

SILENTNIGHT GROUP, THE BEDS COMPANY, GOT MORE THAN IT BARGAINED FOR WHEN IT HIRED INTERIM EXECUTIVE MATTHEW JENKINS AS ITS FIRST-EVER GROUP MARKETING DIRECTOR

silentnight group
rooms for living

And so to bed



IN 2003 A SERIES of acquisitions by Silentnight Group, then a beds and furniture company, had resulted in a mixture of individual bed, cabinet and upholstery businesses, ranging from Silentnight beds to Parker Knoll chairs. The company was looking at how to meld them into one business with a portfolio of brands.

“We knew we needed to recruit a permanent group marketing director, but thought it would take some time to find the right person,” recalls Director of People and Communications Michelle Scott. “So because we needed to do some things very quickly, we decided to bring in an interim to ‘mind the shop’ and do what we saw as the ‘tactical’ stuff. But once Matthew Jenkins got to know us, he brought his intellect to bear on all sorts of strategic issues too, and made a much broader contribution than the original brief called for. As a result we are now taking steps towards consolidation that we never expected to be able to make at this stage.”

Jenkins’ brief when he joined Silentnight was to conduct market analysis to assess the positioning of the company’s seven bed and furniture

businesses and identify opportunities for growth; and to start to think about what form a group marketing department should take and the services it should offer. On his first day he was also given an additional seven or eight marketing projects to deal with – “they had been sitting with various very busy executives and hadn’t happened,” he recalls.

Jenkins set about providing some robust and reliable market data and analysis of the UK furniture market, identified where brands weren’t playing to their full potential, and recast the brand hierarchy and positioning in order to make more explicit the role each brand could play in the group portfolio.

He also started to look at how the network of marketers in the seven businesses could perform more effectively. “I quickly realised they would work better as a team running a portfolio of brands. That would help eliminate the ‘friendly fire’ that characterised their relationships with each other, and raise the capability of marketing across the group to act like a market leader,” he says.

As part of this process, he combined the existing Head Office marketing and design functions. “The two had never

worked to common objectives before, so while the new product development looked great, much of it wasn’t commercial and there were a number of failed product launches, particularly on the furniture side,” says Jenkins.

Scott admits: “We used to do all sorts of one-off designs for specific customers that just didn’t justify the resource we put in. Matthew evaluated that and introduced

THE CHALLENGE

A series of acquisitions had left bed-to-furniture group Silentnight Holdings with a mix of businesses, including high-profile brands Silentnight Beds and chair maker Parker Knoll, along with less-well-known brands. It wanted to capitalise on the strengths of individual brands by bringing its seven different brands together under the group umbrella, and to create a new marketing and a new corporate strategy. Believing it needed a permanent marketing director to help it do that, and thinking it would take some time to recruit one, it appointed Matthew Jenkins in a ‘holding’ role to carry out some necessary short-term tactical tasks.

more robust return-on-investment processes for new product development. His favourite saying was ‘Yes, but will it sell more beds?’, and it’s fair to say that he focused us on the importance of profitable growth, rather than growth at any price.”

One of the challenges Jenkins was thrown was to improve the way the group handled trade shows. “Attendance by trade customers had been gradually falling, and the group didn’t know what was working and what wasn’t, so it didn’t change anything. It had fallen into a rut,” he recalls. He started to look at the number, frequency and timing of the shows the group ran, as well as what could be done to improve the ‘wow’ factor. This involved a major piece of research among customers.

Jenkins also organised the first-ever sales conference, which he judges “a highlight” of his assignment. He researched individuals’ views on the company, their jobs and their motivation before, during and after the conference, “and feedback scores improved to an extent I’d never seen before,” he says.

Initial feedback from the 110 sales people, key account managers and business development staff who attended the conference showed they were unclear about both their own roles in the company and the group’s forward strategy. Group Chief Executive Nino Allenza spent a lot of time on the stage fielding tough questions, mediated by TV presenter Paul Ross. “And, true to form, Nino gave straight answers,” says Jenkins.

Jenkins had believed the conference would help win buy-in to the new group

philosophy of operating as one business with a portfolio of brands, and he wasn’t disappointed. “The event had a huge impact on people’s understanding of each other’s business and on their willingness to work together, which was a major corporate goal,” says Scott.

Less immediately measurable, but even more important for the senior team at head office, was the contribution Jenkins made to the group’s strategic long-term thinking about corporate, as well as brand, strategy, says Scott. “We were

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reviewing everything, including how the business worked, organisational structure, brand architecture, internal and external communications, as well as developing specific customer projects and developments. In addition to getting stuck in at a grass roots level, Matthew raised our level of thinking by challenging us intellectually and giving us a different perspective.”

It is testimony to the contribution Jenkins made, that, a few months into his assignment, he was promoted to the

group executive, reporting directly to Allenza. The group also took its time over the appointment of a group marketing director, realising the brief would change as a result of Jenkins’ input.

“Matthew’s main contribution was to bring a level of strategic thinking, insight, discipline and analysis to group marketing,” says Allenza. “He was also very challenging of our ambition and thinking in terms of the optimum structure we should discuss and plan for the group. He performed the group marketing director role with authority, threw himself into the business with as much commitment as anyone else on the team and raised our game as a board.”

Jenkins admits he was helped in his task by Allenza’s willingness to be challenged, and by his elevation to the executive committee.

“I have worked in companies where the managing director explicitly told me he didn’t want to be challenged,” he says. But there was resistance to change by some elements within the group’s businesses. “I was a change agent, and some people responded well to that, while others would have preferred to stick to the status quo.”

He met resistance with a readiness to listen and to explain the thinking behind the proposed changes.

Jenkins’ ten-month assignment with Silentnight ended last year, and the group now has a permanent marketing director, Julie Leivers, who came from frozen food manufacturer McCain. Leivers inherited a blueprint for a properly-structured group marketing function, and a much deeper understanding of Silentnight’s market. Jenkins’ legacy to Silentnight is a solid platform for building the group marketing strategy and a significant contribution to the group’s business strategy.

“In the past, group thinking has been constrained by our production capability, and we have reacted to what our retail customers needed rather than being consumer-driven,” says Scott. “We are now much more consumer-focused and we apply far more rigour to justifying, evaluating and measuring the impact of our marketing activity.”

What’s more, she adds: “We liked having Matthew on our team. A senior executive team has to be comfortable arguing and debating and challenging, but that needs to be leavened with humour. Matthew made us laugh.”

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THE INTERIM

45-year-old Jenkins had been an interim for four years when he joined Silentnight, performing marketing director and consultant roles in companies from Woolworths and Penhaligons, to William Sinclair Horticulture and Goldenfry Foods. His background prior to that was in manufacturing and retail businesses, including Kellogg’s, Asda, Boots and Jewson, where he held a variety of marketing jobs.

THE SOLUTION

Jenkins quickly dealt with the original brief, and moved on to tackle the big strategic marketing and business challenge of bringing the disparate businesses closer together. Silentnight Group is now more customer focused, and the new group marketing function much better armed to face the challenges of a changing market. The company is also much further down the road towards ‘joined-up thinking’ than it expected to be at this point, and much of that is the result of Jenkins’ input.