

Keeping Cool and Creative

ActronAir is driving innovation within the HVACR industry, using principles of environmental consciousness and the latest technology to remain at the forefront of air-conditioning development.

Images by Scott Ehler

Graham Brown, General Manager of ActronAir, has worked in the heating, ventilation, air-conditioning, and refrigeration (HVACR) industry for more than 30 years. He's clocked up more than 20 years of managerial experience and had a brief stint in the medical gases industry before joining ActronAir three years ago.

"I began my career as a toolmaker, and then moved to James N. Kirby Pty Ltd where I worked for some 20 years. During this time I worked across all areas of the business, including warehousing, production, planning, and quality, before moving into management roles, ultimately working as the managing director for Australia and New Zealand. It's now been almost three years since I joined ActronAir as general manager."

Graham has had to overcome numerous business challenges since his appointment to ActronAir. "A major challenge for us as has been the uncertainty in the

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political landscape regarding carbon legislation. The carbon levy, as opposed to the carbon tax, meant two different things to our business. The carbon tax was introduced by the former federal government across all areas of carbon use, while an additional carbon levy was imposed on the refrigeration industry based on the global warming potential of the refrigerant used, making it a very challenging environment in which to operate."

Environmental consciousness plays a vital role in the HVACR industry as it is a major consumer of power and resources. "It is a key aspect of our business. Refrigerant is deemed to be a major ozone-depleting product, so we continually work with our refrigerant supplier to keep abreast with what new refrigerants are coming to the market, how that could reduce the carbon footprint across the air-conditioning industry in general, and how we could apply it to our products. In other words, how can we reduce our impact, or potential impact, on

global warming and the carbon footprint in general?"

"We are also required to comply with minimum energy performance standards (MEPS) regulations. This requires us to continually increase the energy performance levels of our air-conditioning units in order to drive increased efficiency around power consumption. Compliance to this regulation is an ongoing challenge to the industry, particularly in our case, as we conduct all of our own research and development in our labs in Sydney. A lot of our products already exceed the standards set by MEPS, as we specifically design them to suit the unique Australian conditions, but this compliance requirement does represent an ongoing challenge to our business.

"Finally, we not only look at our product, we also look at our internal processes. We have implemented a waste-reduction program with respect to our packaging and recycling programs, where we recycle as much >



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packaging as we can, sending as little to landfill as possible.”

In addition to the environmental considerations, Graham also has had to navigate the challenges that come from using Australian manufacturing. “The high Australian dollar has certainly been a challenge for us, and the downturn in the housing and construction industry over the past couple of years was a major test to our business. However, with current signs of a slight recovery in the industry, the market is looking a little better.”

A key contributor to ActronAir’s success is their focus on innovation. “We continue to innovate our product and service offering. It’s enabled us to successfully compete with what our multinational competitors have to offer. In most cases we feel that we are probably in front of them with some of the developments we have made over the years.”

As a family-owned company, the organisation was built on the creativity and ingenuity of Garry Mundy and his two sons. “The family has always been very innovative from the day they started and this approach is continued today throughout the business. Over the past three years or so, we have been able to successfully implement our business excellence program, which uses the underlying principles and methodology of Lean Six Sigma. Additionally, we take a collaborative approach to our work, helped greatly by the involvement of our employees in all aspects of what we do.

“By having people collaborate across the business, we challenge not only our staff, but also our suppliers and business partners to continue to come up with new innovations, whether it’s a new product or a new process. We especially encourage our key technology partners to bring new ideas to the table, as they know

that we are hungry for innovation and are willing to be the first to adopt good ideas and apply them to our products.”

By working closely with its suppliers and business partners, ActronAir has developed a number of new products and services that are at the cutting edge of the HVACR industry. “Some of the new products we’ve just released are actually the result of this collaborative approach. We released a new product range called Hercules, which is a series of rooftop package units that run from 140kW to 200kW. During the development of Hercules, we collaborated with our compressor supplier Danfoss and our fan supplier EBM to combine all of our expertise to develop new technology and to bring to market the most efficient product possible.”

“Throughout the whole project we also collaborated with Carel, a supplier who makes controls.

Essentially it wasn’t simply us collaborating with each of our individual suppliers; we actually had inter-supplier collaboration going on as well so that we could bring this product to market, a product that today is considered to feature some of the best technology in the rooftop package unit market. This collaborative approach ensured we worked with the best and brightest in each area to ensure our product was best in class.

“Another example of the success of our collaborative approach is Actron Connect, an app that allows our customers to wirelessly control their air-conditioners, whether they are at home or out and about. To produce this innovative app we required an extensive amount of collaboration between our application developer and our marketing and engineering departments.”

Graham sees a bright future ahead for ActronAir. “Despite



what you hear in the media concerning the state of Australian manufacturing, as evidenced by the recent troubles of companies such as Holden and Ford, ActronAir has no intention of closing our local manufacturing in the near future. We are

continuing to grow market share and compete against multinationals in a fairly tough industry. We are now the largest Australian air-conditioning manufacturer, and we can only see the future bringing growth. It is very exciting.”



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