

Dealer Focus

Responsible Retailing

Forbes Rentals has won awards for its commitment to sustainability and customer service. Sean Hannam went to the company's head office in Redhill, Surrey to find out more.



At this year's Innovative Electrical Retailing (IER) Awards, Retra member Forbes Rentals picked up the trophy for Best Independent Retailer Focused on Sustainability.

This accolade highlighted the company's commitment to promoting sustainability and environmental responsibility within the industry.

Commenting on the win, Forbes CEO, Kevin Herring, said: "We are beyond delighted to receive the IER Award for Best Independent Retailer for Sustainability.

"At Forbes, sustainability is deeply enshrined within our company ethos, and we are firmly committed to making a positive impact on the environment. This industry recognition is a big moment for us as a business."

Commitment

A few weeks after the IER Awards ceremony took place, *Alert* visited Forbes in

Redhill, Surrey, to find out more about the retailer's commitment to sustainability, as well as the company's background and its approach to business.



The original Forbes shop in Purley, south London

We spoke to Mr Herring and Hannah Forbes, who is head of brand and content management – her grandfather, Frederick Donald Forbes, founded the original Forbes retail business in 1926, in Purley, south London, and then her uncle, Malcolm and her father Stuart, took over the operation – they joined full-time in 1960 and 1967 respectively.

The business will celebrate its centenary in 2026. Ms Forbes says: “In terms of our offering, we’re hugely responsive to our customers and we’ve really diversified; we now provide mobility scooters as well as home and electrical appliances. While we’re progressive and agile in terms of the products we offer, we still offer the same service we’ve offered for almost a century – it’s just expanded.

“People still want traditional, reliable service without unexpected costs. I think the sustainability message is huge – there has been a movement away from the preoccupation with ownership.

“People can become a user rather than a consumer; reduce what they’re sending to landfill and reduce emissions. We offer a multi-cycle product lifespan and a more sustainable lifestyle choice.

“Winning an award for our sustainability was brilliant – it means a huge amount.”

Adds Mr Herring: “Rental is a sustainable alternative to purchase. If a product is faulty, we’ll repair it or replace it and if we can’t repair it, the parts will remain in our stock flow for re-use.

“We have comprehensive policies on recycling and waste, and fully comply with the WEEE directive for anything that has reached the end of its lifespan. It’s not just the product life cycles that are sustainable – it’s the entire business model.”

Split

Forbes is split between domestic and commercial rentals – Forbes Professional. The domestic side is currently the largest chunk of the business, but the commercial arm is growing very quickly.

“We’ve put a lot of investment into the commercial side,” says Mr Herring.

“Initially, our commercial operation was focused on the provision of TVs for hotels and healthcare but we quickly expanded to also offer commercial laundry solutions, mirroring our consumer offering.

“Our clients now include boutique hotels, large hotel chains, care homes, hospitals and student accommodation. We cover most of the UK and are seeing a rapid expansion of our commercial division, as clients become more aware of the financial, logistical and service benefits of leasing equipment.”

He adds: ““When the company was established, we were selling a mix of products – TV and white goods – but then moved in to rental in the 1960s. The ‘80s, was a big boom era for rental and we were doing large amounts via leafleting – predominately TV rental at that time.

“We were competing with Radio Rentals and Granada. We opened distribution depots and white goods rentals really took off in the ‘90s. Our operation has evolved considerably since then and now the majority of our rental contracts are for white goods.”

Relationship

Bosch is Forbes’s biggest white goods supplier – it has a longstanding relationship with the manufacturer.

Mr Herring tells *Alert* that white goods account for around 60 percent of Forbes’s business and browns – TVs and soundbars – for about 40 percent.

He adds: “Today, we’re getting more applications for white goods.” So, why’s that?

“I think the technology in TV hasn’t changed for a while, so there’s not the need for people to change the TV as frequently,” he explains.

“We’re seeing that a customer who rents a washing machine will very quickly add on a tumble dryer and then a fridge-freezer to their account. White goods give us more opportunities for that kind of organic growth.”



Hannah Forbes – head of brand and content management

“I think the sustainability message is huge – there’s a movement away from the preoccupation with ownership. People can become a user rather than a consumer“

Says Mr Herring: “Our workforce is multi-skilled. Some of our TV engineers can now repair white goods, and we’re training up our delivery assistants and installers to be engineers. We invest heavily in staff development and training and have an incredibly low turnover of staff.”

