CASE STUDY

REVISITING ART OF THE LOUVRE

Beyond mere window-dressing, clever blinds create a building's climate and atmosphere. **Report: Kath Walters**

Blind faith: Control over sunlight and fresh air improves productivity

In the campaign to reduce the nation's greenhouse gas emissions and improve workplace productivity, the humble louvre is making a comeback.

Commercial buildings account for 10 per cent of Australia's greenhouse emissions and 90 per cent of those come from the use stage of the building: heating (32 per cent), cooling (18 per cent) and lighting (18 per cent) are the biggest energy drains, *A Clean Energy Future for Australia, (Clean Energy Group,* 2004) reports.

Romilly Madew, chief executive of the Green Building Council of Australia, (GBCA), explains: "It is not just for energy – one of the reasons louvres are important is because we need to open up our buildings for more fresh air.

"We have really good air quality and there are lots of studies to show that where there is access to daylight and fresh air, productivity increases, whether in a school, a hospital or an office."

A trend towards controlling the amount of sun that hits the façade of commercial buildings – and how and when it enters – is driving a surge in demand for the louvre, external blind or shade.

Sydney company Horiso is pushing its way into this new market, which so far has been dominated by American and European providers.

To break that hold, Horiso overhauled its operations and management and developed smart products that automate "solar access" in commercial buildings.

When it started in 1995 Horiso was a division of its parent company, Turner Brothers, a curtain and blind company with a 100-year history.

Under the management of Scott Turner (fourth generation), Horiso forged ahead of the market demand for "solar control systems" to reduce energy use.

Horiso custom-built louvres and blinds for the special projects of its parent, such as No 1 Bligh Street, Sydney (Grocon), ANZ Melbourne Atrium (Bovis Lend Lease), Darling Walk, Pyrmont, (Stockland) and the NZI Centre, Wellington New Zealand, (NewCrest Developments). All up, Turner Brothers has invested $1.5 million in Horiso.

The company sets itself apart from competitors by making both the hardware (louvres) and the software to drive them.

Competitors often specialise in one side or the other and blame games arise in solving problems.

The software that controls Horiso's systems calculates the angle at which the sun hits the building throughout the day, and accounts for other factors such as shadows or reflection from adjacent structures.

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Every louvre or shade is individually adjusted. The system integrates into the building management systems controlling heating and lighting.

Five years ago, Turner Brothers decided to change Horiso's business model so that it could sell to other suppliers, including rivals of the parent company. At the time, Turner Brothers bought 80 per cent of Horiso's output.

Bruno Seguin, the company's general manager, met Turner at a trade show. Turner asked Seguin to manage the spin-off of Horiso from its parent. Seguin, who is French, comes from a family business background in window furnishings like Turner's.

Seguin had two choices: "I could start from the bottom of the chain, with administration of the factory, or appoint more senior and educated people; managers." He chose the latter and appointed an engineer, production and logistics manager.

To cement separate corporate identities, Seguin and his team modified all the internal business processes.

"We changed the production and engineering approach, we put on more people," he says. "All the administrative work was a challenge."

The company had profits enough to fund the change. Horiso began charging Turner Brothers commercial rates and Seguin looked for new distributors. He made contact with façade engineers, created "specifiers" and other marketing tools for distributors and spread the word that Horiso was the manufacturer behind the Turner Brothers' high-profile projects.

It took 2½ years to change the company's administration, operations and client base: just in time for the global financial crisis.

IbisWorld notes that construction industry revenue plummeted 25 per cent through 2008. Although IbisWorld predicts a significant recovery by mid-2011, it sees no return to pre-GFC revenue and employment levels.

But Seguin isn't worried. His company's revenue grew 25 per cent in the past two years – right through the GFC – with new local and overseas distributors, to reach $5 million in 2009-10. About 30 per cent is export.

Seguin expects revenue to surge another 25 per cent in 2010-2011, driven by demand for five- and six-star rated office buildings and companies seeking to attract and retain the best staff. BRW