



Traditional skills come back into fashion



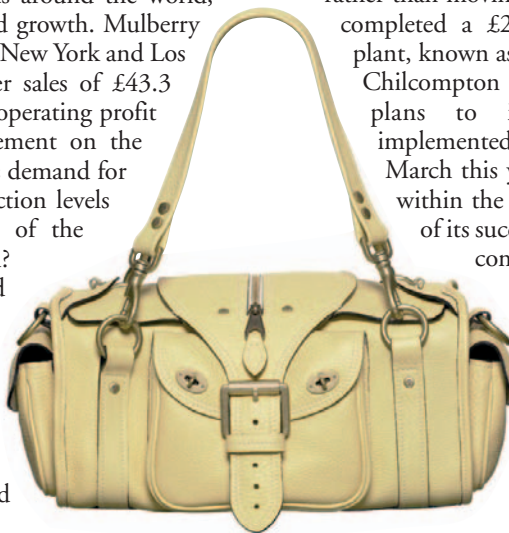
Established in the 1970s in Somerset, UK, luxury leather goods company Mulberry has become a globally-recognised brand renowned for its handbags and accessories. Styles such as its Bayswater, Roxanne and Emmy (*below*) have gained an almost cult status around the world, which has led to the brand enjoying rapid growth. Mulberry opened further stores in Japan, Singapore, New York and Los Angeles in 2006 and posted 44% higher sales of £43.3 million in the last financial year, with an operating profit of £6.2 million—an impressive improvement on the £2.1 million reported in the prior year. As demand for its products has increased so have production levels and this all bodes well for the future of the company... but does it also cause concern?

The market for leather goods and accessories may be booming at present, but it remains a highly competitive sector, and the reason that Mulberry has succeeded in securing an impressive share of the market can be attributed to one factor alone—apart from its designers, of course—which is the quality and

craftsmanship of its products. This could in part be attributed to the fact that, unlike many other successful brands, Mulberry has remained true to its roots and has maintained its headquarters and a large proportion of its manufacturing capacity in the UK, rather than moving it to lower cost countries. The company completed a £2 million expansion of its purpose-built plant, known as the Rookery, on the edge of the village of Chilcompton in Somerset, in 2006 and has ambitious plans to increase production further—having implemented a 50% rise in capacity by the end of March this year with further plans to double capacity within the next 18 months. But it is this very 'secret of its success' which is now causing problems for the company due to a severe shortage of suitably skilled workers who have the knowledge and aptitude to produce goods to the high standards that the company demands.

An age-old problem

Although the company has 206 employees who are highly-skilled in a ➤





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variety of complicated leatherworking techniques, such as stitching, cutting and skiving as well as being able to handle the latest computer technology, many of its current employees—some of whom have been with the company since it was founded—are now heading towards retirement and Mulberry needs to expand its workforce in order to increase production. However, leatherworking does not rank highly on the list of ‘dream jobs’ for school leavers in the UK due to the fact that it is not viewed as having the same ethos or ‘street credibility’ as some other careers.

Furthermore, as is the case for any specialist manufacturer still based in traditional markets, training courses in such skills are now almost non-existent as colleges have channelled their funds and expertise into more generic courses which attract students from a wider variety of sectors and where there is more demand and investment from industry. This may be a more sensible approach in economic terms for training establishments, but it has created a ‘chicken and egg’ situation in that student numbers in these vocational fields cannot be improved if the courses to train them do not exist. It also caused a serious dilemma for Mulberry, which was faced with a far from ideal situation.

The Skillfast option

The options left open to the company involved either providing in-house training in the specific skills it required—which would be costly and mean the company forfeiting the public funding it would have received if staff undertook training in recognised qualifications—or sending its staff for external training in largely irrelevant subjects that would not provide the level of expertise needed. Neither of these options was feasible as Mulberry had to consider both the company’s reputation and its financial situation if it wanted to maintain its position in the market. Finding no suitable solution to the problem Mulberry decided to take the bull by the horns and approached Skillfast UK, an employer-led independent network of 25 Sector Skills Councils and the Sector Skills Development Agency, which identifies the need for changes in policy and practice relating to education and skills development. With private and public funding, the network engages with education and training establishments such as universities, colleges, funders and qualification bodies to increase productivity in the UK’s workforce including the apparel, footwear and textile sectors. It—essentially in the case of Mulberry—also has the power to

create new vocational qualifications and revise existing training courses based on the needs of employers.

Having met with Mulberry to discuss its needs, Skillfast helped to establish a partnership between the luxury goods company and its local further education establishment, Bridgwater College, through which they developed a new two-year apprenticeship qualification programme in Leather Goods manufacture. The course was tailored precisely to suit Mulberry’s needs but was also flexible enough to accommodate the requirements of individual trainees. Furthermore, as it has been approved by all of the relevant awarding bodies, it also qualifies for government funding.

Guaranteed employment

Through the programme, which began last September, apprentices—predominantly made up of local school leavers—gain a nationally-recognised qualification as well as having the guarantee of full-time employment upon completion. And, although the qualification is administered and awarded by the college, apprentices spend the majority of their time on the shop-floor at Mulberry learning different skills. This means that, at the end of the course, Mulberry will have new employees who are both qualified in the necessary skills and already accustomed to working at the company. In addition to this practical training, apprentices also spend one day each week with college lecturers in an on-site classroom where they build up skills such as communication and teamwork, as well as studying the history of the leatherworking industry and the technical information and attributes of different types of leather and their applications.

For Mulberry this solution has gone beyond merely solving the problem of a skills shortage: it has enabled the company to control the content of the training provided to its future employees and to continue investing in the brand’s future expansion, thanks to the public funding provided for the course. It also has far reaching benefits for other local businesses involved in the leather sector as the Mulberry technical training centre is open to other employers to use too. And, maybe most importantly, the apprenticeship is proving popular with local school leavers, having received 50 applications for the ten available places in the first year. Those that were successful in securing a place on the course appear to be more than satisfied, too. “This partnership with Bridgwater College enables us to offer school leavers who have chosen not to go into further education a chance to continue to learn in a working environment and to achieve a recognised qualification. The feedback from the first group of apprentices has revealed that this is a successful formula for them,” states Mulberry’s supply director, Ian Scott.

A win-win situation

Through its co-operation with Skillfast and Bridgwater College, Mulberry has turned a no-win situation for the company into a win-win situation for everyone involved, securing the future growth of the luxury brand, guaranteeing the continuation of traditional skills, and creating a bright future for some of Somerset’s young school leavers, who may well otherwise have been forced into unskilled jobs. In spite of the deluge of high tech gadgets and computers surrounding young people today, when training is made available it appears that they are still eager to learn vocational skills. It may well be the case that training in traditional techniques is coming back into fashion for young people. 🌐