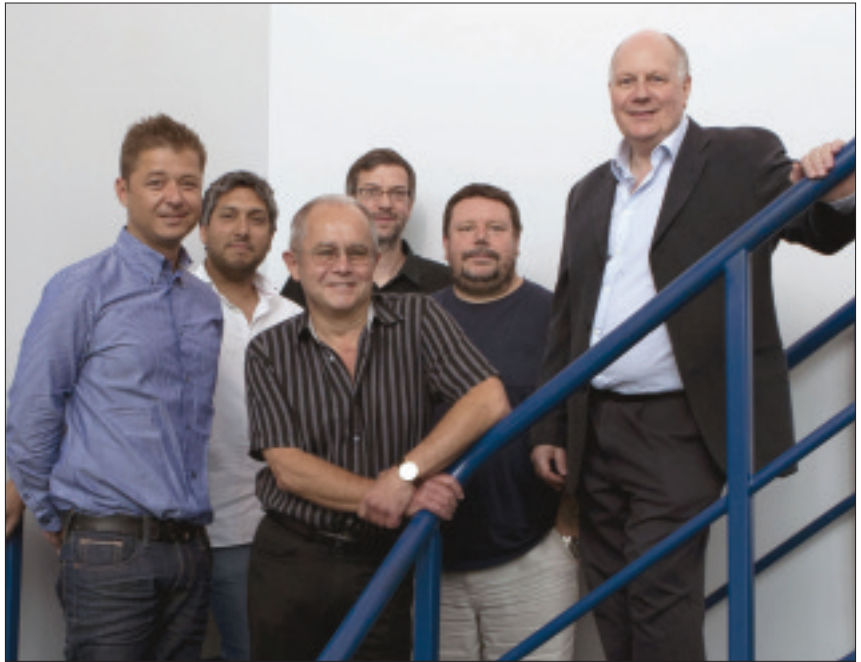


The AC-ET Test

In the last 40 years the entertainment industry has seen explosive growth, both economically and technologically. For the businesses that support it, the process of balancing the successful delivery of the latest products with managing the expectations of the end user, could be likened to taking part in a Grand Prix racing season. One company that has stayed the circuit is A.C. Entertainment Technologies Ltd. Sarah Rushton-Read looks at what has kept the company in pole position on the entertainment technology grid . . .



For 40 years A.C. has successfully negotiated the sharp hairpin bends and high-speed straights of a fast developing industry alongside the shifting camber of a fluctuating economy with intuitive reactions. This has seen the company grow exponentially from the lighting and projection hobby of the then 16-year-old company co-founder and recently appointed Executive Chairman, David Leggett, to a leading international provider of entertainment technology products and solutions.

Since inception, A.C.'s growth has seen the company through a number of incarnations, driven by Leggett's 'if it felt right, we did it' pragmatic approach. It's fair to say Leggett is renowned throughout the company and beyond, for his ability to read the market and act upon his intuition. The fact that the 'A.C. Group' has managed to grow from a small hobby business to become a multi-million pound distribution, lighting manufacture and project design range of companies, is surely testament to that.

Celebrating its 40th year of trading this year, A.C.'s continued mission is to further develop its reputation as a leading one-stop technology shop for lighting, audio, rigging and video equipment, in-house manufacturing, consumables, bargain and used equipment - and any related services.

A.C. stocks a huge range of products and component parts manufactured for the

backstage industry. Coinciding with the 40th anniversary, former A.C. UK sales director Phill Capstick has recently taken over as managing director and Jonathan Walters has expanded his responsibility, from Northern sales director of the company's Leeds office, to become UK sales director. The restructure frees Leggett from the day-to-day management of the company to concentrate on the future direction of the Group and marks a new era of expansion for the business.

Capstick explains: "Today, A.C. isn't just one company: it's a fleet of businesses, which supply equipment and state-of-the art solutions to dealers, distributors and end users in over 80 countries. The Group of companies employs over 200 people worldwide and has an annual turnover approaching the £50 million mark."

In its 40 years A.C. has seen first-hand every stage in the growth of the live entertainment and broadcast industry. It has penetrated markets that 20 years ago would - at first glance - seem unlikely adopters. For example, entertainment lighting, audio, video and staging equipment is increasingly being used to augment sports opening ceremonies, hotels and restaurants, corporate events, schools and colleges and even private homes and parties. As Walters says: "This has opened up massive new markets for us. Particularly because we have the technical know-how and infrastructure in place to support these non-traditional customers."

Above, L-R: Jonathan Walters, Cally Bacchus, Peter Searles, Mark Tonks, Phill Capstick, David Leggett.

Facing page: Members of the High Wycombe head office UK and Export Sales teams.



