

BUYING GROUPS – IBA 25TH ANNIVERSARY

IT'S A FAMILY AFFAIR

The wholesalers that have made the Independent Buyers Association what it is today are celebrating the group's 25th anniversary this month, writes Greg Rhodes

The manicured acres and characterful architecture of Worsley Park Marriott Hotel & Country Club hosted electrical wholesaling's great and good earlier this month as the IBA buying group marked its 25th year in style.

Members, family and friends gathered to celebrate the success of the independent electrical wholesaling buying group.

With group turnover approaching £140m, the IBA carries the kind of buying clout that allows independents to compete on the big stage alongside the national wholesalers.

Targeting 100 members by 2020, it has recorded consistent growth and member returns since 1993, when six 'founding father' wholesalers met in the offices of then electric utility Norweb (North West Electricity Board) in Chorley.

Six of those remain in the fold, among them

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Les Jones, head of Mr Ohms (Southport) Ltd and former IBA Chairman, Les stated: "The idea of forming a buying group came from Glenn Kerfoot of Lightstar Technology," he recalls. "The others I remember in the first meeting were Dave Whalley (Trafford Electrical), Nigel Morrell (NEW), Mark Owen (MOES) sadly passed away, Robbie Williams (Acorn Electrical) and Dave McCreddie (Mr Ohms Ltd).

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So the IBA came into being under inaugural chairman Les, who held the post for two years,

alongside treasurer Robbie Williams and secretary Glenn Kerfoot.

Its operational pillars are still firmly in place – a group run by the members for the members, one member, one vote and 100% of all rebates negotiated with suppliers returning to the membership.

There was no shortage of wholesalers wanting to join the new group as IBA membership rose to more than 20 in its first year, meeting pent-up demand for collective buying that worked in the interests of small independents.

"We all knew someone who wanted to join," Les remembers. "The outlook looked promising as administration as membership mushroomed and we could approach suppliers as a cohesive buying force."

Key to the negotiating strategy was to appoint members to deal with suppliers whom they knew well and had a strong relationship, he adds.

Meetings started to move around the country as the IBA became nationally representative. "Suppliers were invited to present to members and we developed a trade show in the early 2000s for them to showcase their products, which still proves massively popular," Les continues. "It's a fun day too and we ask suppliers to offer their 'Deal on the Day'."

An office in Oxford opened as a geographically strategic location before the operational hub moved 'home' once more to Newton-le-Willows in 2013.

As the millennium dawned, the IBA family had swollen to 25 and the group has grown consistently since to now number 82 with more than 100 branches.



The event was organised by the IBA's office manager Colleen Jackson with help and support from Pam Hardman, the group's finance manager.

David Eden, who heads M + D Electrical Distributors, chaired the IBA for three years after Les stood down and was one of its earliest members. Also a rebate secretary in 2001, he worked on the executive committee until 2013.

"When membership reached around 40, we changed the way the group was run, bringing in paid employees and appreciating the added benefits of growth. Our extra buying power means we are now more widely recognised by major suppliers and that has benefited the members.

Transparency is crucial too, he stresses. "Our monthly report to members clearly shows members' spend and rebates, which generates peer pressure and helps increase purchases from approved suppliers," he explains.

In a moving tribute to IBA key players past and present, current Chairman Sean Gilbert, who runs 7Core Electrical in Lincoln, recorded milestones across the years, also reminding the audience of the group's "seven basic rules".

The IBA is powering forward attracting a record



L-R Paul Jenner, IBA chief perating Officer, Sean Gilbert, IBA Chairman, David Eden, past Chairman & Les Jones, IBA Founding Father



Current finance manager Pam Hardman (left), who organised the anniversary bash with office manager Colleen Jackson

nine new members in 2017, Sean notes.

A previous industry award-winner with 7 Core Electrical, Sean was delighted to welcome two among the assembly – Go Electrical, Wholesale Supplies, Blackpool (Best Wholesaler – Sole Branch) and SM Electrical Supplies, Kirkcaldy (Best Individual Branch) awarded at the recent EW awards.

After throwing down the gauntlet of seeking 100 members by 2020, Sean signed off: "People make the difference and you are some of the best I've had the pleasure of meeting. I was looking for something different [in a buying group] and have found a spiritual home within the IBA. The IBA remains as relevant today for my business as it was in 2008 when we joined as well as being good for my business."

Sean finished his speech by presenting a check to Tessa Ogle from the Electrical Industry Charity (EIC) for £10,000 to be used to support people in the wider electrical industry who need the help of our industry charity. The IBA supports the EIC widely at its various events. Tessa took a few minutes to describe some of the good causes that this money will help towards.

The IBA is not alone among buying groups facing sector challenges – the rise of online being just one – but Les Jones and his group colleagues are clear on their priorities.

"Our aim is to maintain reputable trading agreements with reputable suppliers – to maintain our integrity and focus on the right products from the right suppliers. We are a family that's very big on quality."

The IBA's chief perating officer Paul Jenner commented on the event saying how pleased he was to see former members and staff taking time from their busy lives to continue to support the group. It was great to see so many faces.

Commenting on his own anniversary (Paul will have been with the IBA for 5 years in October) Paul stated "that right from the start he knew the group was something special. It had the right balance between a professional operation built on strong foundations, yet with a family feel that continues to develop". He is particularly happy to see the next generation of wholesalers coming through the group getting involved in the family firm. Often this next generation has already a strong network of friends and colleagues who are there to help and support.



RED `RETURNS HOME`

Newest IBA member RED Worcester is also celebrating – after joining its first-choice buying group.

Set up in 2014 the sole-site wholesaler had approached the buying group to join, after completing "due diligence" on those in the sector but were declined "for the right reasons", explains managing director Keith Spokes.

"The IBA required sight of our accounts and, as we had just been set up, we had none to show them. We joined another buying group and after three years with them, decided to leave and join our first choice," he adds.

"We were not receiving the support we needed so I approached Paul [Jenner, IBA chief operating officer] again and we were accepted."

The move `back home` is already proving a good one, Keith continues. "Membership is far more inclusive and forward thinking. IBA members have already called to welcome us and offer help if we need it. That feeling of being part of a big family is exactly what we wanted," says Keith.

"As an independent, you can feel isolated but being a member of a transparent buying group, with competitive members, adds more drive to your day."