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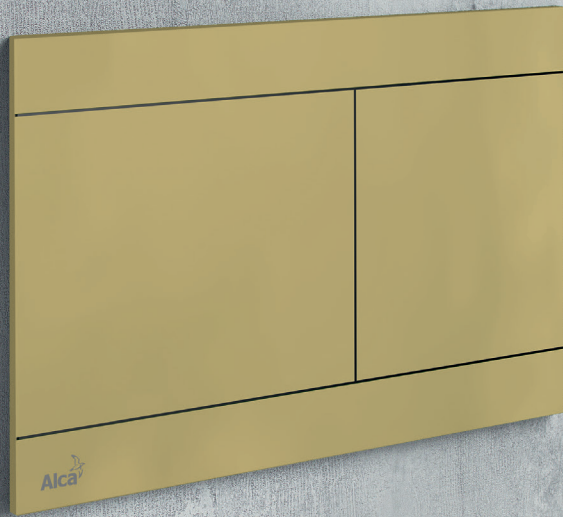
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Sales Director,
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Cover: Kevin Oakes (Sales Director at The IPG) and Justin Protheroe (Sales Director at WMI Simpsons) outside WMI's dual branded store.

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The rise of The IPG

The IPG has come a long way since it was launched just eight years ago. Every year, the group grows in stature and offers something new to an increasing number of members and suppliers.

The IPG was founded in the summer of 2013 by Robin Beal, (now Chairman), when he identified there was a need and an opportunity to strengthen and support independent businesses more than ever. It is the largest and fastest growing membership group for plumbing, heating and bathroom specialists, with a network of well over 100 suppliers and 200 member locations nationwide.

The group now has 15 members of staff.

The IPG offers five key benefits to its members:

- **Buying power**
- **Business tools and resources**
- **Marketing support**

- **IT services including digital screens and websites**
- **Exclusive rebates.**

After some exploratory phone calls, and working from his daughter's bedroom, Robin set about making his idea for a new business a reality. He started recruiting members and suppliers in October 2013, moving to an office the following month, and officially opening for business in January 2014 with only three members of staff. By the end of the year, the business had 50 members.

From its humble beginnings, The IPG has had to move to bigger offices on more than one occasion.

The latest move will be taking place in March 2021, with the new offices providing the business with a much better, more spacious, and modern workspace to accommodate the growing team.

Since 2017, the biennial IPG Conference provides an opportunity for members and suppliers to network.

The last one was held at The National Space Centre, Leicester, in September 2019.

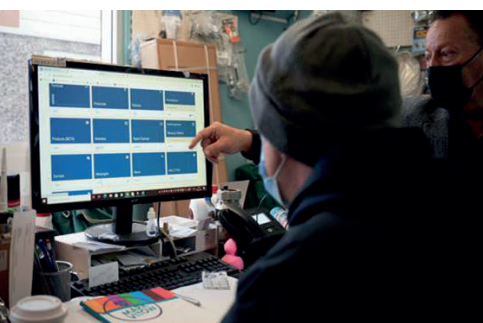
In May 2018, The IPG launched a partnership with Missing People #FindEveryChild, enabling the charity to harness the wide geographical spread of the group's network in its mission to find

missing children.

That same year the company launched its first customised members' website and its online portal that allows members to manage their relationship with the group and take advantage of the benefits it offers.

In 2019, in line with its stated vision of "supporting independents," The IPG created three dual-branded stores in collaboration with Newline in Kingswinford, Gas & Plumb Bits in New Milton and Plumb Inn in Enfield.

The trio all benefitted from the expertise of the marketing team, and were the first dual branded stores to benefit from the support of The IPG trademark that is fast becoming increasingly familiar to plumbers, installers and home owners. ■



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Who's who at The IPG

The recruitment of excellent people to its team has been key to the success of The IPG since its inception. Five team members are profiled here.

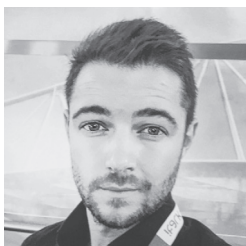


Kevin Oakes
Director of Sales

Bringing with him an extensive knowledge of the industry, with over 20 years' experience, Kevin joined The IPG in the spring of 2015 when the group's journey was just beginning.

Kevin manages member requirements externally by travelling the country developing relationships with each of the individual members, which is essential to the success of the group. During his visits, they will discuss supplier success stories, business growth and any future plans.

It is an opportunity for Kevin to ensure members are utilising all the benefits of being part of the membership group. For example, he can highlight supplier promotions, ensure members receive favourable payment terms, assist them with their expansion plans and new trade counter/showroom openings, advise on the best brands to promote based on their clientele, and much more.



Kieran McDowell
Web Developer

Kieran became part of The IPG team in January 2020 as a Web Developer, armed with a wealth of IT and business experience.

Kieran and his colleagues developed, and successfully launched many websites for members, some of which have an added e-commerce functionality, allowing members to trade online 24/7. Many members are now equipped with their websites, helped with technical support from Kieran and the team.

The IPG portal is one of the major projects that Kieran is heavily involved with, working regularly to further improve and develop the portal, allowing members and suppliers to operate at their most efficient capacity.

