

Stepping on the gas

Copper specialists accelerate sales in a challenging year

Lawton Tubes has been trading for more than a century. It wasn't until after the fourth generation had made Lawton a household name in the UK that it began to consider selling beyond domestic shores.

"As a family business, it was the fourth generation that launched the company onto the international scene," recalls Robert Lawton, a member of the fourth generation at the helm of the Coventry firm.

Today, however, the business exports its copper tube and fittings to 35 countries and holds a Queen's Award for international trade.

Lawton's export sales touched £20m in 2021, helping it to achieve record annual turnover despite the recent challenges that have beset the industry.

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Niche product

The company began to export in a structured way, by answering email enquiries from overseas to quickly building a proven strategy of utilising the British brand. Soon, Robert Lawton took a more active approach, exhibiting at foreign trade shows and forging relationships with potential customers and partners.

While the company's products for the plumbing, air conditioning and refrigeration sectors are all exported, the competition in these markets is fierce. Lawton found a niche product in the supply of medical gas piping, especially since the arrival of Covid-19.

Besides supplying UK hospitals, including the Nightingale pandemic facilities, the business has now provided specialist oxygen delivery systems in countries including Ghana, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, United Arab Emirates, and Vietnam.



Case study: Lawton Tubes

Lawton benefits from its UK branding. "Our product conforms to NHS standards for installing medical gases. This provides us with a key differentiator in the overseas market. It is often overlooked that the NHS is an internationally-recognised institution, and this British brand is something we have leveraged and benefited from," says Robert Lawton

Expert help

Lawton Tubes takes advantage of key features offered by its banking partner, Barclays. The relationship dates back to Lawton's founding in 1918. Lawton also connects with trade organisations, such as the Association of British HealthTech Industries, to exhibit regularly at the Middle East's biggest health trade fair.

As a result of its annual attendance, Lawton was able to find regional distributors and eventually earned places on the official vendor lists in each market.

Trade experts also facilitated a sales trip to Thailand just before the pandemic. Through the local Coventry Chamber of Commerce, Robert Lawton made contact with a trade body in Bangkok, which sought out potential customers for Lawton's products.

"The Chamber made half a dozen appointments for us, and hired us a driver so that we could easily travel beyond the city," he says. "You can't beat local research – and the insight they [The Chamber of Commerce] can provide can provide about cultural differences is valuable too."

Deadline disruption

Lawton prides itself on being able to ship orders anywhere in the world within two to three weeks. Recent supply chain disruption has made this tougher: "You can wait up to two weeks to find a container, and then the shipping timetables are unreliable too," explains Robert Lawton.

Brexit has had little impact on Lawton's import of raw materials, which are sourced mainly in the EU. It has, however, made the company's exports to Ireland more costly and bureaucratic. The business foresaw this issue at an early stage and signed up a third-party logistics provider to handle the paperwork.

A similarly timely approach has enabled the company to stay one step ahead of skills challenges – taking agency warehouse staff into direct employment, and providing good packages to retain its 14 in-house lorry drivers.



Valuable source

Robert Lawton urges new exporters to make use of an affordable and little-known resource of databases provided by customs and excise. "For relatively little money, you can find out where in the world there is demand for your product," he says.

For 2022, Lawton is strengthening its online marketing. It has translated its website for overseas audiences, and is working to boost its prominence in search engines in its target markets. The company has also signed up a plumbing ambassador, who will promote the sustainability of Lawton products via YouTube, Instagram and Twitter.

For all the power of virtual sales, Robert Lawton is relishing the prospect of returning to overseas markets in person, with Middle East and Southeast Asia key 2022 targets. "Virtual meetings and trade shows are fine, but you can't beat the personal touch," he says.