



45 YEARS AT THE TOP – & COUNTING:

D&M'S RECIPE FOR SUCCESS



From left to right: MD Paul Dowding with wife Jenny; Paul's sister Liz Richards-Dowding; and Paul's father and company founder, David Dowding



Established in 1978 and proudly remaining an independent family business to this day, D&M Tools not only boasts a Twickenham tool empire but also the industry's No.1 hand, power tools and machinery event. One hard working man is at the centre of it all – MD Paul Dowding – who shares some of the secrets behind the company's longevity and success

Anyone with a passion for woodworking tools – whether hobbyist or tradesman – will be familiar with the impressive niche that D&M Tools has carved for itself within the industry, over a period of some 45 years. Specialists in hand, power tools and woodworking machinery, this independent family-run business, headed by MD Paul Dowding, is undeniably in a league of its own.

Boasting an impressive Twickenham-based tool emporium that houses a huge range of tools and equipment from all the major brands, the superstore continues to expand. However, in addition to this, the company has another string to its bow in the form of the UK's No.1 dedicated hand, power tools and woodworking machinery event – 'The' Tool Show – which following a two-year hiatus, returned to Kempton Park Racecourse to mark the 20th show in 22 years. Event planning and coordination is handled, pretty much single-handedly, by Paul and having had the opportunity to sit down and talk to him at the recently held show, we were given an insight into the countless hours of preparation and hard work involved leading up to, during, and after the event. His passion and dedication is clear to see, and according to Paul, it was "amazing" to be back at Kempton Park, having not been able to do so since 2019.

Old-fashioned values; modern ideas

Starting life as a simple Twickenham-based double-fronted ironmongers and DIY shop, which also sold tools, D&M Tools was established in 1978 by David and Mary Dowding. Despite the extent to which D&M has grown over the years, and taking into account the numerous achievements – in terms of both the business and show – to this day, they still trade from the same Twickenham location – albeit on a much larger scale. Having built a wealth of industry experience over more than 40 years as a result of stocking and supplying the biggest brand names, D&M Tools is best described as a modern, proactive company with old-fashioned ideas and values, as far as customer service and after-sales is concerned, and above all, a name that everyone knows and trusts.

Exceptional customer service underpins everything they do, and a desire to make life

easier for those looking to buy tools and equipment. Importantly, D&M Tools hasn't rested on its laurels, which is evidenced by its continual expansion, but as Paul is eager to highlight, an awareness of the latest industry trends, utilising and investing in new technology – providing this is of benefit to them and the customer – and moving with the times, is also critical to their success.

D&M certainly have their finger on the pulse as well as being leaders in their field, choosing to embrace new developments in a bid to remain at the forefront. Such examples include the launch of D&M's first mail order catalogue in 1996, followed by the website in 2000. Just three years later, in 2003, this was utilised to sell products, which at the time was incredibly cutting edge. Today, the website is a 24/7 fully secure online ordering facility, with customer support on hand, which allows a customer to place an order whenever convenient. The website – which, at time of writing is due to be newly relaunched before Christmas – is constantly updated to include newly released tools as well as offering special and weekly deals to customers. This attention to detail helps to ensure repeat business and

further builds brand loyalty and trust.

Similarly, at the other end, in the distribution centre, state-of-the-art machinery and barcode technology is utilised to make the ordering process as seamless as possible. Barcodes are scanned and double-checked to ensure that no mistakes are made and the customer receives exactly what they've ordered. Also, when it comes to packing the orders, no plastic is used – only paper – which further attests to D&M's forward-thinking ethos.

Of course, a deep-rooted passion for the tools and equipment they sell is crucial to success as well as an understanding of this. Although Paul himself isn't a practising woodworker, he still knows the product portfolio inside out, is competent enough to be able to use anything he sells, and also knows when something isn't up to scratch. Over the years, the company has built and developed key working relationships and partnerships with leading industry brands, including Festool, Makita, Bosch, DeWalt and Trend, to name a few, all of which are renowned for their top quality branded kit and tools.

Every item that's stocked both in the shop and on the website is bought and sourced by Paul, and if it doesn't meet his high standards, it doesn't make the grade. As well as knowing what sells, Paul and the team benefit from having many years' of expertise and a big part of the service they offer is advising and helping customers choose the best product to meet their needs. All of this, again, comes down to excellent customer service, understanding



The early beginnings of the tool show in the late '80s, when it was held at the shop's rear



Scheppach at the tool show back in the late 1980s

what the customer wants, and ultimately being able to meet and even exceed these individual requirements.

