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# Part of the Team

Andrew Page is one of the largest auto parts distributors in the UK and is planning for more expansion in the coming years.

Images by Phillip Shannon

**W**ith a history spanning almost 100 years, and a position as one of the United Kingdom's largest distributors of auto parts and workshop equipment, Andrew Page knows its business. It was started by the late Andrew Page in 1917, and members of the Page family are still involved in the company to this day. Originally known as Andrew Page & Son, it was based out of a shop in Leeds and enjoyed modest success. After being forced to briefly close during World War II, in 1946 the company was reopened by Andrew's son James as Andrew Page & Co Ltd. In 1974, James's son Andrew joined the company, which saw rapid growth in the following decades.

Previously the COO of Andrew Page, Mark Saunders was promoted to the CEO role in

February 2015, and was tasked with pursuing the board's strategy for expansion. At the time of the appointment, Jim Sumner, executive chairman of Andrew Page, expressed his confidence: "Mark has done an outstanding job in the past year and thoroughly merits this promotion."

Mark's career history means he has the perfect skill set to take Andrew Page onwards and upwards. After studying economics at the University of Salford in Manchester, Mark gained a graduate position with a major UK supermarket chain and hasn't looked back since. "I started as a graduate trainee with Waitrose supermarket and then worked my way through various organisations over the years. This includes household names. I worked for Sears and Fosters Group for about six years in junior buying roles."

Interestingly, fashion has been a recurring theme, as Mark worked as head of merchandising for Tesco's clothing division at the turn of the century, was on the board of Matalan, and then vice-president of retail for Levi Strauss Europe between 2004 and 2009. He also served as chief executive of Habitat, with the remit of addressing the furniture company's falling sales. However, despite the high-street experience, he did a couple of more relevant interim roles, the last of which was for automotive supplier Saxon Industries. This is where he crossed paths with the dynamic chairman of Andrew Page, Jim Sumner.

As investment firm Endless negotiated its acquisition of Andrew Page in February 2014, Jim Sumner approached Mark with the offer to come onboard as COO. "It's a very classic >



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progression," says Mark. "When I was younger, I had functional roles such as merchandising, which is the science-like side of buying in fashion, and then those roles became broader, like my role at Levi's."

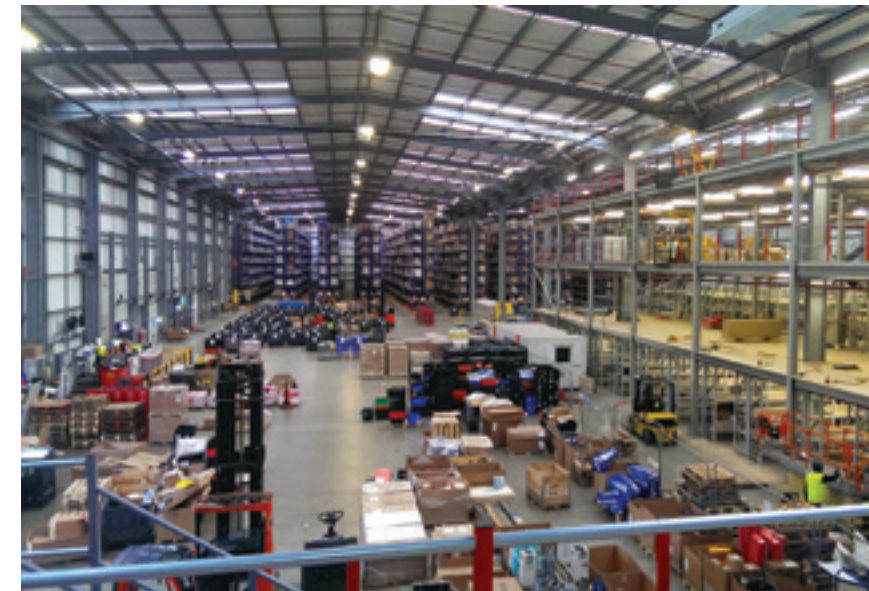
Since Mark stepped into the CEO role, he's been focusing on innovations and increasing sales volume. Last year, he explains, was about Andrew Page's new management settling into their roles and forming a cohesive team, whereas this year and into the future will be about moving the company into new areas and continuing its growth. "The key focus last year was all about getting the new management team together, getting to grips with the business, getting operationally stable, and moving into operational excellence. We wanted to take some of the new ideas that we generated and turn them into reality.