A.C.'s workforce is undoubtedly one of its most important assets. Marketing manager for the company James Molony elaborates: "We rely on our loyal and knowledgeable staff; not just in sales but throughout the company in purchasing, training, after-sales support, technical services, IT, accounts and marketing, plus a whole heap more."

In addition to being a single-source equipment supplier, AC-ET comprises four specialist product sales divisions - Lighting, Audio, Rigging and Video. However, for many of its 40 years the company was known simply as A.C. Lighting; in 2008 it rebranded to reflect the extension of its ever increasing technology stockholding into complementary areas.

In charge of each division are knowledgeable individuals that understand their product sector inside

out, to provide a level of support akin to a specialist dealer. A team of sales people and admin staff provide support, as Walters discusses: "The UK Lighting Sales team has doubled over the last eight years in response to increased sales. Better-trained and informed staff has been key to this growth. A similar pattern has emerged for the other AC-ET Divisions - Audio, Rigging and Video."

Capstick continues: "In an effort to remain customer-focussed, AC-ET is continually investing in its staff and systems. The company's BS EN ISO9001:2008 certification reflects the importance it places on customer service."

So what is AC-ET today?

It's a long way from the box-shifting company it was once perceived to be, as Molony explains: "These days AC-ET is better known for its vast product and

60 seconds with David Leggett:

Leggett, co-founder and executive chairman, is surprisingly a quietly modest, understated; yet perceptibly determined individual who loves

motor sports, I asked him,



How did you end up doing what you do?

When I left school my friend Richard Floyd and I set up a small business - we called ourselves Alpha Centauri Light Show - and spent our weekends cheering up dull venues such as clubs, multi-purpose halls and the like with lighting and projection. In those days purpose-built super clubs were still in their infancy!

How did the company evolve?

We were lighting bands and were approached to do a tour. I was working in a lab during the day so I took a two-week holiday to service it. The band turned out to be Status Quo and from there A.C.'s clients quickly grew to include AC/DC, The Damned, Depeche Mode, The Tourists and many more.

So how did A.C. grow?

We started to move from lighting production into lighting sales. We soon realised it was wrong to compete with our retail customers and decided to concentrate our efforts on reselling and distributing product.

Why do you think A.C. has done so well?

The industry, to all intents and purposes, is only one generation old. Many of our clients have grown up professionally using A.C. However, A.C. has also grown by virtue of the people we've recruited. In terms of staff we encourage personal growth and we welcome new ideas. For example, Adam Beaumont, who was a sales manager, brought the A.C. Rigging division idea to the table.

Running such a growing concern, have you had many sleepless nights over the years?

Not really. Our progress has been pretty measured and our growth has not been forced. We've always discussed the business's development as a collective and we make major decisions in the same way.

How has the economic climate affected business?

There seems to be an increasing level of acceptance for generic products; the industry is less brand-driven. People are also more open to buying high quality second-hand equipment.

What do you see as your role in the industry today and in the future?

To ensure that the market is well informed and to encourage the adoption of new technology and safe, fair working practice. We pride ourselves on the diverse services and level of support we offer our customers, end users and projects alike. We have excellent relationships with our manufacturers. We're constantly on the look-out for the next big product or technology development. In addition we're proud to have played a part in establishing products that have become industry standards, such as Wholehog and WYSIWYG.



From top: Five scenes from the AC-ET operation - The technology demo room; The Cable Express service; The Scroll Express gel string service; the hoist assembly area; and a picture taken at the company's recent Digital Switchover open days.



Meet the staff



Division: Lighting
Name: Jonathan Walters
Position: UK Sales Director

Background:

I have been in the entertainment industry since leaving school. After completing a technical theatre and stage management course at Middlesex Polytechnic, I worked in London for several years in various lighting freelance roles in both the concert and theatre sectors before ending up as Chief LX at the Theatre Royal Haymarket, London.

On moving North in the early nineties, I then moved into the world of lighting rental at Futurist Light & Sound, before moving on to project manage several large installation projects in the Far East.

The industry has taken me all over the world and introduced me to some very colourful characters to say the least, no day is the same and I wouldn't work in any other industry!

I joined A.C. almost 17 years ago -starting A.C. North from my back bedroom. I'm relishing the challenges ahead in my new role as UK sales director.

Exclusive & Key Brands:

Chroma-Q, Jands Vista, Jands, Spotlight, GLP, Socapex, Tourflex Datasafe, Pani, Strong, Ape Labs, Gekko, VARI*LITE, PixelRange, Lycian, Mole Richardson, Manfrotto Lighting Support, Avenger, City Theatrical, Powerlock, Avolites, Reel EFX



Division: Video
Name: Alistair Smyth
Position: Sales Executive

Background:

I fell into the industry whilst at University, spending summer breaks working on the outdoor music festival circuit knee deep in mud. Once I graduated the entertainment technology industry seemed a more pleasing pursuit. So years spent working in technical support & service with Vari*lite Production Services & High End Systems followed. Fancying a move abroad I then spent 5 years living in Canada working for Christie Lites. Eventually wanting to move back to the UK, A.C. offered me an exciting opportunity in tech sales within the newly formed video division. Today it is still exciting working with a great portfolio of products, trying to match them with a varied clientele and diverse range of applications.