He adds: “We’ve also seen a lot of growth this year with our mobility scooters and we’ve had a good strong summer.”

Staff

There are 109 staff working for Forbes at its head office, across various departments, including customer service, admin, sales, distribution and delivery, plus installers and a large, nationwide team of field service engineers who are primarily home-based.

In addition to the head office in Redhill, Forbes has regional head depots in Derby, Wigan, Exeter and Glasgow, so the company can provide deliveries across most of the country, with a few geographical exceptions.

Forbes offers free delivery, free same/next-day service / repair and like-for-like replacement – if a product can't be repaired, it will be replaced.

Mr Herring says Forbes benefits from being a Retra member: "It's the industry knowledge – you can be very insular and only look at your own business... Retra is a forum and a knowledge base that you can't get anywhere else."

He adds: "The services for members – Retracare and the helpline – are essential. I use Retra Risk Assist, which is invaluable for compiling all of our health and safety and personnel documentation."

Customer Service

Last year, Forbes won a IER Award for Best Customer Service.

During our visit, *Alert* is shown the domestic sales department and introduced to sales manager, Janice Englefield, who tells us about that side of the operation.

"Our domestic sales team works six days a week, from 8am to 7pm – it's a very busy, proactive department with passionate staff," she says.

"Everyone has been here for over 15 years – I've been here over 20 – and the staff are knowledgeable and enthusiastic. It's like a Forbes family – we have that ethos and our customers are part of that."

She adds: "We're dealing with applications for new customers that come in via our website, having applied online.

"We contact them, confirm their details and perform a credit check. Not everyone passes the check – if they do, we're delighted to offer them the product that they initially pick. If not, we do have alternative products to offer – we use our pre-loved, quality refurbished stock that's come back from one of our existing customers who has upgraded. It's a circle of stock – sustainability."

Contract lengths on pre-loved products are only nine months, so customers can call Forbes after that period of time has elapsed, and the retailer will review the customer's situation and also look at new or additional products that they may want.

"We also have new customers that phone in – I would say that number has increased thanks to our current marketing. We're getting a high volume of calls, as well as online," says Ms Englefield.



Forbes CEO, Kevin Herring

“Customers know we are only ever a phone call away and our customer care team provide telephone and video assistance for a number of basic user issues. We are committed to providing a comprehensive service support for all products“

She also attributes this to the cost of living crisis and says: “It’s peace of mind – we take everything away from them and we do the delivery, service and the installation. If there are any problems, they can just phone us.”

Adds Mr Herring: “We’ll do what we need to do to satisfy the customer.

“Customers know we are only ever a phone call away and our customer care team provide telephone and video assistance for a number of basic user issues. We are committed to providing a comprehensive service support for all products.”

‘Regeneration of products is at the core of the Forbes business’

Forbes takes its environmental responsibilities very seriously – the regeneration of products is at the core of its business.

On the news section of the company’s website – www.forbes-rentals.co.uk – an article on sustainability written by Hannah Forbes, who is head of brand and content management, says: ‘We believe that sustainability is synonymous with a sense of responsibility towards people and the environment, and is an integral part of quality awareness.’



Forbes winning this year's IER award – Best Independent Retailer Focused on Sustainability

As a business, Forbes says it is fully committed to:

- Using its resources efficiently and minimising waste.
- Selecting its products based on their durability and projected longevity.
- Refurbishing and redistributing its products – where possible, old stock is regenerated and either sold to trade or put back into the company's stock flow.
- Ensuring that any products that are not suitable for regeneration are disposed of responsibly.
- Recycling of plastics, metals, glass, paper and cardboard.
- Promoting the use of recycled products.
- Choosing its business partners carefully, to ensure its laundry equipment offers optimum energy and water efficiency and minimises chemical usage.
- Offering the latest, most efficient LED technology.
- Introducing hybrid cars to its fleet of vehicles where possible.
- Encouraging employees to be aware of their own environmental responsibilities within the workplace.

“Even when a product reaches the end of its life, there are parts that we can reclaim and put back into stock,” says Ms Forbes. “Regeneration goes beyond just the products – it’s about the parts too.”