

A view from the top: Roberts Radio

Leading a very special brand

A couple months ago Roberts Radio celebrated its 80th anniversary with a royal endorsement at St James Palace. The brand's chairman, Leslie Burrage, like its Revival radios enjoys a very special status in the industry. **Anna Ryland** met him to hear the Roberts' story.

Leslie Burrage does not need an introduction. Like a rock star he is not only the person behind the brand, he is the brand. Famously modest, he would deny this and say that the success of Roberts Radio is the making of his loyal team. Turning around the failing brand which would have been wiped out of the market twenty years ago and making it the number one radio brand in Britain, Leslie credits to the commitment of its current owners, the Glen Dimplex group, and his team. "It only happened that I was the team captain."

Making of Leslie

Leslie Burrage's life story could have progressed very differently if not for "a Eureka moment" which Leslie experienced at the age of 17 while a pupil of an experimental high school in Kent. "The headmaster showed me a document from Philips Electrical which created a number of commercial trainees. I read the prospectus and thought this was exactly what I wanted to do. I was recruited in 1958 into the scheme that exposed Philips' 26 management trainees to every aspect of the business: from manufacturing and distribution to ledger control and marketing."

"The three months I spent at Philips Records were the most magical months of my life. So I wangled my way back for another three months. This was just pre-Beatles period. It exposed a lad from rural Kent to the world of entertainment, glamour and money – and pop extravagance. It even gave me an opportunity to sing with the Cherokees!"

"At the same time I took a business study degree and travelled between Philips factories in the UK and Europe, as the manufacturer had then a very broad business portfolio that ranged from small appliances to radios and televisions."

Leslie spent eight years with Philips. In 1967 he was headhunted by the Rank Organisation, which at the time was called Rank Bush Murphy and later became Rank Radio International. "There I finally got to grips with the balance sheet". He joined as Bush brand manager and ultimately became commercial director. At the time Rank Organisation was second to Thorn Group in terms of volume of TV sales. These were the boom years of television and we produced in excess of 200,000 TV sets – many for rental operations."

In 1977, Leslie tried his hand in venture capital which acquired the Carmen business and a few other brands, including Morphy Richards in 1982. "When we sold Morphy Richards to Glen Dimplex in 1985 my relationship with the company began."

Next he moved to Hitachi where he spent ten years, enjoying only the first five. A close friend of Dick Roberts, the founder of Roberts Radio, Leslie spoke to him when the man was terminally ill about his plans for the business. "We thought about going to the City for funds but I did not want to justify every move to the bankers. Instead I spoke to Martin Naughton, chairman of Glen

Dick Roberts, the co-founder of what would become a British institution, had spied St James Palace outside the factory gates one day waiting for his brother to come out. He offered him a job because he was old enough to leave school. And St James Palace is known to everyone in the business, I have been working for Roberts Radio nearly 70 years."

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Dimplex. Dick Roberts died in 1991 and three years afterwards Glen Dimplex took over the brand, following a three-year period of tortuous negotiations with the family." After closing the company's West Molesey manufacturing base, its production was transferred to Mexborough in South Yorkshire to take advantage of the Glen Dimplex's facilities, including its logistics and warehousing. Now most of the Roberts injection moulded products are made in the Far East but the Revival range is assembled in Mexborough, on account of its short runs and limited editions.



"The brand was a delicate flower that had to be cherished and nurtured"

Beautiful sound quality

Design and style has been synonymous with Roberts since its outset and this is amply seen through today's product range. Digital listening continues to evolve in ways we could never have imagined. Listeners demand greater choice and support services in ways and at times that suit busy lifestyles. Roberts has responded and evolved its product range to ensure that people listen to music.

Our products also provide iPod quality playback - and charge at the same time.

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Heritage for

Making of the Roberts brand

Initially the Roberts Radio brand was absorbed into Morphy Richards Consumer Electronics, which included radios, telephones and personal care products. "The people who worked on Roberts Radio did not understand brands and within a year the business, which was already on a slippery slope, was clearly in freefall. In 1996, I received a call from Martin Naughton who said: 'Leslie, you got me into this mess; you'd better get me out of it.' The brief was clearly to do it up and sell it on. Our small team was capable of turning the business around very quickly

and within eighteen months we separated Roberts business from the rest of the Morphy Richard CE business. I made a presentation at the Institute of Directors saying that the business is ready for sale and the company will make a good profit on the original purchase. Martin Naughton then said to me: 'Leslie you don't understand me: we only buy companies, we don't sell them. The rest is history.'