"This year the company will concentrate on embedding a lot of the initiatives that it started last year. The best example of this is the e-commerce site opened a month ago. It's currently working well, but there will be a big push in the second half of this year to really ramp up the volume of sales that the site handles." Andrew Page will also expand into the commercial vehicle sector—a key opportunity.

Andrew Page has already made big changes and positive steps towards its expansion. The company has acquired a number of sites over the past three years, expanding its reach across the UK. The year 2012 proved to be pivotal, with the opening of five new branches and the acquisition of well-known industry chain Camberley Auto Factors. This brought the total number of Andrew Page branches to 93, and annual sales exceeded £120 million. "This was an extraordinary example of how business acumen and the support of our loyal staff created one of the UK's most successful aftermarket automotive organisations," explains Mark.

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Further sites acquired in 2014 have taken the number of branches to over 100, putting Andrew Page well underway to becoming a truly nationwide distributor.

Some of those key site acquisitions followed the demise of Unipart Automotive after it went into administration in 2014. The deal to buy some Unipart branches, which boosted Andrew Page's network by 21 sites, was pulled together in only five days and saved numerous jobs. "We are happy with the progress so far," Mark says. "The last nine to 10 months have been very much involved in bringing the new sites into the family, fully integrating them, rebranding them, training all the staff in the Andrew

Page way of doing things." Next year will be about getting back to opening new branches, as the company's vision is to have truly national coverage and to be able to offer a consistently high level of customer service.

The acquisition of Unipart also led to incorporating new staff into the Andrew Page family, something Mark says was hugely positive for the organisation. "As one of the most successful aftermarket automotive organisations in the UK, we believe our success can be attributed to the diverse capabilities of our 2,000-plus personnel." The company believes that continual expansion requires the right people and that it has a varied range of career >





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opportunities; therefore, it's always looking for forward-thinking and dynamic individuals.

Part of the work when incorporating those Unipart sites into Andrew Page was ensuring a cultural fit. The culture of Andrew Page is focused around customer satisfaction, and Mark says that he always follows his words with actions to ensure he sets a good example. "Our core values are all about being customer focused in terms of service, absolute integrity, and treating customers and staff alike in a fair and respectful way. And you instil those values in an organisation by actually walking the talk—the example you set is what counts; I always emphasise this. And every time we let ourselves down, usually it's because we are compromising. You have to live

and behave like it every day, all the time."

This customer focus is shown in many of Andrew Page's initiatives and strategies, Mark explains, and it invests in its business and infrastructure accordingly. "We set ourselves out to be a quality player, and we have a big focus on relationships with our customers. We are not just about the transaction; we would rather build and maintain relationships with customers over long periods of time and genuinely understand what their needs are."

A company has to meet customers' needs in the short term, but Andrew Page believes that always focusing on building relationships is a key differentiator between it and the rest of the market. It cites its service levels as a key metric;



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for example, 85 per cent of the orders taken are delivered within 45 minutes. "There is clearly a big investment in the logistics infrastructure in order to be able to provide that level of service," says Mark.

Some of this investment includes the creation of a new division focused on using technology to better meet customer needs. The company launched an online e-commerce venture, AP-Tech, which allows customers to purchase specialised equipment at the click of a button. Created in 2000, the AP-Tech division was designed to fulfil customers' tool, workshop equipment, and training requirements. AP-Tech now employs four sales advisers, three full-time technical representatives, and a service engineer responsible for equipment demonstrations, warranty, and customer support. With the recent development of AP-Tech's own website, this highly specialised service is now available online to workshops UK-wide.

This isn't the only innovation that the company has introduced. Andrew Page's training program, >



Auto Education, was first established in 2003 to acknowledge the need for training within the industry. Today it consists of over 25 courses to improve and advance technician skills. The second half of 2009 saw the launch of the updated Auto Education website, where garage technicians can now view all up-and-coming courses and book securely online. Partnered with industry stalwarts, including Bosch and Delphi Automotive, it offers comprehensive training for its customers and has proven extremely popular to date.