Key Brands:

Green Hippo, Christie Digital, TV One, G-LEC, Midiator



Division: Audio
Name: Peter Butler
Position: Sales Manager

Background:

I started in professional Audio in the 80s, when the industry was in its infancy. At the time the number of 'pro audio' brands available was relatively small. Some of the people I met back then are still around and many have become good friends.

After a brief stint in retail I spent the next 16 years working with one of the UK's most prolific installers. At the same time I gained qualifications in Electronics.

I joined A.C. to oversee the development of A.C. Audio. It's not been without its challenges but it's gratifying to have the support of some of the best and most well known people in the industry.

Key Brands:

AKG, BSS, Crown, dbx, JBL, Lexicon, Soundcraft, ASL, Australian Monitor, Aviom, Beyerdynamic, Biamp, Dynacord, MC2 Audio, XTA, Ohm, EMO, Tecpro NEXO, Yamaha, Traction Sound, RSS by Roland



Division: Rigging
Name: Adam Beaumont
Position: Sales Manager

Background:

I started out studying Lighting and Sound engineering at Oldham college in the early 90s. After leaving college I worked as a technician at Stageworks Worldwide Productions, Blackpool, before going on to work for rental and production companies doing lighting and rigging on a wide range of shows and several events. After spending a few seasons on the electrics crew at Opera North in Leeds, I left to work abroad in Brunei as chief lighting and sound engineer at Jerudong Park. I returned from Brunei and started working with Jono (Jonathan Walters) at A.C. North in 1997 and 14 years on I'm still here! I started the A.C. Rigging division in 2006 while I was A.C. brand manager for Litec truss. I've worked with some great people and made some great friends along the way.

Key Brands:

Litec, Columbus McKinnon, Entertainment Technology, VMB, Touring Custom Products, XLNT Pro Motion control, Kinesys, Prolyte Group, Out Board Electronics, Crosby, Tractel, Yale, James Thomas engineering, Petzl, Pfaff, Manfrotto / Avenger, Broad Weigh

[Please note: in certain countries some products listed may not be available from AC-ET.]



Above: The High Wycombe base, outside and (right) in . . .



industry expertise, which draws upon the knowledge of a team of loyal staff who have nearly 600 years' combined experience between them. This enables the company to provide a whole range of complementary services which add value at every stage of the customer experience, including product training, demos, equipment maintenance and servicing, plus time-saving add-ons such as cable manufacture, gel cutting and scroll assembly. All this is alongside a product range that embraces over 200 brands and which benefits from the competitive pricing that is afforded by volume purchasing power."

The company also holds regular open and training days on topical subjects: A.C. Audio's Peter Butler comments: "We've

recently held a series of seminars in both our Leeds and High Wycombe offices concerning the Digital Switchover. We looked at how it affects our industry and what AC-ET is able to do to assist customers going forwards."

In addition, the company has established a very busy used equipment division. Walters explains: "Often it's high quality

> The "A.C. Group" includes:

A.C. Entertainment Technologies Ltd - a leading international provider of cutting-edge entertainment technology products and solutions with sales and warehousing operations in High Wycombe and Leeds, UK.

A.C. Special Projects Ltd - provides lighting, audio and AV installations to the performance, architectural, educational and corporate sectors.

A.C. Lighting Inc - a value added distributor of stage, studio and event lighting, accessories and consumables based in North America.

A.C. Lighting Asia KK - based in Tokyo the company delivers a comprehensive range of the latest entertainment technology products throughout Japan.

Spectrum Manufacturing Inc - designer and OEM manufacturer of products for the entertainment and event lighting industry, which markets its products primarily through exclusive distribution agreements with leading international distributors.

ESL - one of the leading distributors of professional lighting equipment in France, supplying many exclusive products and a wide range of consumables.

Primarc - a leading distributor of UV and other specialist lamps in the UK, holding large stocks of Philips, GE, Osram, Ushio, Sylvania, Voltarc, Light Sources and First light UV.

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Above: Somerset House, one of the lighting installation achievements of AC Special Projects.

Key AC-ET Staff

- David Leggett - executive chairman
- Phill Capstick - managing director
- Cally Bacchus - international sales director
- Jonathan Walters - UK sales director
- Mark Tonks - IT & logistics director
- Peter Searles - director & company secretary
- Peter Butler - A.C. Audio sales manager
- Adam Beaumont - A.C. Rigging sales manager
- Alistair Smyth - A.C. Video sales executive
- Neil Vann - Jands product manager, Europe & Middle East

equipment that has been taken in exchange for new orders, or our own product divisions' ex-demo stock. This is of huge benefit to end users with smaller budgets."

