

# In the box seat

ROD FERGUSON'S EXPERIENCE IN PRODUCING QUALITY SEATS FOR THE BUS AND COACH INDUSTRY SPANS FOUR DECADES. HIS SUCCESS IS FUELLED BY HIS DESIRE TO CONTINUE TO IMPROVE HIS PRODUCT RANGE. **CHRIS SMITH** WRITES

**R**od Ferguson's secret for business success is to work exceptionally hard in the early years to build a brand. He's done it many times in his career, most recently through his company Transport Seating Technology.

"Success for me is whether you have created something that you can be really proud of," he tells ABC.

"In business, as in life, all that matters is that you do something positive and never stop learning."

Rod's life of business achievement and learning stretches from 1963 when he started his career as an apprentice motor trimmer.

He started at Humphries Motor Body Works, a business conveniently located on the block behind his family's home in the Brisbane suburb of New Farm.

"My father got me the job, and I worked on Jaguars and Volvos and the lot," Rod explains.

At the time, he says, seating company Admac had been building seats for Denning. As fortune dictated, an opening arose. By the end of his first year of apprenticeship Admac lost its trimmer, Rod filled the gap.

At this stage it wasn't a case of jumping ship, rather it was a case of two jobs for the apprentice.

"Every afternoon I'd finish my work as an apprentice at four o'clock in New Farm where I lived and worked. I'd travel on a train, with my pushbike, all the way to Yeerongpilly and work till 11 o'clock building bus seats.

"I loved it so much. I didn't want to work on the Jaguars and Volvos and all that in the body shop and I didn't like the repair part of the job, I liked production work."

Although still young, he chose making seats as a career and transferred his apprenticeship permanently to Admac.

At the time McConells and Admac had the seat market sewn up in Queensland.

Then the 1974 floods hit and left many businesses in flux, Admac was no exception.

"The floods took a toll on Admac. They closed it."

**"IN BUSINESS, AS IN LIFE, ALL THAT MATTERS IS THAT YOU DO SOMETHING POSITIVE AND NEVER STOP LEARNING."**

After 11 years with Admac, and now without an employer, Rod's career went from production to refurbishment after a brief stint doing work for GBW Bodyworks.

"I was doing seats in conjunction with GBW Bodyworks. Making the parts and assembling the components."

At that time the dominant players in the express business were Greyhound and Skennars Coaches. They shared a majority of the express work between Sydney, Brisbane and Cairns.

Skennars went out to Roma and Mt Isa and serviced the surrounding areas.

"Clarie Skennar had a great big place down in Fortitude Valley, he would order four to six new buses every year from GBW Bodyworks," Rod says.

It was Clarie Skennar's association with GBW Bodyworks, and a need to

refurbish his seats, that took Rod back into refurbishment.

Rod started out on his own in 1975, with South Side Trimming.

South Side Trimming's two biggest customers became the two express kings, Greyhound and Skennars Coaches.

"I approached Russell Penfold from Greyhound. I said, 'Russell I am just looking for some extra work'. He gave me all the Series 5 and Series 10 Eagles. I did every one of them," he says.

"I started doing Skennars' work. Clarie said to me, 'Rodney, anything that needs doing, just do it', and that's how easy it was."

In 1979 Kevin Johnston and Dick White started coach-building company Motor Coach. They met Rodney and asked if he could replicate the Admac product he had worked on for 11 years.

"My answer was: not a problem," Rod says.

This new venture saw Rod re-enter the world of seating after his stint in refurbishment.

"I went out and bought one hand-bender, one sewing machine. Welded the cutting bench myself. After one month I had one lad helping me and within one year, to the day, I had 13 workers."

His relationship with Motor Coach gave him the resources to build a new facility in Capalaba.

"When I was building seats in the early 80s for Motor Coach, it was like an open chequebook. I was building seats for them all the time," he explains.

It was at this high point Peter Townsend and Bill Oddie, from rival bus builders Austral Denning, also approached Rod to build a specialised seat for Denning.

He was building seats for both groups and was riding high in the industry. Then he sensed an approaching darkness.



Shane Shambrook has worked with Rod since the Transit days





*Rod in his younger years*

"It wasn't until, Expo ... in 1988 ... something told me this wasn't going to last too long and the industry is going to collapse — and it did," he recalls.

Luckily, he trusted his instincts and sold out to one of the biggest seat builders, who for years had approached him as a takeover target — Henderson Saydair.

"Henderson Saydair was very big and very professional. They bought me out and I thought 'what am I going to do?'. They put me on as a sales manager for six months," he says.

"I HAVE FRIENDS WHO HAVE WANTED TO BE PART OF THIS HOWEVER, I DON'T REALLY LIKE WORKING AS A PARTNERSHIP."

"I hated all the bullshit and paperwork that goes along with a big corporation.

