

THE BELRON SPIRIT

Belron is the world's largest vehicle glass repair and replacement company. With more than 100 years of experience, Belron is committed to offering exceptional service around the globe.

Images by Ben Lister

For Belron CEO Gary Lubner, the company has been in his blood since the day he was born. Whether it was a job over the school holidays, or listening to conversations about the company over dinner, Gary has been involved with the company in some capacity for most of his life. He recalls spending time from an early age with his father and grandfather as they ran the business, and says he learned different lessons from both of them.

“My grandfather was absolutely obsessed with customers and people. I remember very clearly riding around with him in his car, visiting customers. He used to have a little notebook, where he wrote down observations to make improvements on later. What I learned from my dad was that no one in the organisation was more important than anyone else. This created an ethos where everyone who was contributing to the organisation

was treated with respect, dignity, and understanding.”

Gary wasn't always keen on joining the family business: he studied finance at the University of Cape Town and, after qualifying as a chartered accountant in 1981, joined Arthur Andersen in South Africa. He joined Belron after earning his MBA from the London Business School in 1991, and has been there for more than 20 years.

Gary's early experiences with the company in South Africa were hugely formative for him. “It's important to understand that staff aren't just workers: they are whole people with all sorts of other pressures. Growing up in South Africa, that was very clear to me. On top of the normal business challenges, you had real political issues in play.”

“Apartheid was an evil, evil system, which took dignity away from people and, in my opinion, prevented businesses from flourishing.” Gary was involved in

a number of anti-Apartheid organisations. He experienced criticism from within the company, as well as from consumers, suppliers, and the wider business community for his actions. But this backlash only strengthened Gary's conviction that the system couldn't continue.

“I have very strong views about the role of business: it's much broader than just serving customers and making a profit. I believe that businesses have an obligation to give back to the communities that they work in, especially when those communities aren't able to fend for themselves. That has always been a core tenet of what we do at Belron.”

Gary was appointed CEO of Belron in 2000. As well as upholding the principles established by his father and grandfather, Gary leveraged his experience running the UK and European businesses of Belron to set out an agenda for expansion. >

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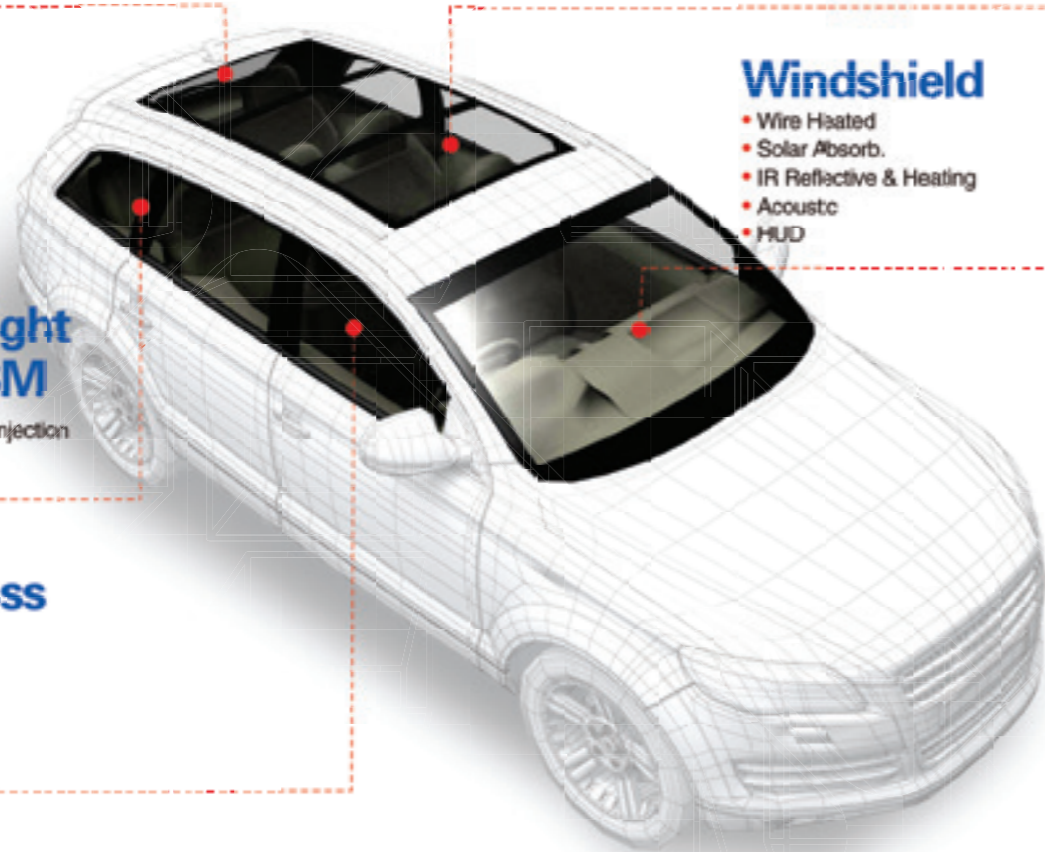
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“At that time, I realised that Belron was really just a collection of businesses.”