As you can imagine, the warehouse in AC-ET's High Wycombe head office - which operates alongside the Leeds office's warehouse to supply deliveries nationwide and to over 80 countries - is a cross between a Santa's Workshop for entertainment professionals and Aladdin's cave of technology treasure. Boxes of all shapes and sizes merge into large storage areas for essential consumables, rigging, cable reels and chains. On the periphery the large gel-cutting room is workplace to a team of people who work tirelessly at long tables cutting gel and

making up colour scrolls for theatres and venues across the UK and beyond. In the custom cable making department huge mountains of black spaghetti rise from the floor as freshly made cables are stacked up by technicians who, surrounded by electrical test equipment, top and tail cables with various connectors.

A technology-packed customer demo and training room sits to the side of a large load-out area and lorries and trucks seem to arrive, load and unload almost as frequently as planes land and take off from Gatwick!

Further along is the events department, where trade shows and product demos are planned, and close to that are the IT, Logistics and Marketing departments which between them look after up to 10 websites, support promotion of the reseller's many products and services and ensure AC-ET's communication channels are kept open 24/7.

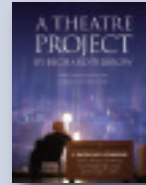
"We appreciate that entertainment is a 24-hour industry which is sometimes unpredictable, says Walters. "To counter that we keep a lot of frequently requested stock on our shelves and provide an emergency out-of-hours delivery service which is on call evenings and weekends 365 days a year, so the show goes on. We

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deal with major production and rental companies through to the guy operating out of his garage. We do our utmost to support our clients. Virtually every sale we make is gig-critical and we understand that it's absolutely essential that there is someone at the end of the phone to call up when the proverbial is hitting the fan."

AC-ET has a number of products it has exclusive distribution for in different areas of the world including its own Chroma-Q brand of LED fixtures and lighting accessories. Walters elaborates: "They include the Color Block LED, which revolutionised the rental market in 2004 with its multi-purpose, reconfigurable design suitable for a huge range of applications. More recently, the brand's Color Force second generation technology LED fixture range has been setting new standards in LED light output, colour blending and dimming performance."

The company is also the exclusive distributor, in selected territories, for the Jands Vista visually-based lighting control system, which recently launched its second generation Vista v2 software.

There can be few businesses in this industry that can match the volume AC-ET can offer in terms of product stocks held, turnover of cable manufacture, colour cuts and scrolls, never mind the capacity, skill and manpower

to service and certify chain hoist motors and repair a huge range of entertainment equipment. As Molony points out: "In the current economic climate this is useful to know as we know many customers are looking to repair broken or faulty equipment as opposed to replacing it."

Exports

A.C. has a thriving export department. For the past nine years Cally Bacchus, who has been with A.C. for 15 years, has been in charge. "I have a fantastic team who between them speak Russian, Lithuanian, French, Portuguese and Spanish fluently. Being able to speak the language of a customer is vital because each country does business very differently from another and it's important to understand that. AC's multilingual status has enabled us to build relationships with customers all around the world - at the last count we were trading to over 80 countries."

A.C. Special Projects Ltd

Sister company A.C. Special Projects provides lighting, audio and AV installations to the performance, architectural, educational and corporate sectors. A team of five headed up by managing director Peter Keiderling, known to his friends and colleagues simply as 'PK', assists theatre consultants, designers and architects with the specification, equipment supply, installation, commissioning and programming, of a project.

Keiderling says: "We set up A.C. Special Projects in 1999 as a provider of architectural lighting equipment sales and installation services. Since then we've supplied some of the industry's most prestigious lighting projects, including 2010 Lighting Design Awards winners: The British Music Experience (BME) at The O2 and the Centre of the Cell at Whitechapel in London. We've also carried out lighting projects at Somerset House, the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Sky Gallery at The O2, Park Plaza County Hall Hotel, Christie's and Eurostar."

Recent projects included the prestigious Whisky Mist nightclub in Beirut. In addition, A.C. Special Projects supplies a wide range of leading architectural lighting brands - as well as having access to AC-ET's entire stockholding - including Osram, Traxon, iGuzzini, Reggiani, Chroma-Q, Philips, Pulsar and Anolis, to name but a few.

Never one to stand still, A.C. is currently enhancing its online presence in a number of ways. Just around the corner is a completely revamped company website, featuring an improved e-commerce online ordering service. In addition the company is taking its communications with its customers and manufacturers to a new level through its corporate Facebook and Twitter sites.

> www.ac-et.com

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