Added value

Returning to 'The' Tool Show and looking back at how this began, its success has been built and subsequently nurtured over a period of some 30 years. Starting small and originally being held at the back of the shop, the show today attracts more than 10,000 visitors over three days, which is a fantastic achievement but one that's undoubtedly a labour of love. From the very first event held at Kempton Park, its success has continued to grow, and according to Paul, so many people turned up that they were forced to close the Twickenham shop and send extra staff to help at the show.

Unlike many others, 'The' Tool Show has always been a free event, which is something it prides itself on, and according to Paul, this won't change. As he rightly says, in this day and age anything free is a rarity, so they like to offer as much added value to the visitor experience as possible, which includes free entry, free parking and a free prize draw. This was especially relevant this year given the rise in fuel costs and cost of living, which meant that for some, getting to the event was made more difficult, therefore placing a greater emphasis on them feeling the trip was beneficial.

Over three days in October, Paul and the team transform the racecourse into a big tool shop,



Alan Holtham demoing for Record Power at the D&M tool show in the early 2000s

and it's hoped that the money people save on entry and parking is instead used to buy tools and machinery at the event. As Paul says: "Why would people pay to shop in Tesco?" And it's this uniqueness that keeps people coming back.

Precision & planning

Talking of the military precision and minute planning the show demands, even though it's very much a team effort and all family members are involved, to some extent this is a solo mission for Paul, who knows everything inside out. No one else can do what he does, and as a result, he's able to utilise this logistical knowledge, which is invaluable. In fact, leading up to and during the show, he invests in excess of 100 hours per week. Organising such an event comes naturally to Paul and here, his skills and leadership abilities are brought to the fore, and this is where he truly excels and thrives.

The show is undeniably a huge commitment for Paul and his family, all of whom are part of



Stuart Pickering demonstrating on a Record Power lathe in the late 1980s

the business, which is now in its third generation. In Paul's words, he has an "emotional connection" to the event, not only because he cares, but the ultimate aim is to deliver a great product to their customers. Describing the show as "a comfy pair of old slippers," Paul recognises that people need the familiarity and to know what they're getting, as well as being able to rest assured that they'll leave feeling it's been a worthwhile visit.

Despite the fact the show's success has grown year-on-year, Paul is a realist, and rather than getting greedy and going bigger – and potentially jeopardising what they've worked so hard to create – he says that he's happy with the size of the event as it is now. Importantly, he's made the decision to keep the same venue and develop it rather than moving to a bigger setting and having to manage the extra stress that entails. Dealing with the logistics such as they are is already an enormous task, which is made even greater given that Paul coordinates the whole operation. As with everything in life,



DeWalt at Kempton Park Racecourse c. early 2000s



Signage for the 2003 show

peaks and troughs are felt over the years, but Paul always looks at the bigger picture. In the words of Ian Styles when talking of the Axminster show and similar woodworking events, "it's a rollercoaster you can't get off," which is a sentiment very much echoed by Paul.

A special opportunity

Given the impressive visitor numbers typically seen over the three days, the show offers a great opportunity for brands to launch new products and product ranges, which was also evidenced at this year's event with the DeWalt 5Ah POWERSTAK battery and Festool's new range of cordless tools. The industry knows that the show is always held on the second weekend in October, which allows them to synchronise product launches accordingly. This is a great investment for tool companies to make and also a fantastic showcase for new products, although there's a lot of work that needs to be done behind the scenes and some complicated

logistics – as Paul points out: "Timing is crucial."

Another factor that sets the show apart is the racecourse setting, which is quite an intimate venue, over two floors, which therefore makes it cosy and interactive. Visitors are also given the opportunity to see the biggest, widest and most diverse range of tools – not just the most popular or bestsellers – which is something you won't see anywhere else. Paul also makes it affordable for the companies exhibiting, which means it's not just big names and premium brands that attend but smaller ones too, which ensures there's a variation and cross-section for the customer.

Speaking on the current climate and returning to Kempton Park following a two-year break, Paul comments on how the world is a difficult place at present and there's a lot going on: "First it was COVID, then a global recession, followed by an energy crisis, so deciding to go ahead and put on the show was a difficult decision." Seeing the 2022 event as a "good opportunity

to bring the team back together," Paul goes by the mantra: "If you build it, they will come," and early signs proved that demand still exists and people want to come, especially after not being able to for such a long time. People's enthusiasm hasn't dampened and they still want to see the tools for themselves, enjoy a day out as well as being able to take advantage of various show deals. Simply put, people in the industry are passionate about woodworking, whether as a profession or hobby, and the show offers a special opportunity for them. Also, due to the hiatus, visitors have 1-2 years' worth of new products to see and buy, which is another reason for people to visit and brands to invest.