Kieran also liaises with suppliers to maintain a product database, one of The IPG's latest projects. In addition, he supports members with digital signage and managing the day-to-day system maintenance.



Nike Lovell
Head of Marketing

After 25 years working with highstreet brands, Nike was taken on in 2017. She has much experience across B2B and B2C, and delivers hands-on management to support teams in fast-paced environments.

Her knowledge of developing brands, consumer retail and her analytical and creative expertise to help SME retailers grow successfully has proved to be an asset in all her roles.

Nike's retail experience became invaluable when launching the first IPG dual-branded stores in the autumn of 2019, where she was able to advise members on store layout, merchandising, POS and sign design.

Nike has also overseen brand development, website content and design, PR, social media strategy, developed the supplier marketing programme, built charity and other strategic partnerships and managed two biennial conferences.



Laura Goslin
Supply Chain Support

The IPG welcomed Laura in June 2018. She brought over 13 years of customer service experience and quickly demonstrated her fantastic can-do attitude.

Laura is currently working hard to help establish and develop lasting relationships with suppliers.

Working closely with David Cairns (Head of Supplier and Commercial Strategy), Laura is responsible for assisting with supplier compliance and reviewing their performance for the membership's benefit.

Laura is the first point of contact for any new supplier, and is responsible for the initial background checks for helping the supplier with the on-boarding process to the group.

Laura is also able to provide suppliers with the necessary day-to-day support to ensure a quick response to resolve supplier-related issues.



Glenn Fisher
Managing Director

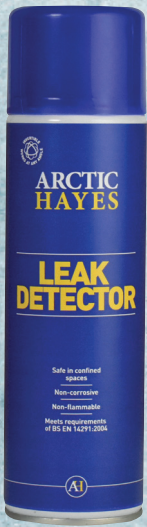
Glenn was appointed by The IPG in April 2019 to the role of Financial Director and was swiftly promoted to Managing Director in January 2020. He took over from Robin Beal, who founded The IPG based on his passion for supporting independent businesses, and is now Chairman of the company.

Glenn has brought a wealth of knowledge to the role, having worked with several owner-managed businesses.

He is passionate in supporting independent companies and is keen to "not just level the playing field, but reshape it in favour of our members, by creating an environment where they can thrive".

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Service, Support & Integrity

Getting the best deals and service from suppliers thanks to The IPG

ASE Plumbing & Heating Supplies is a well-established family-run and owned business that first opened its doors in 1988. As Director, Adam Pearce, explains The IPG has played a major part in its success story.



I had been looking to join a buying group for some time when I heard about The IPG. It was becoming clear to me that to continue trading successfully we would need to be part of some kind of cooperative to get the best deals and service from suppliers.

We heard about the formation of The IPG from supplier representatives and

joined in June 2014.

Over the past seven years, we have benefitted from a number of IPG strategies and initiatives, such as networking opportunities, marketing ideas and joint campaigns. The IPG has helped us to improve trading profit, given us access to more suppliers and products, as well as inviting us to join their steering groups.

We have been involved in as many IPG marketing programmes as possible, from bespoke printed banners to fundraising drives for charity, which

included the Cycle to the Moon event. Staff and customers had great fun racking up miles on a static bike to raise funds for #FindEveryChild.

The financial and business support The IPG has provided, with regular contact from the whole team from the day we joined, has been second to none.

The group has also helped improve our online presence by providing us with a website that is easy to update from the IPG portal and is well supported by suppliers with offers and banners.

The profile of the independent merchant has been raised massively thanks to The IPG. I was aware of other independents in the UK but the scale and strength that can be achieved together has only been highlighted through being a member.

I cannot think of any reason not to be part of The IPG, so get in contact with it as soon as you can. The benefits of being a member of The IPG that I have already mentioned ensure you really do get great value for money. ■



Joining The IPG was a gamble well worth taking

Leeds based bathroom showroom, Doug Cleghorn Bathrooms, only joined The IPG in May 2020, but as Director Doug Cleghorn Junior explains, it is already reaping rewards.



We first found out about The IPG through word of mouth nearly three years ago.

We had considered joining a group before, but had written it off as being too good to be true.

At the start of the last lockdown when we had to close our showroom, we decided to diversify our business and we opened a trade counter where we now sell plumbing and heating products. But we were struggling to get responses from suppliers and in some cases, we were not sure who to contact. We thought joining The IPG would give us access to more contacts and was worth a gamble; probably the best gamble we have ever taken. Since joining, we have not looked back.

The obvious benefit to us is the rebate scheme and the improved terms and stock deals. We have enjoyed better access to suppliers, and increased terms with a number of them, sometimes as much as ten per cent, even when we thought we were already on the top discount.

It is great not to get bombarded with information and to know that what we receive from suppliers is valuable and usually includes a few good offers. The business support has assisted

us in offering credit accounts which was new to us and helped us a few times.

Although current circumstances make it difficult to measure any increase in business from marketing, compared to previous years, we would recommend The IPG to any other plumbing, heating or bathroom specialist. The benefits are fantastic even if you do it for the increased terms and rebates and we are yet to find any negatives. I know it sounds too good to be true, but it truly isn't. ■



The IPG: Service with a smile

Founded nearly four decades ago, Ballcock & Bits is now a well-established specialist in plumbing, heating, spares and controls, bathrooms, tiles and renewable energy. The IPG plays a vital role in the company's continued success, as Jay Lovejoy, Showroom Manager, explains.



