

The bottom-line benefits of good workshop design

For decades, even the most upmarket High Street dealerships were divided into two different worlds.

Showroom customers walked into reception and display areas awash with shiny glass, gleaming aluminium and chrome, but the back office and workshops were dark and dismal places for staff and technicians, often with last year's calendar on the wall and bins overflowing with oily rags.

However, in 1997, Dominic Wishlade, a talented industrial product designer, realised modular design concepts from the residential sector could be applied to the automotive aftermarket and the idea for Dura was born.

Wishlade, now Dura's managing director, was commercial director for a company making garden machinery in sheet metal when his 'Eureka' moment occurred. As no one else was enthused by the idea, he made a prototype in his spare time and asked a sub-contractor to knock the design into shape.

"At the time, Aston Martin was ahead of the game at enhancing dealership standards for workshops, and by chance, someone from there saw my prototype. It wasn't much more than 'drawers and doors' at that stage, but the idea really appealed to them," he said.

"I created a more sophisticated version, and they decided to incorporate it into their newest service centre, which was a real milestone. Then Audi saw the concept, also liked it, and we've been designing furniture for their workshops and service centres ever since.

"Right from the start, I believed this equipment could straddle function, design and brand enhancement, because good workshop design benefits everyone from customers and technicians, to the dealership management team and the manufacturers.

"There's a feel-good factor when technicians use our bays, and know they've been designed to make their job easier and quicker, which helps dealers retain their best employees. It's a lot more cost-effective to invest in a modern and efficient working environment than to be constantly looking to recruit.

"Aston Martin and Audi were the first to

understand the benefits, and once I established Dura as a business, using a top-notch manufacturing supplier I'd used at my previous job, other dealers soon followed."

Dura's clients now also include Bentley, BMW, Ferrari, Honda, Lexus, Porsche, Volvo – and even Harley-Davidson.

"To franchised dealers, the workshop is their engine room in a financial as well as a practical sense, so if they can increase its productivity the impact is immediately seen on the bottom-line performance," said Wishlade.

"As service centre designs become more open, customers increasingly see mechanics working on their vehicles, and I know from feedback that people are always impressed to see modern, well organised and tidy service centres.

"No one enjoyed seeing their precious car in the old-style workshop environment, but now they can see their dealer is really taking care, which can only assist customer retention.

"Pretty much all the manufacturers now recognise that it's crucial to create great customer experiences in aftersales, just as you would look to at the front end of the sales process."

Although other players have entered the workshop furniture sector in recent years, Wishlade believes Dura's experience at the forefront of the market makes its position secure.

"We're never going to become over-confident, because that's dangerous in any sector, but we do have a demonstrable track record for designing innovative installations for almost 20 years," he said.

"The manufacturing plant in Devon, which I used for my first prototype, is now an integral element of our business. When it had problems during the financial crash in 2008, we decided to take the building and the people on, because we didn't want to lose their skills and experience.

"At the time, the acquisition represented a major challenge, but we have since invested something like £7 million, and today it's probably the most sophisticated sheet metal factory you could find, with the latest laser cutting machines and computerised powder-coating plant.

"We've got a really committed workforce there, and they're as precious an asset as our design team



"As service centre designs become more open, customers increasingly see mechanics working on their vehicles"

Dominic Wishlade, Dura

here in Brackley. Many firms outsource sheet metal work overseas, but we believe keeping our manufacturing base in the UK adds great value to our business, and means better and faster service for clients.

"We have more manufacturer approvals than anyone in this sector, and are constantly looking to maintain our market presence by future-proofing our designs to take account of, for example, the growing use of electric vehicles and hybrids."



AWARD-WINNING DESIGNS WITH GLOBAL APPEAL

Awards don't always tell you much about a business – but the biggest in Dura's trophy cabinet certainly do.

Steve Brooks, UK sales manager, proudly pointed out a Red Dot Product Design award, and the Queen's Award for Enterprise in the international trade category.

"Red Dot is one of the world's most respected competitions for designers, it's been running since the 1950s, and typically there are around 17,000 entries every year, which shows how tough they are to acquire," he said.

"People are always impressed that a firm designing workshop furniture in sheet metal has won such an award, and I must admit, I am too. We do pride ourselves on creating products with clean lines, but even so, I think it's a tremendous achievement to be awarded a Red Dot."

The Queen's Award indicates that Dura's designs have global appeal, and Brooks

highlighted a 16-bay service centre for Audi VW in Norway, the flagship service centre for Rolls-Royce in Dubai and a 34-bay workshop under the streets of Paris for Mercedes-Benz. "We started the company at the luxury end of the sector with Aston Martin and Audi, and most of our longest customer relationships are with upmarket marques," he said.

"The manufacturers trust us with their most complex and demanding design briefs, so we are regularly recommended when they are creating new workshops and service centres overseas, which is very pleasing.

"We also find that if a workshop is installed at one dealership site, that other dealers from the same marque are soon there to check it out, which is an important way of winning further business.

"Word of mouth has been crucial to our growth, but we always attend Automechanika in Frankfurt, partly as it's the world's biggest

automotive exhibition, but also as it's a great meeting place to catch up with everyone.

"We launched our latest product, the ServiceWall System, there recently and it was very well received. It's designed for use as either a modular system, or a partition structure for customer-facing areas.

"Although many customers are luxury marques, we see great potential in other market sectors, and the ServicePod we launched a year ago is proving very popular because it has a very small footprint, and was designed as a 'plug and play' unit, so it's extremely quick and easy to install.

"We thought the pods would be in demand from operators of rapid-fit centres, but it's surprised us a little to see what other customers have invested in them. We've gradually built up a network of distributors around the world, so I'd expect our export sales to increase steadily as we go into 2017."

To find out more, contact Steve Brooks on 01280 706 050, email steve.brooks@dura.co.uk or visit www.dura.co.uk