



In just over a year since Tant Laboratories was acquired by Lenstec, the Bishop's Stortford-based company has grown from 28 staff to 41, one of a number of changes brought by the new ownership.

Tant's then managing director Gerard Donovan is now financial director (FD) of the combined group, working with managing director Nigel Castle across both companies, which have also been subject to major investment of circa £1m in that time. In total, the group has 11 robotic glazing machines, three of which have been added to Tant in the past 12 months. Staffing at Lenstec's Caerphilly business has also grown, with 15 appointments and 24-hour production.

Donovan explains that when former Tant owner Nelson Hawkes was looking to move on, the two labs already had experience of working together. 'We had shared investment decisions on software for example, as it was mutually beneficial to get together with another lab. There have always been contacts. Nigel and Nelson had been work colleagues way back at Norville.'

One of the main requirements was that each company could add strengths to the other business, and SWAT analysis proved the labs to be compatible. 'Lenstec had sophisticated product and quality systems, whereas Tant could bring sophistication in finance and marketing, as well as background administration. It was a good fit,' says Donovan.

He had the opportunity to acquire Tant himself, but decided against it. 'I asked myself if I was the 100 per cent shareholder, what would I do tomorrow that was different to the past 10 years and the answer was nothing, or I would be doing a disservice to Nelson. I was totally focused on finding someone who could add value and address areas of the business that needed doing and Lenstec was perfect for that.'

When Castle took over, he encouraged Tant's staff to think big, pointing out they had a major opportunity to develop together and exchange views to contribute to the business plan. He says: 'We are operating in a very competitive market place. The group's growth, with commitment to training our staff to the highest standards means we will continue to look at ways of improving our quality and listening to our customers. I feel we have a strengthened management team to

Doubled glazing

Rory Brogan visits Tant Laboratories in Hertfordshire to hear about life after being bought out by Lenstec



Gerard Donovan (l) and Neil McFarlane alongside Tant's new glazing cell

continue this progress into 2012 and beyond.'

Recent news that Tant has achieved ISO 9000 status, under the guidance of Lenstec's training department, is concrete proof that this has happened. Tant has also signed up for Investors in People and a number of employees have taken NVQs and a commitment to training. 'It has been good for staff and good for morale as it has given them a feeling of ownership,' explains Donovan.

Adding capacity

Neil McFarlane, who was promoted from glazing manager to general manager, has 20 years at Tant under his belt and is one of a band of long-serving staff that includes surfacing manager Alan Larke who has racked up 28 years. While McFarlane describes ISO accreditation as hard work, he says Tant is now seeing the benefits. 'We're more streetwise regarding production. We were lucky to have the support from Lenstec whose quality manager Paul Kibble walked us through it, working on the quality and service.'

Thanks to continuing success of the businesses, both needed to add capacity. 'Physically at Tant we had more space than Caerphilly, so we grabbed the opportunity to increase production, particularly in glazing, with the new Nidek equipment,' says Donovan.

The greater buying power of the combined labs gave leverage when looking for equipment. 'It is hard to do it all alone as a medium sized lab when margins are tight,' he adds, pointing out that, with the group's glazing investment, it is now Nidek's largest customer in Europe.

As a result of the automation of this equipment, Tant was able to appoint semi-skilled staff who were then shadowed, enabling them to learn very quickly. The new recruits took on the semi-skilled roles of existing staff, who then were free to concentrate on the skilled work.

'In the past if Tant wanted to train a technician it would have taken eight months to get to a level of competency, but with a dedicated training ethos at Lenstec the process was accelerated.'

The main achievement was to



Looking at labs

double the amount of work within six weeks of being taken over. 'It's a testament to all who work here that it was smooth,' he adds.

The two labs remain distinct, but there is clearly potential for existing customers to try out the lab they don't use. 'Lenstec has its work and Tant has its and that's how opticians will want it to remain. Ordinarily each lab focuses on their own work, but internally there will be work that we carry out for each other. We supply what the customer demands.

