Keeping the wheels turning

How's this for dedication? Mike Crouch left school aged 16 to join the then fledgling Marquis Motorhomes dealership, where one of his early roles was to build up a rental fleet that would eventually top some 60 vehicles in its heyday. Over 30 years on, Mike is still at Marquis – except that now the company's 10 branches make it the UK's leading specialist motorhome dealership network, and Mike himself has worked his way right up to the very top of the management tree!

Nick Harding asks the questions...

Q With 10 retail outlets to look after, how are you coping with the recession?

A Having joined Marquis in 1979, I have worked through a couple of previous recessions. However, the speed and severity of this current economic downturn has taken most people by surprise.

Recessionary periods are difficult times for both businesses and customers, but can provide positive elements. Companies become leaner, fitter and more efficient in order to trim overhead costs – and successful retailers like Marquis realise the need to focus upon, improve and excel at their customer service levels to exceed consumer expectation and generate sales.

The motorhome industry will survive. However, there will undoubtedly be casualties both in manufacturing and retailing. This will ultimately streamline the current expansive choice for the consumer. The motorhome marketplace is unlikely to shrink in 2009 as people will continue to enjoy their chosen recreational lifestyle. However, by the same token, I also do not foresee any market growth.

Q What's happening with new vehicles, especially your own limited edition models?

A New vehicle sales, in line with the car industry, have been badly affected, despite the fact that it genuinely is an incredibly good time to secure a sensibly priced new motorhome. There is an excess of new stock and lots of customer incentives. But the stock is ultimately limited and once sold, the deals will not be repeated due to the paring of production by base vehicle suppliers and converters alike. Everyone may see the experience from shopping at the local supermarket. Towards the end of last year there was an abundance of products being sold on a 'buy one get one free' basis. Now excess stocks have been sold, exchange rates have increased and prices have risen, forcing the consumer to spend more money in return for the same level of goods.

Q And the secondhand market? Will it continue to remain relatively buoyant, and where will the action be?

A The current sales trend is geared heavily towards quality used motorhomes at affordable prices, which has prompted Marquis to re-introduce the AutoMarq standard. The used sector of the market remains strong, and we are already seeing shortages of sub-£30,000 price bracket stock. The trend is likely to continue through the summer period.

Part of the success of Marquis as a larger retailer within the industry, is down to the commitment, experience and passion of the senior management team who, along with myself, work with a reasonably hands-on approach, 24/7. Our business is run for long-term growth, stability and benefit of the Marquis brand and not for short-term profit and exit. The company has a good structure that offers opportunities for promotion from within, with well-trained staff that are an invaluable asset.

The company ethos is geared towards customer satisfaction, which, from our questionnaire responses, is achieved 96 per cent of the time. Our Branch Managers are part-rewarded via the questionnaire scheme, which helps focus their efforts in satisfying the customer.

Q You're known for your dedication and long working hours. Do you ever take the opportunity to go motorcaravanning?

A I regularly use motorhomes with my family, but in reality it's more for product experience than lifestyle appreciation (maybe I shouldn't say that!).

I also enjoy a close working relationship with our suppliers to bring new models to the marketplace, and the Marquis special edition range has been the cornerstone of our new motorhome sales for many years.

I take full responsibility for layouts, specifications, fabric schemes, external colourways etc. It gives me great job satisfaction to see the finished models that were originally conceived over a glass of wine and first drawn on the back of some handy scrap of paper in use on campsites or on the roads.

Having enjoyed 30 years to date with Marquis, I look forward to a few more years, the challenges and experiences that are still to come.

Q Can you sum up your current job in one sentence?

A Working for Marquis has been my only employment and, having helped to construct the foundations upon which today's business is built, it's more a way of life for me than a simple job.

In a sentence, my role and responsibility is simply to keep the wheels turning.

Mike Crouch is...

- Managing Director of Marquis Motorhomes, the UK's largest specialist motorhome dealership network
- A member of the National Caravan Council's Strategy Committee
- Father to 16-year-old twins (one girl, one boy)!
- A life-long Portsmouth FC supporter