"If it hadn't been for Martin's and Sean O'Driscoll's commitment, the brand would have gone," stresses Leslie. "At the time it didn't have volume opportunities for large retailers. It was a team effort; there

is no doubt about it. It only happened that I was the team captain. The brand was a delicate flower that had to be cherished and nurtured."

How has he gone about it? "When I asked Dick Roberts what is the age profile of his company's consumers, he told me: '45 to dead'. Then I realized that if we are going to motor this brand it has to have a much broader appeal - in terms of products, designs, colours... And we did it largely through the evolution of the Revival. Starting with the Revival we introduced new colours, shapes, finishers; making the product iconic. From there we

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moved into DAB and entered new categories such as sound systems. When Dick Roberts died we had ten models, now the company has over 90 products in its portfolio.

"On top of this we have grown the relationship with the British Wireless for the Blind Fund. We are their chosen manufacturer. In terms of kudos this is immensely important for us. We have developed specialist products for them and some of their features were incorporated into the standard models."

So what are the unique features of Roberts radios in the current cut-throat market?

"The word quality comes to mind first," says Leslie. "Quality comes in design as much as in longevity and quality of distribution. Consumers tell us that our products go on and on and on. Owning a Roberts radio makes a statement about you as a consumer. It's like owning a Rolls Royce."

The culture of Roberts Radio is that of longevity – both in terms of products and personnel. "Each member of our team has been with us for a very long time. They all embrace and understand the brand."

Leslie is reluctant to divulge the financial information about the company but he says that the turnover of the business has grown twenty times since the acquisition.



Leslie Burrage
in his 'local'

Owen Watters, Roberts Radio chief executive, on the Roberts' new distribution policy

"It is a set of trading terms and conditions specifying how we would like our products to be represented in the marketplace and what the customer should expect when they want to buy Roberts products or have a problem with them.

"The trading agreement sets our products in different categories, since some require more explanations than others. These are: the lifestyle range, such as the Revival, sound systems and the internet range. Retailers selling products from these three categories would need to satisfy a range of criteria (19 in total). For example there must be sufficient product information both online and in-store, stock has to be available in store or for a reasonable time online, and there has to be a help function to handle customer queries. Crucially there has to be clear information about returns and after care arrangements.

"The new distribution terms will be introduced from 1 April 2013 but over the following weeks we will be visiting all our dealers individually and presenting this information to them. This will give them an opportunity to voice their questions and opinions. The new conditions will apply to all our customers. If they don't adhere to new terms we will reserve the right to withhold supplies."



Roberts is now the number one radio brand in the UK. "In the run up to Christmas, our business with John Lewis was 15% up year-on-year. No other brand got close to this figure. Yet, although being a number one gives one a nice warm feeling, what you do at the bottom line is what matters. We have both volume and profit up despite challenging market conditions."

Roberts' independents

"The independent dealer is the bedrock of our brand." In 1994, 34% of Roberts Radio's business went through the independent channel. Then it increased to 50% and now is in mid-forties.

"Robust", this is how Leslie describes Roberts Radio's relationship with the independent channel. "We are very sniffy about where our products go. The independent who stocks Roberts understands the brand and the manner in which it has to be supported. And they get a good return on their investment."

The company is currently drawing its new terms and conditions of distribution (see the box above).

"It's a very straightforward document in the way it outlines what we expect from the dealer and the dealer expects of us.

Once we shake hands on these conditions we can control how our products are marketed, including withholding supplies if the retailers don't meet the criteria."

Looking forward

In 2013, Roberts Radio is planning to extend its product range and expand geographically. "We will be diversifying into new product categories and we will seek growth in the European and global markets. Our Revivals have particular appeal in the Far East."

Winning has always been Leslie Burrage's ambition, whether it was on the rugby field or in business. "Not money. Money has never been a motivator for me. Integrity is very high on the list of things I respect."

It is perhaps not surprising that a number of leading figures in the industry, such as ex-Sony managing director Steve Dowdle, consider Leslie as their mentor.

In 2008, Leslie received the Lifetime Achievement Award at the Independent Business Awards.

Rugby is his greatest passion, "after my family". No doubt, they both will wait for him when one day he decides to step down from the captain's bridge. ■