"As soon as I was bought out, Richard Riddick (Henderson Saydair's GM) and I called into all the body-builders and told them they were buying me out. A lot of the body-builders were in shock.

"When it came to Motor Coach, Kevin Johnston was sitting there and his brain was ticking over. By four o'clock that afternoon he had ordered 10,000 flexilators from Henderson Saydair, who make the little spring pad for the seats. Richard Riddick said to him, 'What do you want with 10,000 flexilators?' and he (Kevin) said to him, 'I am going to build my own seats'.

"They paid a lot of money for me but didn't realise that Kevin would build his

own seats and that's when Transit Seating first started," he recalls.

Rod had only been doing refurbishment work after the sell out, because of the contractual agreement.

"However, I found out through a barrister, who I paid \$1,500 for the day — he said because I am a trimmer, they cannot stop me building seats, but I would've felt guilty. So I gave them three years grace and then started myself," he says.

In 1992 Kevin Johnston accepted Rod into Transit Seating and he was given the opportunity to be its third partner at no cost to himself.

"We were at Amanda Street, Slacks Creek, and from Amanda Street we moved to Tarragindi Road, Salisbury, into a big building housing 30 workers and putting out about 25 sets of seats a month," Rod recalls.

All wasn't rosy for the partnership, and a few years later it dissolved.

"By 1995, I couldn't stand the partnership. I got out ... and started myself as Transport Seating Technology in 1996," he says.

"I then applied for grants from the Queensland Government which I used for testing all my own seats."

Many of the ideas floating around the industry were born from his association with Transit Seating.

Rod says this is okay, because he has his own ideas about making seats that differ from his competitors.

"I built two sport aircraft and I got into the marine industry as well as the bus and coach industry," he explains.

"I have testing accreditation from both the marine and bus industry."

He lists this as one of his greatest achievements.

"I also brought my knowledge of working on aircraft back into the marine and bus industries to make seats lighter, because of axle weights [in buses] and things like that."

He says the major issues affecting the bus and coach seat industry stemmed from the Kempsey crashes in the late 80s, which brought to the industry rollover standards, seat anchorage, and seat belt standards.



*Rod Ferguson*



He says during his years at Transit, the group had to get ready for the crash lab because of the Australian Design Rule (ADR) 68.

"We are above everyone else in the world for strength. We are rated to 20 Gs where everyone else has a 10 G test," Rod says.

The next obstacle for the industry was seat belts.

"I thought if I designed a seat which satisfies the customer, the body-builder, the owners and the operators, I would have a very good product.

"I made it with a cushion, which is a sprung cushion base. Other manufacturers, because of ADR 68, put boards in the seats. I thought this was crazy because you are putting school bus technology into a coach seat.

"I had learnt through my days working for Greyhound, with the Series 5 and 10 Eagles, they had springs. The seats were made at National out in America.

"I used the same principal in my seats — zig-zag springs."

As a testament to his ongoing interest in seating technology, Rod's latest venture is a joint initiative with Coachworks for the Safe-T-Ride seat.

Because of limitations of grants and the expense of testing the two groups worked together to produce what Rod says is the perfect school bus seat.

The seat allows the driver to see all the children as well as complying with all the ADR requirements.

Rod retains the intellectual property rights and makes the seat while Coachworks owns and sells the seat.

With all his achievements, Rod still says what drives him is a passion for creating seats.

"My wife gets crook at me sometimes because she thinks I will never stop re-designing seats and changing things, and keeping up with all the latest and greatest technology from overseas," he confides.

Rod says he owes much of his success to good advice from a good mentor.

"The most influential person is Noel Humphries who owns Humphries Motor Bodies in New Farm," he says.

"We were doing the seating for the auto industry back in the 60s but not involved in the bus and coach industry, and to date he is my advisor to many tasks in running a seating company over the last 31 years.

"Noel is the owner of 13 Thrifty franchises in Brisbane and also sells aircraft (Premium Aircraft sales), and from time-to-time I have access to aircraft to fly outback to the bus operators in remote areas.

"Today Noel still gives me good advice on being smart in running Transport Seating Technology," he says.



Rod says the funniest moment in his career was when Kevin Johnston built buses at the rear of Transit Seating and was moving to Kingston and all the equipment was thrown into a coach that didn't have any windows. Rod says it looked like the Flintstones going down the road.

"Kevin was pulled over by the police as there were parts hanging out the windows," Rod recalls.

Looking ahead, Rod's five-year plan is simple: work smarter, embrace new technology and keep expanding the product range.

However, nearing 60, the biggest issue facing Rod is succession. "My kids are into aviation; I don't see anyone taking over the company," he says.

"I have friends who have wanted to be part of this, however I don't really like working as a partnership."

All-in-all, Rod says there are many exciting developments in store for Transport Seating Technology and promises revelations of the top-secret initiatives in the following months.

"Watch this space," he says. ■