These services all come back to Andrew Page's aim to put the customer first. The company prides itself on delivery within an hour in the majority of cases, which makes it easier for its technician customers to do their job. As Mark explains, the company doesn't just sell a product and consider that the end of the relationship; the staff go above and beyond to ensure the

best after-sales service. Mark emphasises that the company is not the bargain basement of parts suppliers; it is about quality products and quality service.

"We always aim to be competitive, but we're not always the cheapest in the market. It's much more about availability and service and sorting customers out when something's not right, and not just leaving them out in the cold," says Mark. Going the extra mile to resolve an issue whatever the problem, and the attitude of helping the customer, is seen as a key differentiator. Andrew Page has spent a lot of time focusing on meeting customers' needs, in terms of getting the right measurement skills across the business. "When we are reviewing customer accounts, we know the exact situation for each customer; for example, we would see that 97 per cent of the deliveries were within the 45 minutes that we made a commitment on for that account."

Andrew Page also works very closely with suppliers to ensure that it is able to provide this service to customers; the company can't deliver products within 45 minutes if it doesn't have effective supply chains in place. In order to have the best possible relationship with suppliers, Andrew Page works collaboratively with its stakeholders. "[The key] is sitting down on a very regular basis in a formal manner, and then topping that with informal meetings and obviously e-mail and phone conversations, to cover everything thoroughly.

"It's also about being pretty transparent and saying, 'Right. Let's agree on a joint vision as to where this relationship is going; what do we see the opportunities to be, where do we and our supplier partners see our shortcomings, and where are the opportunities?' Then it's about forming a plan on how to do that, and then implementing it and discussing what worked and what didn't: 'Do we need to do a bit of

this or that because it's not working out how we thought it was going to?'" Ultimately, Mark believes, it's about talking to people, because suppliers want their customers to be successful and to be making money. The flip side of that is suppliers to be successful in making money, too.

For the future, Mark has plans to expand Andrew Page further, potentially into Wales and further afield. He says while the company has good coverage over England, there are gaps Andrew Page is looking to fill. "It's throughout England, because we currently don't go further north than Carlisle," Mark explains. "At the moment, our focus is England; but, having said that, I am sure at some stage we will cross the border into south Wales, because it makes good business sense. Our expansion plan for the future is about plugging any holes in our coverage map to deliver a consistent service no matter where a customer is based."

Andrew Page is beginning to look at franchising as a possible model for this further expansion, Mark explains. The company has developed a strategy and franchise package which Mark believes is very workable for both Andrew Page and the franchisee. "We now have a franchise package that we have developed, and it certainly looks attractive for us from a financial perspective; but, just as importantly, it looks very effective for a franchisee."

As part of its engagement plan on possible franchisees, Andrew Page was able to use the media as a promotional tool. "We talked about it in quite a generic way in a couple of trade publications, and we're now having detailed conversations with a number of people who registered an interest as a result." Franchise operations are seen as another route to achieving Andrew Page's expansion plans, as the market in the UK is nearing saturation in terms of the number of motor factors. "There's always a debate about opening up new sites in what is already a congested



marketplace or finding alternative ways to expand. This is a strong route to build alliances or a franchise to partner up with existing operations that are culturally and operationally aligned to where we aspire to be," explains Mark.

Regardless of its plans for expansion, Andrew Page is doing very well at the moment. In July, the company was announced as Factor of the Year 2015 at the prestigious Motor Trader Awards. This came shortly after Andrew Page published results that March 2015 was the company's best-ever month in its history. "It is great to be recognised by one of the most prestigious titles in the automotive aftermarket, and is testament to the hard work the

entire team has put in," Jim Sumner says. "We have been busier than ever over the past 12 to 18 months and are seeing the rewards of the strategic investments we have made in the business."

Mark believes that Andrew Page's success has come down to its focus on people and relationships, from its staff relationships, to its supplier relationships, to its commitment to its customers. "We brand ourselves as 'The Autoparts People', and that really says an awful lot. I think it speaks volumes about what we consider to be the most important part of our business, because this is an industry which is very people intensive and is all about relationships." •

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