'One thing that has been introduced to Tant by Lenstec is 8-base glazing, so we've had cross training, with staff from Tant spending some time at Lenstec and vice versa. It wasn't all one-way traffic,' says Donovan. 'Staff were able to come up with solutions themselves, rather than being dictated to at director level.'

He now spends time between the two labs and the FD position is making greater use of his accountancy skills. 'I brought my financial expertise to Lenstec and had to develop some sophistication in terms of electronic communication. We have worked together to improve communication between the labs, so that staff can access each lab while out on the road or away. We're a mobile business and we now have excellent speed through the terminal service.'

As well as spending a good deal of time making sure that the hardware, software and communication links were reliable and robust, £60,000 was invested across the sites in upgrading the systems.

Larger portfolio

Another advantage, with each lab having its own preferred lens suppliers, is that they can tap into the other products and offer additional brands. 'We're now an Essilor partner lab as well as being a Seiko specialist lab, which was an opportunity for us after the acquisition thanks to Lenstec's involvement with the two. We had a close relationship with Shamir as we are less than an hour away, so that has helped Lenstec.'

Independence and providing choice is important to our ethos, says Castle.

He adds that while the two labs are still independent and competitive from an optician's point of view, the biggest change is 'in the back room'. 'We are now more efficient and slicker, and able to give a better service to the customer.'

With marketing executive Joanne Adam working across the two

companies, a new and simplified General Catalogue offering a choice of all brands has been produced, along with a condensed glazed packages offering. 'It's gone down very well. We compared our catalogues and listened to customers so we now have a dual-branded version. It's not necessarily that the bigger company is imposing itself, there are lessons from both companies,' says Donovan.

The customer clearly has a wider product offering to choose from, demonstrated by the catalogue's combination of 6,000 lens options. 'There is no issue of choice in the market for opticians, there's nothing we can't get or do.'

The catalogue also lists minimum times and quality via the Opticians Charter already in use by Lenstec. 'It's new to Tant. Those disciplines were understood but were more informal as they weren't down on paper. Now they're in the catalogue staff clearly understand. Also, with three people 100 per cent focused on quality training and analysis at Lenstec, that level of sophistication has come to Tant.'

There is also a new focus on sales, with additional sales personnel and a sales director in Martin Burroughs, which Donovan describes as a great benefit and another reason Tant has continued to gain clients.

Castle explains: 'It is the relationship we build with our customers face to face that is key to

building a solid foundation long term.'

Business has increased across the board, with a 50 per cent increase in capacity in the year. While work for the independent optician remains core to Tant, there are opportunities with medium-sized groups as well, says Donovan. 'The addition to the sales force was to increase independent business and is the focus of management meetings.'

Human touch

Some practices use Tant and Lenstec for work other people don't want to do, says Donovan – difficult Rx work and high base jobs. 'We both still relish that and the skilled people like that sort of work – the guy at a bench who does the job by hand, irrespective of the robots. That's what we're all about. Lenstec has a "Specials room" and here we have that in essence, with an area for jobs that need some TLC in a different process.'

This is backed up by looking at customer accounts – some may just send five jobs a month, but they are all difficult ones, for example glazing a 7 cyl.

'All labs need a critical mass and large numbers of low-spend accounts are an important part of the mix,' adds Donovan. 'There is still a place for good independent labs offering a bespoke service for clients. We can give them that level of attention. Optics is quite unusual as every product that is manufactured is a unique product, unlike other areas of manufacturing where you are making tens of thousands of widgets that are all the same.'

Next up the group will be looking towards digital production. 'When you have the support of Essilor, Seiko and Shamir, with high quality freeform you have to question what degree of investment you have to make,' he says. 'We were both looking at freeform solutions and as a combined force we could come up with a more efficient and cost effective solution. These are big investments – £1m for freeform and £2m with coating.'

On the question of whether the joint company would make another acquisition, he plays this down. 'We knew each other so well and were a natural fit. The circumstances were unique, so whether we would find another lab that fitted so well is debatable.'

In the end even Lenstec's original logo, where an L and a T link together, works perfectly well for the combined company. ●



Lenstec too has had a major investment in equipment