Ballcock & Bits is the longest-running independent merchant in the Bracknell area. Much of our success is largely to do with our expertise and the care that goes into every interaction with customers. This was present 36 years ago, is still present today and will remain in the future.

Nevertheless, we needed some extra know how, so we joined The IPG in late 2017.

The initial attraction lay in potential rebates, but we did not realise how much more becoming a member would bring us.

These are some of the many advantages Ballcock & Bits experience through working with The IPG:

- Easy and speedy control of our website
- Time savings in

- finding the best supplier
- Better prices and rebates
- Access to more suppliers
- Financial statements at the touch of a button
- Quick access to price lists and supplier promotions.

It has been so easy to work with The IPG, its staff are very responsive and carry out all their promises. They are a smiley bunch too, which is always welcomed.

When our customers see The IPG branding, they are intrigued to find out who The IPG is and why we are a member.

Once we explain the concept and how it can benefit them as customers, they often put us to the test. And we win business every time. Who can say what lies ahead, but we hope to continue to grow with The IPG and become more invested in the marketing side of things.

The IPG is a company with a great vision and we are excited to be part of that for the years to come. ■



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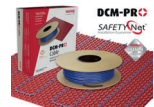
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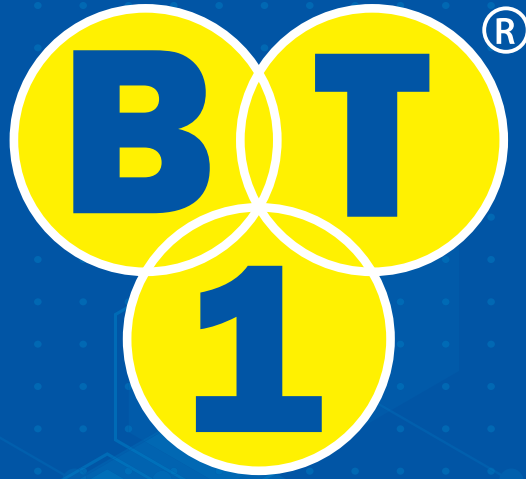
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The IPG and First Trace Heating Direct: a Snug fit

Steve Dunne, Managing Director of First Trace Heating Direct, reveals how The IPG has helped the family business ever since it joined the membership group six years ago.



As a family business, we have built some fantastic relationships over the years with independents and seen growth from this sector of the market.

This is primarily because the majority of independents are also family run businesses and this synergy allows us to understand their needs, frustrations and overall passion for their business and provide product ranges and customer service with this in mind. As a result, The IPG, with its emphasis in the independent sector, was the perfect fit for us.

Working with the group is easy. As a business, its commercial, administration and marketing team is approachable, open

to new initiatives and supportive, especially of our Snug Underfloor Heating brand. In addition, its digital portal enables us to ensure that our latest brochures, price lists and promotions are available to its members in one central location.

Key advantages

There are so many advantages to working with The IPG. For us, at Snug Underfloor Heating, one of the key advantages is that it opens up the doors for new opportunities and allows us to forge and build stronger relationships with the independent sector.

We are able to collaborate on joint initiatives and exclusive IPG promotions to maximise the

opportunity for the group's members to successfully attract underfloor heating custom and capitalise on sales of Snug Underfloor Heating.

Sharing core values

Ultimately, we share the same core value with The IPG, to want to make life for the independent as easy and as successful as possible, working together in partnership with The IPG really strengthens the ability to do that.

Thanks to our relationship, we have seen significant growth within the independent sector of both water and electric Snug Underfloor Heating systems, as well as our range of Smart thermostats.

Whilst The IPG hasn't necessarily changed us as a business, it has been extremely supportive of the Snug Underfloor Heating brand, new product ranges and member promotions, which provides an added level of affirmation that we are delivering what is right for our customers - The IPG members and their installers.

Our customers have also seen an increase in their sales since we joined The IPG and since using Snug Underfloor Heating on a regular basis.

They find that their

installers enjoy fitting Snug systems as they are designed with ease of installation in mind and appreciate the fact that we will go the extra mile to support them and their installers with expert advice, quick quotation and design turnaround times.

Flexible deadlines

Our customers also like the fact that we are flexible with regards to order deadlines to ensure they receive their systems quickly and efficiently.

In addition, our customers appreciate our marketing support, providing bespoke solutions to help raise awareness and help drive sales of Snug Underfloor Heating in their branches, taking the pressure and expense of having to do those things themselves.

With The IPG there to support us going forward, the future looks bright. We see a long relationship with The IPG and its members, with year-on-year growth even through the pandemic.

We have exciting joint initiatives planned over this year and beyond for The IPG members and are confident that Snug Underfloor Heating will go from strength to strength as a key supplier of The IPG. ■



First Trace Heating Direct is a family business with over 20 years' experience in the heating sector and is a North West Family Business of the Year winner. It is a developer and

supplier of trace heating cables, Snug electric and water underfloor heating systems, Smart thermostats, and ancillaries to UK electrical wholesalers, plumbers and builders' merchants.

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The IPG makes our business feel secure

Dorchester Plumbing Supplies, one of The IPG's very first members, having joined in 2014, explains why it signed up and highlights the many benefits of doing so.

