

G.F SMITH



It's a vision that connects us to our roots and it's what inspires and drives us forward

In the late 1800's, two brothers in Hull formed two separate companies that would one day become No. 1 brands in their respective sectors. Both companies initially traded from shared offices on North Church Side in Hull. The first was formed by Thomas James Smith, a dispensing chemist, and his company Smith and Nephew has since grown to become a multinational pharmaceutical giant. However, his brother George Frederick Smith had a different passion – his desire was to seek out and find the very best papers from around the world to supply to the UK and European print markets, and in 1885 his company G. F Smith was born.

G. F Smith has gone on to become a world-leading and highly respected brand in the specialist coloured and textured paper, and graphic design markets.

The journey has not been easy and there have been a number of challenges along the way. During the First World War, all G. F Smith's European stock was impounded or destroyed. Unable to pay its debts, the company was nearly on the brink of collapse. Fortunately however, its largest supplier, an American paper mill, had confidence in the company's survival and wrote its debt off, in exchange for taking over the ownership of the business.

The company then suffered another blow in the Second World War when both its Hull and London premises were bombed flat within 48 hours of each other. Ever resilient, the employees worked from a rented house in Park Avenue, Hull, using the garage at the bottom of the garden as the warehouse and began rebuilding the company. In 1948 the Lockwood Street premises were purchased and the company grew from strength to strength. Then, in 1963, this chapter in the company's history came to a close as the company was bought back from the American owners by its then Hull Directors and has proudly been an independent owner-managed business ever since. G. F Smith is the most respected brand in every sector they operate in, with clients such as Paperchase, Mulberry and Burberry. The company has 200 employees, a turnover of £30m and an export market to over 60 countries; including the United States, China, Russia, Australia and Western Europe. G. F Smith is continually investing in new machinery, equipment, stock and products, and also has successful ancillary services such as; paper conversion, making custom-sized envelopes/boxes and photographic albums. They are now the UK's largest manufacturer of bespoke wedding albums. Their largest single range of papers is 'Colorplan', a paper range of exceptionally high quality available in 50 colours, with 8 ranges of thickness and 25 embossed finishes, resulting in one of the largest ranges of premium coloured and textured paper available anywhere today.

Why is G. F Smith such a success? This is largely because of what the company stands for, a strong sense of its values and its deep routed onwards spirit. It's now 131 years later and George Frederick Smith's legacy is paramount throughout the company's culture and ethos; providing exquisite paper, employing remarkable people and building strong relationships with customers and suppliers around the world.

In addition, instead of being known for everything, G. F Smith stands for something specific; their beautiful bespoke quality paper and related products. Although often operationally challenging, they sell the exact quantity and style their customers want. Joint Managing Director, Phil Alexander says; "All our operatives in the production and warehouse areas are highly skilled, multi-functional and extremely talented. They can move where the demand is and that's why we can offer a truly bespoke operation – we are not producing for stock like a traditional manufacturing business".

Why Hull? Phil Alexander says; "We are Hull born and bred, and fiercely proud of our roots. Over 80% of our people are based in Hull and it's where we have made our biggest capital investment. Although the South East is actually our largest market area and we do have a sales office and distribution centre in central London, we would never relocate there. As owner managers we think of ourselves as custodians of the business – we never discuss exit planning, we always focus on succession planning and when we retire the company will be handed over to the next generation. People are, and always will, remain the fabric of G . F Smith".

What company can beat G. F Smith for employee engagement and loyalty? They have an extremely low staff turnover, with 40 employees having over 20 years' service and having only 11 Managing Directors since 1885, it demonstrates everyone here is as equally committed to the business. Although no longer family owned and run, G. F Smith has a genuinely strong family feel to it and family values appear at its

core, with 35 retired employees still receiving company Christmas hampers. In 2014 the company unveiled a new identity, not just a logo but a cultural and fundamental restatement, reflecting all of what G. F Smith stands for. They also invested £650k on a site refurb, including a Notting Hill style café for its employees, so chic you are almost looking around for a professional barista. With all this and the company's legendary annual team building staff festival, it's no wonder morale, creativity and productivity are at an all time high. It is not surprising that G. F Smith won the 2015 D&AD Yellow Pencil Award for 'Best Corporate Branding', but more significantly they went on to win the coveted Black Pencil, beating 20,000 global entries including Apple Watch, recognising their campaign as one of the world's highest creative achievements. The new identity celebrates G. F Smith's history and heritage but skilfully marries this with their bold pioneering onwards spirit.

So what does the future look like for G. F Smith? Aren't we in the middle of a digital revolution with increasing usage of iPads, e-mail, kindles, online news and so forth, resulting in the shedding of paper? Yes, but this doesn't affect G. F Smith, quite the contrary, Phil Alexander explains that; "as everyday paper consumption declines, creative, beautiful, tactile paper usage is actually increasing and that is exactly where we sit in the market. We've never sold paper that people need – people buy our paper because they want it, because of the value it adds and for the tactile and long lasting connection it creates that fleeting digital impressions can never replicate", reaffirming the desire to use paper Phil adds; "quality paper is a natural and sustainable product that can enrich us by providing an outlet for creativity and provides that sense of touch and feel and the ownership of something tangible and beautiful".

Offering some final lasting words, Mr. Alexander added; "As we look ahead, we really do remain true to the legacy of George Frederick Smith, determined to continue to find and supply the very best paper we can in order to inspire the next generation of creative pioneers. It's a vision that connects us to our roots and it's what inspires and drives

us forward”.