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KEVIN WOOLERTON TAKES US ON HIS JOURNEY ACROSS THREE CONTINENTS WITH PPG – A YOUNG COLOUR CHEMIST IN THE UK WHO BECAME THE ARCHITECT OF THE REJUVENATION OF PPG AUSTRALIA’S REFINISH BRANDS. THE HIGHLIGHT OF HIS CAREER MAY SURPRISE YOU.

NCR: I understand you’ve just reached a milestone in the organisation. Would you take us back to where it all began?

KW: When I finished my degree in colour chemistry in Bradford in the UK in 1983, I began my career with International Paint, who had combined a number of non-core businesses onto one site, which they sold to PPG in 1985. I was initially doing development work, bench chemistry and formulating paints, before moving into colour, colour management and supervising the colour-matching lab. In essence, I’ve just ticked over 35 years with the group.

NCR: I believe you also spent time in Europe?

KW: At the time there was a collection of unconnected acquisitions that included Ivi in Italy, Lory in Spain, Corona in France, Wolfing in Germany and, of course, International Paint in

the UK, all of whom operated independently with little coordination or commonality. PPG pulled them together, appointed my boss to head up what became PPG Europe and so we established a European technical team, built a common product platform based on French technology and so, in 1988, I moved to Saultain in northern France.

NCR: What was the outcome of this move to France?

KW: Deltron! Our global refinish system has its origins in Corona’s technology, Corostar, which became the starting point of the Deltron platform. The project included scaling up the product line, coordinating production between three plants, ensuring quality and consistency, doing some technical service work, and securing OEM approvals. I often found myself the link between the

American and French teams and it was even suggested that I was translating “English into English” to clarify many potential misunderstandings.

We also hosted customers from around Europe as this was an impressive facility that included a training centre with our own accommodation and restaurant facilities.

Initially, Deltron was the European product offering that was ultimately rolled out globally. Of course, the product today bears no resemblance to what was in the can back in the late 1980s.

We thoroughly enjoyed our ten years in Saultain and made some very good friends – not bad for an Englishman living in France!

NCR: So, how did you come to be in Australia?

KW: An opportunity arose with the acquisition of Orica’s technical business and I was one of the ex-pat team sent out to facilitate the integration in late 1998. This was my first arrival – but we’ll get to that. I was appointed Chief Technical Officer, a cross-SBU function that was designed to make the relevant connections between the local teams and their counterparts in Europe and the US. I then became involved in the separation of our IT system from the Orica system and was effectively the IT Manager for a short time. As the need for a Chief Technical Officer wound down, I found myself back in the refinish business unit.

NCR: But you didn’t stay in Australia?

KW: After five years an opportunity arose in the USA, and so we moved



yet again, this time to Strongsville, a suburb of Cleveland Ohio, which was the decision-making hub for PPG's product and brands. I worked on global product platforms and also in global colour, all in the refinish business unit. We lived not far from Lake Eire, which was wonderful in summer and vicious in winter.

Another five years went by and we relocated to the Coatings Innovations Centre in Allison Park, north of Pittsburgh, where I ran the Colour Science group and worked on two key projects: nano-encapsulation of pigments to achieve extreme colour effects and liquid colour measurement, measuring colour from samples directly off the mill using optical techniques. Both projects were very different, very interesting, and provided their own challenges.

NCR: So, what brought you back to Australia?

KW: When we went to the US, my son stayed here to continue his studies at Monash University and we only saw each other twice a year. After seven years away, we decided to "remake" the family and so we went through the entire immigration process once again. At the same time, I was fortunate enough to get a call from Paul [Galea] that there was an opportunity at Clayton, but before I could get here, I was asked to stop off in Adelaide for a year!

NCR: Why Adelaide?

KW: It had been several years since the Protec acquisition and PPG had left it to run relatively independently, but the time had come to integrate the business. We addressed various issues, particularly migrating the Protec IT system onto PPG's Oracle system, and also identified some challenges within the product portfolio.

NCR: So, when did you finally get to Clayton?

KW: The role was initially a product role that had expanded to include technical marketing by the time I arrived. The role was initially to address the Protec product range that had been effectively untouched since the acquisition. One of Protec's key strengths was: "if we don't have it, we

will develop it". This responsiveness has many advantages, but of course led to a blow-out in the number of SKUs on the system, many of which had been superseded.

We took a "clean sheet" approach and cleaned up the range and simplified the branding. Today, I don't think we have anything in the range that we had six years ago.

NCR: How did you roll it out?

KW: We began with information sessions for our distributors, although initially they were met with some scepticism from several of them. However, we did what we said we would do, which went a long way to establishing the trust.

The second phase was rolled out to a more "receptive audience", even though we were relaunching the entire tint system, the spectro, and the colour software.