Dorchester Plumbing Supplies was established in 2004 and now boasts an experienced store team including Steve Rolph, Gavin Read and Dean Rawlings, all of whom have been working in the heating and plumbing store industry for over 25 years.

The main reason Dorchester joined the IPG in October 2014 was that it liked the idea of being part of a group



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which was specifically set up for the smaller independent business and liked the 'stronger together' ethos.

As one of its first members, Dorchester's initial enthusiasm for The IPG proved to be well founded, as it instantly gained access

to established suppliers with excellent terms. There were monthly exclusive promotions from key suppliers and regular opportunities to mix with similar independent plumbing, heating and bathroom stores from around the country and to exchange ideas on developing a successful business.

As the group has grown, the additional support a member can access has also increased.

There is extensive marketing and sales support that includes local and trade PR opportunities, brand development and store re-branding, advice on the supply of point of sale including digital screens, website development and e-commerce.

The IPG IT Team has developed and continues to improve a comprehensive portal, making all aspects of the business easy to access including regular updates on changes to supplier terms, promotions, website content and instore digital screen customer facing messaging.

"Working with the IPG gives us a voice

that is heard a lot more clearly by our customers and a presence that is noticed," said Steve. "It has given us a clearer identity with regards to our route to market and product portfolio."

Being part of the group has given this independent merchant the opportunity to work with suppliers and manufacturers that perhaps would not have opened their doors to it otherwise and helped it to continue to grow, be competitive and achieve a realistic profit margin.

Dorchester's customers also recognise the advantages of the business working alongside The IPG and are very positive about the many benefits it provides them, including competitive pricing with unrivalled service and advice.

Steve and his team are enthusiastic and excited about the future and its continued partnership with The IPG that makes their business feel secure.

"We are currently working on setting up the e-commerce side to our website," added Steve.

"This will be the cherry on top." ■





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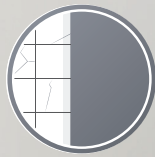
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Getting closer to your customers

On The Tools is part of Electric House, a social media publishing group that works with construction brands to create and distribute video content. Lee Wilcox, Co-Founder and CEO of Electric House Group, explains how its strong relationship with UK tradespeople online has helped improve the IPG's social media offering to its members.



The IPG member's target customers range from individual plumbing and heating engineers and bathroom fitters to larger plumbing and heating contractors as well as homeowners. Understanding its members' target customer is a key part of The IPG's marketing strategy, and in turn, success.

In 2019, The IPG formed a partnership with social publisher, On The Tools, to get closer to its existing members' customer base, and to attract new customers via social media channels.

On The Tools is the largest online

construction community in the UK, with over five million followers across the social media landscape, connecting with tradespeople every day through entertaining, informative and thought provoking video content.

Getting closer to the customer

Through a partnership with On The Tools, The IPG is able to share its in-depth knowledge and experience of the plumbing, heating and bathroom industry and to showcase the excellent service levels of its independent members.

The IPG has also been able to promote its charity partner, Missing People #FindEveryChild, raising funds for missing children and their families across the UK.

The On The Tools partnership allows The IPG to get under the skin of plumbing and heating engineers and bathroom fitters, understanding their behaviours online and what they will respond well to. This deep audience insight helps drive decisions, and shapes marketing activities.

Co-Founder and CEO of Electric House Group, Lee Wilcox said: "We've enjoyed working in partnership with The IPG over the past 18

months. Its passion for helping local plumbing, heating and bathroom specialists to thrive and its understanding of this sector is second to none.

"The IPG has a strong focus on delivering customer value. This has enabled us to create a wide range of compelling social media content that both provides information, and also entertains and engages, achieving their marketing objectives.

"As a network of independent members, our relationship gives the group the opportunity to engage with tradespeople and showcase personality to stand out.

"It's this brand personality that resonates so well with the On The Tools community," he said.

"The engagement we are able to achieve for The IPG across social media channels both raises brand awareness and helps to drive website traffic."

Nike Lovell, Head of Marketing at The IPG, added: "We chose to work with On The Tools because of its strong relationship with UK tradespeople online, and its expertise in reaching and engaging them on social media. The relationship gives value to our members, increasing consideration for IPG local member stores.

"More and more plumbing and heating engineers use social media every day, both for connecting with brands to find information, to promote their own businesses to consumers, and also for entertainment and leisure purposes.

"Using social media, and the On The Tools partnership allows us to talk to our customers where they are, providing them with information and building relationships online."

Changing to meet customer needs

Since the first Covid-19 outbreak, the behaviour of UK tradespeople has continued to change with many choosing to adopt digital services for the first time.

The IPG continues to adapt its services in response to this.

The On The Tools partnership forms a vital component of this digital focus, with increases in social media usage set to continue.

After so much negative news about physical retail spaces, it is reassuring that The IPG independent members are adapting and expanding their service and delivery channels ensuring they remain in the community for the foreseeable future. ■



Futureproofing your business

The IPG portal is the groups central online hub. All members and suppliers of the group can access a wealth of information about their membership in just a few clicks. Kieran McDowell, Web Developer, explains how the idea came about and how it has evolved over time.