Small details

In terms of pitching the show to brands that sell their tools through D&M, Paul offers a package that's unlike any other. For him, the devil's in the detail – it's not just about selling



D&M Tools' Twickenham superstore



The Dowding family, pictured at 'The' Tool Show in 2018, following the company's 40th anniversary



DeWalt's new 5Ah POWERSTAK battery was unveiled at the 2022 event



The show gives visitors the chance to see and try the latest tools and receive advice from industry experts

exhibition space, but the personal touches and ensuring nothing is missed. For example, Paul looks after people – visitors and exhibitors – and recognises the importance of having good security, so they can rest assured knowing stock is safe overnight and that extra precautions have been taken. As the show is a potential target for thieves, there's dog patrols as well as plain clothes security guards operating during the event, which helps to protect against lost stock.

Talking to Paul, you get a true sense of just how passionate he is; the importance placed on people feeling looked after, and that for them, the show has been a valuable experience.

Prestige, knowledge & background

In terms of marketing the event, Paul explains how this has changed, and although they still rely on the traditional methods of advertising in magazines and on billboards and buses leading up to the show, the clientele today is undoubtedly younger and more tradesperson-based. This is very different to many other woodworking shows, which typically attract an older demographic, and in order to reach and appeal to them, D&M have



Pictured centre, Paul Dowding at the 2022 event with Rhona Bolger, Group Advertising Manager (left), and Tegan Foley, Group Editor (right)

diversified their advertising methods accordingly. This includes social media avenues such as TikTok, which allows them to access different and younger markets through targeted video content.

The most important method, however, and one that's pivotal to the show's success, is word of mouth. This has been the case for some 20 years, before the internet and social media even existed. For many, the show represents a day out and people tend to come in groups, visitors tell their friends about the experience, who then go on to tell others, and so the awareness develops. Don't be fooled into thinking that technology has taken over, however, as Paul is still an avid fan of the tried and tested methods. For example, all invoices at the show are written by hand due to potential connectivity issues with the PDQ and EPOS systems, which are prone to failure and as such, sales opportunities can be missed. "You can't beat a pen and paper," says Paul, "if you rely on age-old methods, you know they'll work – technology can work against you and ultimately let you down."

Prestige, knowledge and background are three key tenets that underpin the D&M ethos, but the show in particular, and these are vital to success. Each year, things are fine-tuned and improved to ensure they're the best they can be, and as Paul says: "80% is right and doesn't need adjusting, but 20% requires tweaking to ensure we're keeping up with the times and striving to be the best we can be." While the decision could have been made to stop the show after the last one held in 2019, despite the difficulties experienced during the past few years, Paul felt there was still a place for the show, which really is unlike any other.

The future

Having had the chance to assess and evaluate the overall outcome of the 20th show, and to some extent return to normality, we spoke to Paul a month or so later, eager to discover what



Promotional methods for 'The' Tool Show include advertising on buses leading up to the event

had been decided, and most importantly, whether or not they'd be back next year. Hearing that the event was so well received and surpassed many expectations is fantastic news, and as with previous years, Paul and the team stuck to and applied the same winning formula to deliver a top line-up of the biggest power tool and hand tool brands in the business. "There were lots of great show deals and freebies on offer, along with new products and show debuts on many of the stands," he explains.

In terms of visitor numbers, these didn't disappoint with many travelling long distances and feeling positive about the show's return. In fact, two particular visitors arrived at 9am on Sunday morning, an hour before opening, having travelled from the other side of Stansted, setting off especially early as they were so excited about the show!

In terms of notable highlights, Paul confirms that, for them, the best part was "feeling like we'd never been away, and that all the hard work involved in organising and running the show wasn't in vain."

So, the burning question on all of our lips is whether there'll be a next time... Thankfully, the answer is yes, and we're pleased to announce that, owing to its continued success, 'The Tool Show' will return to Kempton Park Racecourse from Friday 6 to Sunday 8 October 2023. We're thrilled to hear that the legacy will continue under Paul's watchful eye, and while we can't quite fathom how such a feat is possible, it's safe to say that with Paul at the helm, D&M Tools' future is most definitely in safe and capable hands. ✂

FURTHER INFORMATION

As well as their spacious Twickenham showroom, D&M Tools also has a fantastic website, which includes a huge range of hand tools, power tools and machinery, all of which is available to purchase online:

www.dm-tools.co.uk

For more details on the UK's No.1 branded hand, power tools and woodworking machinery event – 'The' Tool Show – visit the dedicated event website: www.thetoolshow.com