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Making good

Economic turmoil, phoenixing companies and bad debt. Nathan Bushell meets Super Seal, a trade fabricator determined to bring stability and service to the sometimes turbulent Irish and Northern Irish markets.

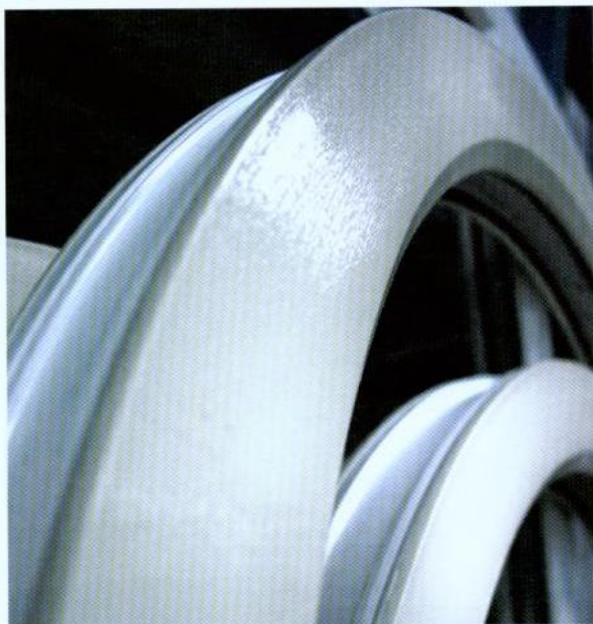


"It's not easy", says Ken Taylor, managing director, Super Seal. "Anyone who tells you it is isn't being truthful but we're working hard and investing in our business and our service to our customers and we'll continue to do that."

Manufacturing 1,500 frames per week in the FC 60mm and FS70mm systems from Profile 22, the Belfast-based trade fabricator supplies installers across the North and the Republic of Ireland. As managing director of one of Northern Ireland's biggest trade suppliers, Ken remains very much hands on and is just a little 'uncomfortable' behind a desk.

"I can't just sit in the office, I need to be out and about", he says. Having started his working life as a joiner he has more than 30 years experience in the construction industry, founding Super Seal in 1990. As if to reiterate a point, as we speak the phone rings, a couple of murmured 'yeahs' and Ken puts down the receiver. He explains: "One of our customers had a couple of mis-measures, he needs them tomorrow so I'll go down to Cork tonight."

continued: p10



It's indicative of the company's commitment to customer service, something which has meant Super Seal has maintained its pre-downturn volume.

"It's been tough, there's no doubt about it", says Claire Mulholland, customer service manager, Super Seal. She continues: "We have had to give our existing and our new customers more, whether that's sales support or new products but we've done fairly well, albeit through a lot of hard work and effort.

"Although we're big and although it's a bit of cliché, our customers aren't just numbers, we work really hard at knowing them individually and it's definitely supported us in retaining our existing customer base and bringing on new."

The fabricator, as you might expect, given the clamour on the other side of the Irish Sea, offers a full range of Window Energy Rated products. But as an early adopter – it offered 24 WER A and B rated products as early as May 2008 – it has used the commercial advantage WERs offer to good effect to support its installer networks.

Claire explains: "WERs have been a big part of our strategy. We came on board early and we made a point of sitting down with our installers so that they knew what they were

and how to sell them and that's been important in maintaining our volume and that of our customers.

"Pretty early on Window Energy Rated products were accounting for 20% of our business and they have continued to grow."

This investment has to some extent allowed Super Seal to counter economic downturn in the North and downturn coupled with wider economic instability south of the border.

"It is a difficult market – you have the wider economic problems coupled with maturity. What makes it more difficult is that you get these companies pushing down prices to win business, running up debts, not paying them, going out of business and then starting again the next day. That makes it hard for our customers and hard for us," says Ken.

He adds: "And it makes it particularly difficult for their customers because it leaves them with unfulfilled orders and out of pocket – it's not good for anyone."

But the landscape isn't entirely bleak. In the same way that Super Seal has put distance between itself and its competitors on Window Energy Ratings it has and continues to push foiled options so that

almost 40% of the product it supplies features either a colour or wood grain foiled finish.

"We do a lot of Oak; of 1,500 frames last week a little over 300 were in the finish but we're also doing more black and cream, largely in the South. In the North for the moment colour seems to have less of an impact," says Claire.

So what of the future? Super Seal predicts more of the same in the short term, coupled with consolidation in the Irish and Northern Irish markets in the longer term. Ken is a man of relatively few words but when he says them they count. "It has to give at some stage, there has to be some form of consolidation – it can't go as it is now", he says.

He brings the same dose of realism to his assessment of new opportunities, in this case that created following the decision by a number systems companies to drop their 60mm suites.