As The IPG grew as a company, some of the manual paper-based processes for transferring and sharing information between the group, its members and suppliers were becoming cumbersome and difficult to manage on a larger scale.

The idea was to package these processes up into one

central digital system, allowing us to more easily manage and improve these processes internally. Of course, this is also a more convenient way for our members and suppliers to access information.

The development of the portal started in January 2017, with a launch in November that year, following the member and supplier conference at Mercedes-

Benz World.

The portal offers many features:

- **A Member and Supplier directory:**

Members can scan a directory of all IPG suppliers available to them through the group, and the opposite is also available for suppliers to search for members

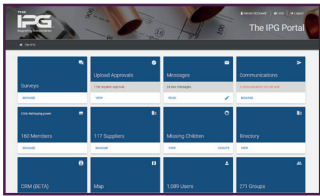
- **Financials:** Members and suppliers can

view invoices, rebate and turnover information

- **Promotions:**

Suppliers can upload promotions for members to the portal, and members can login and view them

- **Products:** Suppliers can supply The IPG with e-commerce friendly product data, which can then be maintained and

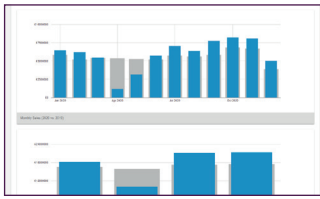
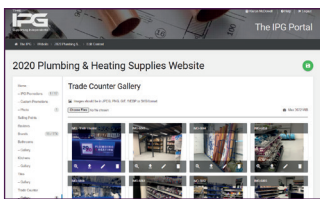


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reviewed by them on the portal. Members are able to search products from all suppliers via the product directory and, if they have one of our e-commerce websites, surface the product data on their websites for click & collect orders

- **Websites:** If a member has taken advantage of one of our dual-branded IPG websites, they are able to edit and maintain the website themselves via the easy to use point and click website editor. E-commerce sites can also be fully managed via the portal, allowing members to select and price products, as well as set their preferences for delivery, collection and more

- **Digital signage:** With one of our digital screens, the portal gives members the ability to maintain and change the content that displays on their TV screen. Suppliers send us screen content that members can simply toggle off/on if they so desire, and members can also upload their own content to the screens at the click of a button
- **Messages/news/charity:** These tiles provide up-to-date information about the group, messages and information relating to our charity partner, Missing People #FindEveryChild. The reaction very early on from both members and suppliers

was extremely positive and the portal is now the central hub for all things IPG for both parties who log into the portal on a routine basis. Many members have it open throughout the day and access it regularly. Some have been known to access it from the shopfloor to answer enquiries.

When the portal was launched in November 2017, we had 475 users, 1,774 visitor sessions and 12,000 page views. By comparison, in November 2020 we had 979 users, 5,668 visitor sessions and 30,000 page views.

There are many reasons for members and suppliers to login, hence the significant rise in the number of users.

The portal has also evolved to offer many more benefits for users. Initially it was used

predominantly to display supplier terms and financial information, but the functionality provided has grown significantly to support marketing initiatives and other features.

Developments based on feedback

We tend to prioritise any developments based on feedback from those that use it, whether members, suppliers, or our own team. Since inception, we have added the following features all based on this feedback:

- supplier promotions
- charity, Missing People #FindEveryChild
- surveys and email communications
- member websites
- product data
- web 2 print
- member e-commerce
- digital signage.

The portal is very intuitive to use and we are always on hand to help if users have any questions.

We are able to customise permissions and access based on login, so sensitive financial information can be hidden, with only areas relevant to the user being displayed.

Future developments will be based on user feedback. In the short-term, we plan to further improve and enhance our e-commerce and digital signage systems.

In the longer term, we will continue to evolve to meet the needs of our member and supplier network.

We aim to add value and make our members and suppliers lives easier with every change that we make. ■

Testimonials

“As a member, one of the most valuable tools the IPG provide is a web portal that allows us to see how we are doing and provide us with all the tools we need to increase sales. The financials provide a great graphical comparison of year on year sales and allows us to assess how we are doing while the portal is complete with all the other items we need to grow our business. During lockdown the IPG team was brilliant at keeping the portal up to date with who was open and having access to the price files and upcoming price changes all in one place is superb. It also allows us to see what new suppliers have joined the group and gives us all the contact details we need to move forward with a new opportunity.”

Gavin Hunter, Managing Director, Ergonomic Designs.

“From a supplier perspective, The IPG has been extremely proactive with showcasing our range to the network. It has selected the ideal independent stores to be part of the group, which makes supplying these independents even more beneficial. CT1, which is used widely by the plumbing and heating demographic, flourish in an environment that the group brings to the table. Marketing, communications and PR finesse that makes the partnerships run so smooth. The portal has allowed us to communicate offers and information on our range, while being endorsed from the top up.”

Nicola Walsh, Head of Marketing and Brand Protection, C-Tec Building Product Specialists.

“The portal is an extremely useful tool for a merchant like us. It’s user friendly, meaning you can update your website, find a supplier, find the latest promotions, or even track your spend or quarterly rebates through the group in a matter of minutes. This saves time and money by not asking a web developer to make changes to your website or ringing suppliers for prices and promotions. We wouldn’t be without it.”

Jay Lovejoy, Showroom Manager, Ballcock & Bits.

