

Changing gears

After starting out as a branch of another company, Computer Gear is now a well-established distributor of PC accessories and has launched two brands for its own products. **Nicky Trup** spoke to managing director Simon Tea and sales director Paul Rudge about how the company got to where it is today and its plans for the next few years...



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COMPUTER GEAR had humble beginnings as a division of the beleaguered British PC manufacturer Apricot Computers, supplying the company's dealer channel with computer accessories before branching out on its own following the break-up of Apricot in 1986.

Originally known as Cornbow, Computer Gear underwent a management buy-out in 1991, when the new management team set about enhancing its reputation in the industry and expanding the business beyond its traditional customer base. After realising it needed to completely overhaul its product range, the company now specialises in distributing computer network cabling and accessories.

"With the ever-increasing pressures of the computer industry we recognised the need to offer more than just the supply of products, therefore a complete re-think in strategy was required," says Computer Gear's managing director Simon Tea.

The firm found that by developing its website and a real-time RSS feed of all the products it has to offer, it could simplify the ordering and update process for its retail partners.

"Our customers can create their very own virtual warehouse with access to thousands of products with no stock levels to worry about, or cash to tie up - we take care of it all," says Tea. "The future development of Computer Gear lies in its technical expertise to design and develop platforms that can be easily integrated into our customers' systems. The easier it is for our customers to do business with us, the easier it is for us."

It was customer demand that led Computer Gear to launch its own brand of accessories in 2004. Although the branded range has proved popular, trading on a reputation for robustness and a low price point, Tea is under no illusions when it comes to competing with the market leaders.

"We have to be realistic and know that our brand will never command the prices that some of the big brands can achieve. We do not have the



resources of these companies and spending thousands of pounds on huge marketing and advertising campaigns is a no-no," he says. "We are a very level-headed company when it comes to such policies and have a finance director who is quick to bring us down to earth whenever we suggest any pie in the sky or hair-brained schemes."

Two years ago the company launched its second brand - Case Gear - to expand its line of carry bags and cases. With a new range of bags in the pipeline, 2010 has been set for the launch.

"Although the brand is not key to the development of the business it has certainly enabled the company to expand its product range and create an awareness that we did not have before," says sales director Paul Rudge.

"Being smaller in comparison to many of our major competitors gives us the flexibility to adapt to change but



Paul Rudge (left) and Simon Tea (right) show off some of the Case Gear products



Computer Gear attributes much of its success to the development of in-house branded peripherals, which have enjoyed growing popularity



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**Simon Tea,
Computer Gear**



more importantly respond rapidly to any forthcoming challenges that may present themselves,” Tea adds. “Our goals may take a bit longer to achieve but we are now slowly benefiting from our efforts with increased brand recognition. I think you truly know you have achieved something when people start to request your brand by name – it is always highly complementary, and a great lift for the old ego.”

According to Rudge, it has been this flexibility, and ability to diversify that has pushed Computer Gear through the economic downturn.

“An area which has helped the company through much of the recession has been our ability to offer more specialist custom design products both inside and outside the computer industry,” he says. “The company identified that it was just as easy to produce plastic injection mouldings for computer products as it was for other products. Therefore this has helped us

to branch out into new areas without being wanton on the computer industry.

“We are continually looking for new business opportunities, however, I think it is important that whatever we do complements our existing business. It is all too easy to get your fingers burnt by diversifying away from what you know best.”

Despite Computer Gear making it through the recession relatively unscathed, Tea believes that there is no straightforward recipe for success at times like these.

“I think this year has been a tough year for everyone, and I do not see a quick fix. Under the circumstances we are more than pleased with what we achieved this year. We have basically got our heads down, maintained a tight budget, and worked our socks off. I do not believe there is a easy solution when the climate dictates circumstances,” he says.

When asked where the company hopes to be in a few years’ time, Tea is quick to answer emphatically: “Still here! I am very excited about our future prospects – we have a solid platform for success. I think the computer industry is still one of the most exciting and one that is continually evolving,” he adds. “I have no doubt that our product range will continue to progress. I foresee a definite decline in our cable business as the growth of wireless starts to impact the marketplace.

“As the confidence grows within the user base and the technology improves, this will undoubtedly be the way forward. Once again, we will have to adapt and find those products that customers need.”