Consequently, Gary set out to establish a culture of collaboration where best practices are shared between businesses, allowing the company to take advantage of all the learning accumulated in business units around the world. It wasn't all smooth sailing: Gary explained that some strategies had better results than others. For instance, the decision to install pan-European warehouses was much more effective than attempts to implement global IT solutions. Gary responded by recognising the mistake and reverting to the original IT strategy.

Early on, Gary realised that the most important part of his job was to develop a fantastic senior team. “As a CEO, I have to recognise that I can't do everything myself, and I have to find people who are like-minded, and who bring a whole range of skills to the table.”

Gary describes assembling a team of people who could grow with the business as one of his biggest achievements. Even now, he says that a huge amount of time, effort, and money is spent on the development of the Belron senior team, including recruitment, induction, and ongoing development.

Once the learning from the disparate Belron business units had been consolidated, Gary looked to grow the company. “We went from having a presence in

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“Fuyao is honoured to work with Belron, which has a clear vision and dedication to provide quality products and services to customers as well as strong commitment in corporate responsibility, and Fuyao also shares this vision.” - Curie Chen, Vice President, Overseas ARG, Fuyao Glass Industry Group Co., Ltd.

nine countries, back in 2000, to operating in 34 countries today,” Gary says. “We undertook an aggressive growth strategy through acquisition and organic growth, both in countries where we were already established, and in new markets and territories.”

Bumps in the road aside, the company's revenues have grown by a factor of four since Gary became CEO. He remarks that one of the main challenges was to grow the company while maintaining its family feel. “There's a risk that a unique culture and set of values can be diluted when a company grows as quickly as ours. But preserving that culture was always at the forefront of our minds, and continues to be today.”

Gary attributes the success of Belron partly to the company's intense focus on the vehicle glass repair and replacement industry. “Unlike many of our competitors, who work with other kinds of glass, or in other automotive service industries, we have been completely focused, and this has given us huge advantages,” Gary says.

“So far, we've taken the view that opportunities for growth within our core businesses or expansion into new geographies are less risky options, because we know how to run these businesses globally.” Gary adds that this focus has made Belron innovative and creative in thinking about strategies that are going to make a lasting difference for the company.

For example, the decision to offer repairs was a highly controversial move, since they cost about a third of the price of replacements. “Our idea was to show insurance companies that we could save them money by repairing, and then they'd give us more business in the longer term, which is exactly what happened,” Gary says.

Gary describes the Belron relationship with insurance companies as a two-way street. “Insurance companies are a key stakeholder in our business, as we need them to be recommending

our services to their policyholders. Even more importantly though, we can be of huge help to them.”

A large-scale study conducted with McKinsey & Company showed that if a policyholder has a great claims experience with Belron, they are significantly more likely to either renew their current policy, or to buy another policy from their insurance company. “We like to think of ourselves as a part of their marketing, because we've proved that we can add value to insurance companies in a number of different ways.”

“It's a similar story on the supplier side: we cannot operate without great suppliers. Although a piece of glass might not sound like a complicated piece of kit, there can be over 100 different variants, depending on the vehicle. All of our glass and glue suppliers are absolutely critical to our success.”

Contemplating the future, Gary looks to the emerging markets for growth opportunities. “We've been in China now for four years, and that's been a bit of a rollercoaster ride,” says Gary. Despite the challenges, Gary insists that China is a market Belron is absolutely committed to, even if their business model turns out slightly different there.

“There's still a lot for me to do as CEO of Belron. As with any long-term vision, I have achieved some of the goals I set out at the beginning, but new ones are always coming up. Being a leader in any business is a journey, rather than a destination.”

It is Gary's hope that his children will join him on this journey with Belron: “I have two sons and a daughter: Jack is only 13 years old, Hannah is 20 and studying social work, and my eldest, Sam, is a language student at university. I'd love for them to go into the business, but I remember being that age, and I know the worst thing I could do now would be to tell them to come and be in the company.” Like his father before him, Gary will let his children come to the business on their own terms. •