“The portal offers a multitude of benefits and continues to be a great communication platform for Roman as a supplier and a brand. Our supplier profile and brand page enable us to advocate our brand digitally to members and end users which has never been more important as a result of the pandemic, and many shopping online for bathroom products.”

Sophie Stanwix, Marketing Communications Manager, Roman.



Download copies of the latest brochures for these brands at www.ree.co.uk/publications

Watch the sales take off with an e-commerce website

IPG members can upgrade and take the opportunity of a professionally designed dual-branded e-commerce website for their business. Kieran McDowell, The IPG's Web Developer, explains.

As part of every membership, The IPG is on hand to help develop and set-up a website, using the member's own branding. The result is a bespoke website that encapsulates their business and personality.

Some members will only seek to upgrade their current website, but for others we can futureproof their business and bring them online, helping them gain greater visibility in their local area.

Members are able to manage and maintain

the content of their website themselves, via easy to use, intuitive, website editors built into The IPG Portal.

Members can add and change text and image content, update business information, upload their own documents and banners, as well as choose from a selection of rich website content that is routinely updated by our supplier network.

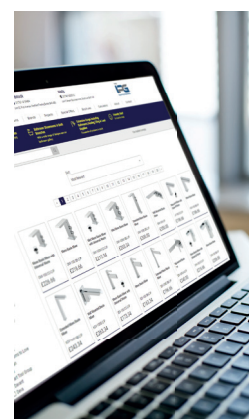
Since August 2018, when we launched our first member website for Four Ashes Plumbing Supplies,

we have developed many websites for our members and more will follow as our membership evolves.

In August 2020, we launched our first e-commerce website for Croxley Plumbing Supplies, offering shop functionality to allow it to trade online and offer a click & collect and delivery service. Its website has gone from strength to strength with visitors increasing by more than 400% in the process.

We now have six members with e-commerce websites, with many more in the pipeline. The premise for our e-commerce offering is simple. Those members offering an e-commerce solution have a greater chance of selling more, which is really beneficial for them and our suppliers. It also allows members to offer Covid-safe processes, giving them the option to offer collection and/or delivery services. Offering e-commerce will give members every chance of taking their businesses to the next level.

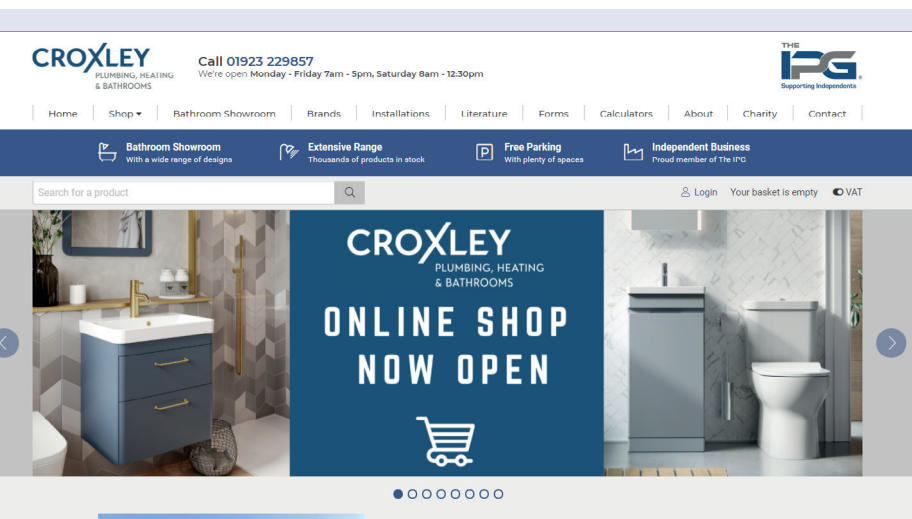
The IPG manage a central database of supplier product data, which is available for members of the group to access and search on via our Portal. We work very closely with suppliers to ensure the product data is rich and up-to-date.



With one of our e-commerce solutions, members have the option of surfacing this data on their websites. It is as simple as choosing a supplier or specific products from the database, adding it to their website, and setting any prices or restrictions accordingly. The member does not need to source or manage any product data, The IPG does it all. Data is king in a world dominated by digital commerce.

Our e-commerce websites integrate with numerous industry leading payment providers and ERP systems, it offers various delivery and click & collect options so a member can customise their site as they wish.

We prioritise developments and improvements to our e-commerce offering based on member feedback, much as we do for improvements made to our portal. ■



“From my initial consultation with The IPG to my weekly emails and phone calls, getting on board with e-commerce has been a big success. Sales have increased since going live, but what has also improved is my profile in the local area. The

amount of visitors to my website has grown significantly, from 500 to 2,000 visitors per month.

Never as much as now has our relationship with The IPG felt so much like a team. Kieran and Chris Wheeler (Web Developer) are always on hand to discuss

ideas or answer any questions I have, as well as implementing fixes or adding new features. They have both been a huge part in helping our website get to where it is now and I feel this really is only the beginning.” **Croxley Plumbing Supplies**

‘Being with The IPG is something special’

Justin Protheroe, Sales Director at WMI Simpsons, highlights the many benefits of working with The IPG and explains why joining the membership group continues to be one of the best business decisions it has ever made.