"There's ongoing demand for 60mm frames. If our customers want a 70mm system we'll supply it but most want a 60mm frame", says Ken. Currently out of 1,500 frames per week manufactured by Super Seal, 1,200 are manufactured in Profile 22's FC 60mm system.

He continues: "The average

wooden frame that they'll take out is around 63mm maybe 64mm, so a 70mm frame creates a lot more cutting back – installers don't want the added work and homeowners don't want it because of the additional disruption.

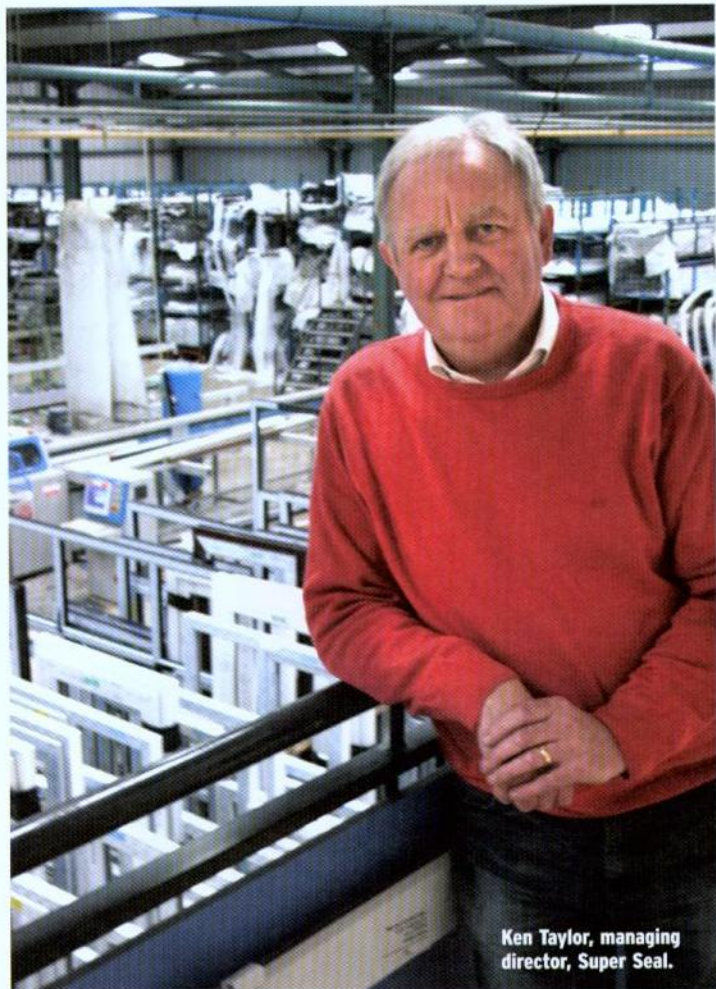
"If you're simply cutting back into plaster it means a lot more making good but cutting back into a tile makes a lot of extra work and that's more time on site and less margin.

"It seems to me naïve that some systems companies are dropping it but that gives us an advantage because we can offer our customers security of supply when many other fabricators won't be able to because their hand is being forced."

And going into its third decade in business, Super Seal is pinning its future on a combination of continuing hard work and investment, while it waits patiently in the wings for the market to achieve some modicum of sustainability. Ken concludes: "We don't see any let up in conditions anytime soon. Things are tough in the North and South. You simply have to continue to invest right now, if businesses don't they won't be here much longer."

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PROFILE 22

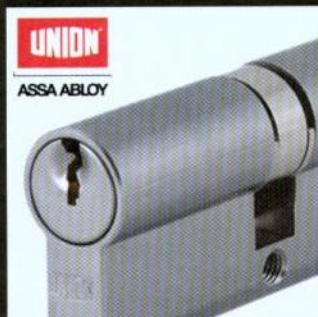


Ken Taylor, managing director, Super Seal.

FC 60 from Profile 22

- Proven comprehensive system fully developed product range offering a choice of four outer frames 52mm width, 59mm, 67mm and 80mm.
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- Slim width frame profiles maximising glass area and thermal efficiency
- Patented RCM reinforcement further enhances thermal efficiency
- 60mm sashes and beads fully integrate with Profile 22's 70mm outer frame and transom, allowing fabricators to target both markets with minimum stock holding.
- Fully accredited

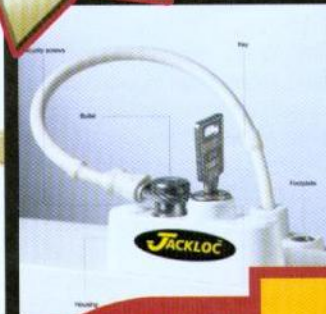
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