showroom is now essential to show the various options available and following the blueprint of its Stourbridge headquarters, its Nottingham store has been upgraded and doubled in size to provide a 4,000sqft display area. In addition to large displays, sliding book units are also used, sourced from Cinca, in sizes up to 2sqm. This allows the company to display every design in stock. Next in line for upgrading is the Llandudno showroom, as funds allow.

This will not be long it seems. Two new showrooms have been added to the six branches that already span the Midlands and north of England. And at the time of TileUK's visit, sales were up by 25% over the same period in 2006, showing the rewards for their efforts.

Significantly, the business notes a marked increase for larger orders. Recently, for example, one customer in Worcester purchased 140sqm of tiles to cover the entire ground floor of his house.

'The size of orders have changed,' says Phillip Battin. 'They've grown from an average of, say, five metres to people ordering 80 to 100sqm. This was unheard of a few years ago.

'Part of this is due to the popularity of laminate flooring.



Company genesis

1999 United Tile sold to Jewsons, then to Saint Gobain. Name changed to Ceramic Tile Centres, with five outlets. Nine months later, these went into liquidation showing losses of £250,000 per annum.

2000 Company purchased by Phillip Battin and renamed Tile Trend.

2002 Worcester store opens, the company's first greenfield development.

Tile Trend now has eight stores in Stourbridge, Birkenhead, Chester, Llandudno, Nottingham, Lincoln, Worcester and Shrewsbury.

RETAILREPORT



The stores use display boards and sliding units

People have become used to hard flooring and then found that ceramics are more hard wearing and easy to maintain than wood or laminate.

'I think this is a trend that will continue to grow. Three or four people spent £10,000 on tiles last year.'

The company also finds that the use of tiles has spread from consumers' kitchens to their bathrooms. Kitchens have long been regarded as an area that needs to be regularly updated and home owners are now far more willing to invest in their bathrooms.

The property development market has provided another area of growth for Tile Trend. A marina development in south Wales, for example, resulted in orders of £.25m over two years for the company, with growing potential also in evidence within the house building sector.

Having concentrated on supplying the upper end of the market, the Everyday Living range has been introduced to

provide customers with a cheaper alternative and to compete with the large DIY outlets, priced at £17sqm.

'We've had a good response to the range and will continue to monitor the results,' says David Battin. 'We'll see if we made the right decision in six or 12 months' time.'

Display units have come into play for the rebranding of Tile Trend's range of white tiles which are now shown with decors and trims. Each branch creates its own display boards as new stock arrives.

Also growing in popularity is for polished porcelain. David Battin describes the Stourbridge area as 'a little more rural in its outlook than Birmingham, Manchester and London', but even there customers are more willing to consider porcelain.

'We've seen more demand for rectified tiles as well,' he continues. Fixers have got used to working with them and technical improvements have made them flatter and easier to work with, he says.

Price is another factor in porcelain's growth, says Battin, as the cost has become closer to that of ceramics. The decision to purchase, however, is often not a quick one. 'This type of customer usually wants a quality product and sometimes take up to six months to decide,' says Battin. 'This means we have to have faith in our decisions and allow time for our ranges to show results.'

'Between 70% and 80% of the people we deal with have a fixed idea of what they want and our stores allow them to see what the tiles will look like when they're installed.'

Tile Trend aims to deliver products within 72 hours. Between two or three months' of stock are held at either the Stourbridge or Birkenhead facilities. The former has capacity



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Tile Trend sources from just 10 suppliers and changes its stock regularly to keep up with trends



to store 400 pallets and the latter 800, amounting to a £500,000 stockholding at any one time.

Its buying operations have also been consolidated, reducing from 25 suppliers to a current total of 10. Dealing with fewer factories in Italy, Spain and Portugal has resulted in more meaningful relationships through more regular contact.

Collections are made at intervals of between seven and 10 days from each factory. This allows the company to refresh its stock on a regular basis and keep pace with the latest trends.

'We work very closely with the factories and we're dealing with the top people now,' says David Battin. 'They've been

flexible, which has helped us a great deal. They're always willing to provide sample material.'

Tile Trend is celebrating success in the recent TTA awards, where its Luce di Carrara marble was judged to be the best natural product. This is supplied to the company on an exclusive basis within the UK and includes nine different whites in seven standard sizes.

David Battin has taken control of the buying operation with the blessing of his father. 'By having one person in control of the buying keeps it in focus,' says Phillip Battin. 'If too many people are involved it gets too complicated and you need to keep the buying simple.'

Adhesives provide further valuable add-ons to turnover. This year the company sold £60,000 worth in just one month.

It works with BAL and Mapei and makes full use of the technical support provided by each supplier. Tile Trend has been pleased to note the improvements in these products and regards them as much better than the options available two years ago.

A wetroom display has been set up in the Stourbridge showroom, in the form of a work in progress, to show the various components used and explain the benefits of correct installation.

The company estimates that it receives around 12 complaints from customers each year. These are dealt with promptly, involving a site visit by either David or Phillip Battin.

'We usually find that problems are caused by improper use,' says Philip Battin, 'but we document what went on and try to resolve things as soon as possible.'

All orders are checked before dispatch and advisory leaflets are provided for customers' benefit.

Such attention to detail combined with imaginative display have created a cornerstone for Tile Trend's development and provide scope for continued growth in the years to come.