WMI Simpsons

Bathrooms Plumbing & Heating



WMI Simpsons is a family-run supplier of heating and bathroom products situated in Finchley, London.

Established in 1986, it is open to the trade and the public, and can help homeowners design the perfect bathroom as well as recommend trusted bathroom installation specialists.

On the heating side, WMI has 1,000's of products and parts in stock to ensure homeowners can get their heating back on faster and their homes warm again. It also works with independent heating engineers, small businesses, and larger companies.

The WMI Simpsons team consists of ex-gas engineers and heating professionals, meaning they can supply, advise, and empathise with any issues to find the best possible solution.

This small, close-knit team have all become good friends. Theresa Phillips, Financial Director, Justin Protheroe, Sales Director, Martin Allen, Manager and Stuart Corby, who looks after the stock management, each have more than 20 years in the industry.

WMI Simpsons

joined The IPG in 2015.

Justin was impressed with the passion the group demonstrated towards the independent sector.

“The IPG was able to open doors we couldn't and that is still the case today. We don't have a stand-alone showroom, so the group deals are a massive benefit to us,” he said.

Justin fondly remembers the first time he met Robin Beal (The IPG Chairman) at one of The IPG's steering group meetings. Robin turned to him and said: “I'll never forget you; you are our 100th member.” Justin felt that this was said with such sincerity and sentiment that he remembers feeling as if he was part of something special.

Justin feels privileged to be involved in this group of independent, like-minded people and is proud to sit on one of The IPG's steering groups. “The nature of independents is that we are all so different, we're all fighting our own fights, yet at the steering meetings, we all come together to find common solutions to drive our businesses forward,” he said. “The IPG really listen to our needs and wants.”

Recently, Justin managed to offer one of his customers a favourable price that in his words “didn't make

him break into too much of a sweat”.

When the customer commented: “I don't know how you can do it for that, it's a better price than I can buy it elsewhere,” he replied that it was because he was part of The IPG, explaining that it negotiates with suppliers on behalf of all its members, which means that his team does not have to spend valuable time seeing reps and negotiating as a single company.

A daily routine

The WMI Simpsons team all use The IPG portal daily and, just like putting your shoes on, it has become part of their daily routine. Everybody in the business has access to it, the portal is “the heartbeat of WMI”.

The portal communications that were sent out throughout the coronavirus pandemic have been key to the continued success of WMI, knowing which suppliers were still open and their stock situations has been critical to the business during trying times.

Knowing they had the support of The IPG behind them has made all the difference and the WMI Simpsons team truly believe that if it was not part of the group, it might not have survived the last year.

“I don't think there would be a future for WMI Simpsons without The IPG,” admitted Justin. “They (and fellow members) are even on hand to assist with business growth strategy and succession planning.”

To this end, it has recently installed new dual branded signage at its premises. WMI Simpsons is happy to invest in this and is honoured to be part of the group and to display The IPG brand alongside its own, as it believes it will enable them to “power on” and with the support of the membership group, “the future looks bright”.

One of the things WMI Simpsons particularly likes about the group is that “everyone is so friendly and approachable, it doesn't matter what their status in the company is, everyone is willing to help”.

The WMI Simpsons team has a belief that if you are a member of The IPG, to really see the benefits, you need to take a leap of faith and embrace all that it has to offer, not only the purchasing support but the many exciting marketing and IT initiatives that help drive footfall into their store.

“Joining the IPG is one of the best business decisions we've made,” Justin concluded. ■

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All for one and one for all: collaboration is based on trust

Builders' Merchants News and The IPG teamed up to hold a virtual roundtable on Tuesday 19 January 2021 to discuss the ongoing issues faced specifically by the plumbing, heating and bathroom sector. Builders' Merchants News Deputy Editor, Nicolas Chinardet, reports.

Following a brief introduction by Tim Wood as to how the event would proceed, the panel was asked its first question 'When is a buying group not a buying group?' and 'What makes The IPG different?'

Given that he founded The IPG, Robin Beal was arguably the best qualified person to open the debate.

For Robin, at a basic level, a buying group is a way to obtain the best purchasing terms from suppliers for its members. In the case of The IPG specifically, this is achieved by "seeking more of a win/win with suppliers," developing strategies that allows

them to increase brand awareness within member locations. However, Robin added, buying groups also have an opportunity to do more for their members, helping them with business development, depending on their needs.

Glenn Fisher concurred, adding that The IPG's wider aim is to build its members' and suppliers' brands, helping them achieve national recognition and ultimately driving footfall into IPG member stores. It is about "getting members more sales, as well as allowing them to buy better," he added.

Gareth Griffiths believes The IPG offers "something quite unique in the market" through this ambition to go beyond the basic role of a buying group.

He cited in particular the "screens in branch" and e-commerce initiatives, which, from the perspective of a supplier, allow for a professional, controlled and consistent presence across the member network; something that can otherwise be tricky to achieve.

Gareth also mentioned The IPG's loyalty model, which is "gold dust" for him as a supplier, and the collaborative approach as distinctive elements in the group's offer.

Jennifer Hollingshead agreed, but sees The IPG more as a partner than a customer. Specifically, the annual marketing strategy developed between the group and its suppliers, is "vital" for her and "sets The IPG apart from the rest". "Collaboration is the key word," she added.

