



Steven Brett

Managing Director Axalta Coating Systems, Australia and New Zealand

WE MEET STEVEN BRETT, WHO CELEBRATES ALMOST TWO DECADES IN THE REFINISH COATINGS INDUSTRY, AND FIND A STRONG-WILLED AND DETERMINED LEADER WHO IS COMMITTED TO BOTH HIS ORGANISATION AND TO OUR COLLISION REPAIR INDUSTRY.

NCR: By way of introduction, tell us a bit about yourself, who you are and where you've come from.

SB: I began my career almost 40 years ago as an engineer in the oil industry – with Ampol in Queensland. Over the subsequent 20 years, I had a variety of technical and commercial roles with Ampol and then DuPont, essentially in the chemicals sector, which is very much a corporate business-to-business environment.

I have always been interested in the business-to-small-business sector, so I was really pleased when I got the opportunity to move into DuPont's refinish coatings business at about the turn of the millennium. It has been everything I expected it to be, and I've had no regrets.

NCR: I believe you have had several roles within the refinish business unit?

SB: My first role was brand manager for the Spies Hecker product line shortly after it was acquired by DuPont, which was a great introduction to the industry.

I then moved into a national sales manager role for the refinish business, which I did for several

years prior to undertaking a range of strategic projects for our rapidly growing business across Asia-Pacific, whilst being based in Sydney. Key projects included process improvements in many different countries across many different businesses, which I did for about five years.

NCR: So, how did you find your way into your current role?

SB: The final strategic project that I led across Asia-Pacific was the transition from DuPont to Axalta Coating Systems following the Carlyle Group's completion of the acquisition of DuPont Performance Coatings in 2013.

I was appointed to my current role in 2015 for a variety of reasons, including that Axalta was looking for someone who was more in tune with the new business culture. Having been integral in the transition in Asia-Pacific, I had a solid understanding of what the organisation was looking for and how we could make it happen in Australia and New Zealand.

I found it really great to reconnect with the local market and also renew relationships both within our distributor network and our end-user customers.



NCR: And how would you best describe your primary responsibilities?

SB: Similar to any country manager role at Axalta, the key areas of focus include driving growth, but not just growth for growth's sake – profitable growth; fostering innovation, not only in product development but in areas such as our business model; and stakeholder management, which, in addition to employees and customers, includes our distributors and the industry as a whole. We are becoming increasingly prominent in industry matters that are well beyond the boundaries of simply delivering a financial result for our shareholders.

NCR: Now, Axalta seemed to be in a state of flux in the early years – how has that impacted your business?

SB: As is normal with any change in ownership, Axalta went through a period of growing pains while we established the brand, developed our short and long-term strategy, put the right leadership team in place, and explored a range of options including potential sale, to increase shareholder value.

Globally, these issues impacted some markets more than others but, in our case, we had an experienced local team in place that was the right size and fit for our business. Irrespective of what may have happened, we maintained a mindset that we needed to put our customers first, focus on our business and support the industry.

NCR: While you were well-placed to manage any subsequent transition if there had been another change in ownership, what approach did you take to ensure the business would be able to make any such transition?

SB: The Australia team had already successfully managed through a number of significant change events, such as the opening of our new distribution centre at Marsden Park, and I knew they would be able to adapt to whatever scenario played out. Throughout these times of change our focus was, and continues to be, on the customer and the success of their businesses.

NCR: So, what can the market expect from a more stable organisation?

SB: Axalta has solidified a long-term strategy focused on growth, operational excellence, and innovation. Our CEO, Robert Bryant, publicly committed to a two-fold growth agenda: organic growth and sensible, strategic growth-by-acquisition.

The latter will be driven at a global level so, for us locally, it means that we continue to focus on the things we do best. Firstly, product renewal by focusing on the fundamental chemistry of the product in the can, which we believe gives our customers the most effective solution without the need for additional capital investment, such as drying technology.

Secondly, enhancing our high levels of service by optimising



Steven with CEO, Robert Bryant.



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business models and the use of digitisation, by which I mean not only spectrophotometers per se, but how they integrate with our colour tools and equipment.

And finally, we are absolutely committed to a full distribution model, where we are constantly working with our distribution partners to maximise value to our end-user customers. Our field technicians are of the highest calibre and are an integral part of our value proposition when it comes to the coalface.

NCR: What are the key challenges facing your local leadership team?

SB: Each of our functional leaders, sales, marketing, services, operations, technology, finance and HR, have a key role to play in the success of the business. In the short term, it's all about instilling the confidence in our customers that the industry is well and truly on the road to recovery and will indeed bounce back stronger than ever.

In the longer term, there are a few challenges we'll continue to solve. Talent is always front of mind for the leadership team. We have a strong, experienced organisation today, but there is always opportunity for renewal, fresh thinking, and scaling as we grow. More broadly, the Australian (and New Zealand) refinish coatings market has not grown in several years, predominately due to the improvements in coating technologies, so delivering on our organic growth objective will mean taking "a larger

piece of a smaller pie".

To do this, we will attract new customers based on our product and colour capabilities, our value-added services and our distribution strength.

In addition, our global organisation has realigned along business lines rather than geographic lines, which brings what we do at a local level onto the global radar. With the significant portion of our ANZ revenue coming from refinish, we can expect even greater support from our global colleagues, due in no small part to the greater focus on the business unit.

NCR: So, what will success look like for Axalta in Australia and New Zealand in the post-COVID-19 world?

SB: Based on our strategic growth objectives and the above-mentioned areas of focus, our success will be measured by the net customer growth across the business. We measure the wins and losses (as we all know, there is always an element of customer turnover), but we will need to move more new customers across to our brands.

During 2020, body shops "battened down the hatches", although we are already seeing a propensity for body shops to entertain alternatives to their current supplier. Our job is to demonstrate that we are that alternative if we are to deliver on our organic growth.

NCR: And a closing comment for our readers?

SB: Every now and then we all need

to stop and think about how important the collision repair industry is to the overall community. We all know that a new vehicle is the second largest investment we are likely to make, so repairing it correctly is very important.

However, I fundamentally believe that safety is first and foremost our primary concern, and the quality of the repair is paramount. It is all too easy to get distracted by our day-to-day issues, but it is important to remember that we are in a vitally important service industry.

Editor: *It was such a pleasure to meet Steven and get to know what makes him tick. He is, in every sense of the words, a real mover and shaker in our industry.*



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