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BUSINESS CLUB

TV set constructor seeks new channels

*Set designer Helix 3D must find new clients and prevent others benefiting from its ideas if it is to hit growth targets, writes **Andrew Stone***

CASE STUDY

It has been a torrid year and a bit for Woolwich-based Helix 3D, which has seen its traditional bread-and-butter work dry up. The company, which designs, builds and delivers installations for events promotions, as well as film and television productions, has had to fight hard to stay busy.

After several television clients cancelled projects last autumn, Brian Dowling, the managing director, could have been forgiven for giving in to despair and paring back operations.

"There are fewer projects around with smaller budgets, so we are constantly honing our competitive edge to keep ahead," Dowling says.

The business, which made the recent set for the Mary Poppins-inspired McCain's Chips TV advert, has seen other projects melt away. "Undoubtedly one of the main challenges in the past 12 months has been the collapse in TV advertising revenue," he admits. "It used to be the case that a designer would come to us with a sketch and we would build it. They were quick jobs with fast turnaround but revenue completely collapsed and our bread and butter disappeared."

For a business with comparatively high fixed costs this could have been catastrophic. The business runs its own workshop and HGV transport, an expensive facility but one that makes the business flexible, nimble and able to deliver its goods, ensuring reliability.

It is an expense but one that Dowling thinks is necessary. "Very few of our competitors can deliver like that but it means costs are high," he says. "It is a big hungry machine that needs to be fed. When a market collapses and revenue for other marketing is shrinking, the challenge of keeping things going is huge."

Despite these massive challenges, Dowling, a confirmed member of the glass-half-full

school, is eager to find the best ways to profit from the new opportunities that will arise from all this change.

"It's actually a time of fantastic opportunity," he says. "Organisations are changing and old ways of doing things are being swept out. We are going out and seeking new clients in new markets. We're also reinvesting in a large new spray booth big enough to spray a vehicle in."

"It's a great time to recruit fantastic new people. Work from overseas is coming in and the exchange rate helps us compete. I did a quote just last week for a big national and international company."

Dowling's goal, audacious even during the best of times, is to grow turnover from £1.5m by

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50pc in the next 12 months. Helix will do this by taking on a larger role for clients, he says.

"We've tried to go up the food chain over the years. Rather than dealing with designers we're taking on bigger projects and we've looked for new markets. We're looking for the type of work no one else can do."

A good example is the company's move into experiential marketing projects, the new buzzword in the industry. Two months ago a hotel group wanted to promote a special double room offer, for which Helix made four giant double beds, each of which had two hidden trampolines which were used by professional gymnasts in each of four cities: London, Paris, New York and Shanghai.

Dowling and his team took care



The joy of sets: Brian Dowling of Helix 3D says the company is well positioned and can operate on a big scale, but not enough people know about it

of everything including getting city permits for the promotions.

Another of the most recent contracts was a rapid turnaround of an attraction at Chessington World of Adventures to promote *Ice Age 3*. "We've deliberately targeted that area to make up for the fall in revenue elsewhere and I think we've become a leader in terms of delivery," Dowling says. "We've also done more international work. Increasingly marketing departments are running campaigns on a multi-

country level yet the marketing and design of these projects happens in one city. If we can get in front of right people we have a chance to get some big projects."

"London is well placed for that. It has a reputation for design and for theatrical and production type skills. And we think we've positioned ourselves well. We're an independent business able to operate on a big scale and deliver projects really flexibly all year round."

But Dowling is aware of the

challenges. Helix and its 12 full-time staff will need to maintain standards and protect its reputation as it grows. Ensuring the quality of work is one thing, getting the credit for its creativity, its hard work, and even in some cases its ideas, is quite another.

"Part of the challenge of picking up these jobs is making people aware you've done them. They don't have our brand on them and we find other people often end up taking credit for work we've done."

"It's not unheard of for us to

present, do a drawing and see it done by someone else. We strive to maintain copyright but we're always looking for a way to do that better. This is a bigger challenge in some ways than getting work in."

"We've got an idea to produce a coffee table-type book as a portfolio of our work. If we do 10 books and tell a story of how we took on the project and a picture of the end product it's could be a good way to have our work sitting on someone's desk."

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