By the time we moved on to phase three and phase four, we were all on the same page and the process had become seamless.

NCR: Let me take you back. You went to the USA in 1993 and returned in 2000. What was the most significant change in the Australian market in those seven years?

KW: Waterborne – but let me explain.

In the mid-1980s, prior to PPG's acquisition, Autocolour launched Aquabase, and although it was somewhat more difficult to use than the solvent-borne systems, it did enhance their ability to support the global OEMs' colour palettes, a shortcoming of the local 2K [solvent borne] systems.

Following the acquisition, we launched Deltron, which allowed us to support the global OEMs' colour palettes, due to its international roots, and the environmental benefits of waterborne were just not enough to make it sustainable at that time.

However, by the

time I returned in 2000, about one-third of our basecoat sales were Envirobase, which I knew all about from my global role in the USA!

NCR: I also believe that PPG Australia changed the way that a spectro is used in the repair process. Could you explain?

KW: The typical approach was "if all else fails, try the spectro". We turned that on its head and taught our customers how to do it properly. In short, if the spectro reading was within certain parameters, don't waste time spraying a card, just spray the car. If it's within a broader range, do spray out or even blend the panel and if it's too far away – stop and seek advice.



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Combined with the Envirobase system, it became a very powerful tool indeed.

NCR: So, what is the team working on as we speak?

KW: The Light Industrial Coatings (LIC) range was the next cab off the rank. It has an enormous product range and the project is still very much a work in progress. We have a clear plan and the customers now know where we are going. We not only changed the product line, but we changed the name of the entire business to Commercial Performance Coatings. Our customers have a much clearer understanding of our value proposition – we are well and truly on the right road.

NCR: I also believe you've done some work on the Deltron brand.

KW: Deltron has been around since the 1980s and has undergone some significant changes in the can and it's better than it has ever been. However, as we believed in the strength of the reliability and consistency of the brand, the imaging remained effectively untouched. It really was time to refresh the brand and modernise the look and feel, whilst simultaneously introducing some new technology.

Our team here in Australia worked with the global and European teams to design and champion the new look Deltron, which we developed entirely in-house. With input from global and Europe we did all the design work here in Clayton, which also streamlined the entire process and we had global agreement within the first six months.

We did the roadshow and launched the new brand across Australia and New Zealand only last year and, of course, every newly manufactured product is now in the new look.

NCR: But it was a bit different with the Vibrance brand?

KW: The Vibrance brand and branding was designed in the US many years ago, which, of course, is the familiar flames in the heart of the Vibrance logo. This was recently restyled to the current "black-look", which we also launched last year with a new range of primers, clears, hardeners and thinners. The objective was to create a freestanding brand rather than a

product range within the Deltron or Envirobase brand. Since then, it really has taken off.

NCR: It appears you have led a "brand transformation" since you've been back in Australia?

KW: It's fair to say that with Protec, CPC and, most recently, the premium collision business, our team has indeed transformed the look and feel of our range. It's been a very exciting and creative time and, of course, there is still lots to do. We are always looking for ways to further develop our product offering



NCR: So, how does the market leader protect its share in the current climate?

KW: The answer for us is to ensure we work smarter. Our mantra for many years has been to ensure our customers are successful, because if they are, then we too will be successful. One way to measure this is to "monetise" the return on assets, which in this case is the spray booth. The more cars through the booth per year, the more successful the customer will be.

One of the other ways to work

smarter relates to managing the challenge of a consolidating raw material supply base and the impact on the consistency, and even availability of pigments to maintain our range of tinters.

NCR: From the marketing director's chair, where is the industry headed?

KW: We all know the changes around consolidation, shortage of new talent, shortage of skilled technicians and, of course, input cost pressures. All of this puts pressure on our customer base so, going back to the mantra to make our customer successful, we need to take time and cost out of their processes and make it as easy as possible.

Also, don't be surprised if we see some real modern, smart technologies come into the workshop of the future. For example, although we take spectros for granted these days, the next generation will take even more time, cost and complexity out of the processes.

Of course, marketing communication will be more important than ever. We have a very young team who are all over the digital space to enhance our reach as the industry goes through its generational change – it really is the way of future. There will still be a place for traditional channels, although they too will be integrated with new technologies.

NCR: And your personal highlight over your journey?

KW: You know, it might actually be today. I'm in a role surrounded by young, dynamic people who are learning their craft, learning their skills, sharing and developing in a collaborative way. They're having fun, they're excited and I feel like a bit of a ringmaster – it's really kind of cool.

NCR: And if you could leave our readers with one clear message?

KW: Hang on to your hats! The rate of change will continue to accelerate and those who are in denial are really going to be caught out. For example, technology is developing so fast that we will see autonomous vehicles in some way, shape or form much sooner than most people realise. My message is: embrace the change – it's inevitable!