Castle Plumbing Supplies was one of the first members of The IPG. Paul Cosgrove sees it as "an extra person in the office". As a small independent merchant, once its goal of "serving the customer and make sure they go away happy," is carried out, there is no time and no capacity to look at increasing marketing or making the company look more professional to customers.

"The IPG is giving us that extra support, as a business, to help us move forward, which has been a huge asset for us," he added.

David Merrick believes that the small size of some buying groups can be a limiting factor for its members due to entrenched interests, and a lack of perspective.

Breaking the stranglehold of traditional brands

He also hailed the role of The IPG in breaking the stranglehold of traditional brands by

bringing in a wider range of suppliers.

Andrew Surtees sees traditional buying groups as being quite elitist. For him, The IPG is not one of those and instead the membership group has helped to transform the market, through innovation.

Nick Khaira praised the personal approach he has experienced when dealing with The IPG, saying he felt like a partner, while also getting access to leading brands.

Reacting to what had been said, Robin made the point that, at the risk of appearing corny, he believes that the relationships between trading partners should be based on care; the business equivalent of a marriage or a family. Collaboration is based on trust, Robin added.

Tim then moved the discussion on to the subject of branding; the strength of a brand in today's market, how it is measured, and the types of brands such as product, organisation, and individual.

Jennifer shared an anecdote that happened to the MD of her company who was once challenged at a conference on the values of his business and how they were not reflected by his brand at the time. This was a moment of epiphany for him, she said, and

The panel

- **Robin Beal**, Chairman, The IPG
- **Glenn Fisher**, Managing Director, The IPG
- **Paul Cosgrove**, Director, Castle Plumbing Supplies (Member)
- **Jennifer Hollingshead**, Director of Marketing, First Trace Heating Direct and Snug Underfloor Heating (Supplier)
- **Gareth Griffiths**, Sales Director, Bristan (Supplier)
- **Nick Khaira**, Owner/Director, Unique Plumbing Supplies (Member)
- **David Merrick**, Group Managing Director, Linthwaite Group (Davant Products) (Supplier)
- **Andrew Surtees**, Sales Director, Mueller Europe (Supplier)

The discussion was chaired by **Tim Wood**, Editor of *Builders' Merchants News*



■ Tim Wood



■ Robin Beal



■ Glenn Fisher

it actually led to the creation of the Snug brand and branding. A strong brand, that is easy to remember and makes you “understand what that feels like” is, for her, “absolutely vital”.

Glenn agreed that branding is about feeling but he suggested that, as well as the perspective of customers, that of employees should also be considered.

Gareth referenced research carried out by Bristan, which revealed customers buying a new bathroom have limited and short-lived brand recognition. However, he added, installers, who often act as brand ambassadors, need to be cultivated more specifically. A digital presence has become indispensable in any case.

Trust remains the key element

For Paul, beyond the importance of a good brand, trust remains the key element and merchants, who also act as ambassadors, are, he feels, often overlooked by companies.

Robin agreed that there are multiple interlocking layers

of brands involved in the sector, from the merchant to the product. For Jennifer too, “it all comes down to trust”.

The panel agreed that the use of recognised and established brands could also be a means to build customer confidence in those involved with them.

The discussion then turned to the future and what services independent merchants should offer to answer the needs of installers and plumbers.

Robin made three suggestions: anything that saves them time, anything that saves them money, and, perhaps more importantly in his view, anything that will please their customers.

Paul and Nick both agreed that efficiency and saving time are becoming more important for their customers, while Glenn pointed out that on-the-job video conferencing is increasingly popular for interactions between merchants and tradespeople.

Jennifer argued that suppliers could get more involved in the selling process, talking directly to tradespeople about the

products before sending a shopping list to the merchants, thus saving them time too.

Gareth highlighted the shift in channels towards the perceived convenience of online selling that has been exacerbated by the pandemic. In that respect, standardised pricing, where the customer knows in advance how much they are going to pay, is helpful too.

With regards to suppliers’ involvement, Gareth had questions about the value for merchants of products being delivered directly to the customer by the supplier in a three-way process. This is something that certainly splits opinions.

Nick was worried this could lead to merchants eventually being by-passed, but Robin thought that, with trust and a collaborative spirit, through e-commerce, this danger could be avoided. This speeds things up and removes the need for merchants to process deliveries and hold stocks.

A human touch

For David, independent merchants have unique advantages that cannot be found in more systemised operations, citing the examples of a human touch and product knowledge.

Turning to Robin, Tim asked him about e-commerce and whether he thought this business model would become the norm in the industry for the future.

Robin responded that e-commerce is not only going to be important in the future, it is important now. Most customer

journeys already start online. It is not, in his view, the only option but one that has been growing significantly in terms of uptake.

Jennifer concurred that customers are likely to go online to find information and that finding that information helps build confidence in the product and the advice received about it.

However, David argued that mobile devices would be the buying tool of choice for newer generations of customers.

For Andrew, availability of stock and effective logistics are important, and something that chains like Screwfix and Toolstation do very well, but he agreed that, while independent merchants have to offer click & collect options, they also have to emphasise their proximity and knowledge of products.

Gareth cautioned about the risks of going all out with a digital presence, which can become a “big black hole of investment if you are not careful”.

Small merchants are not in a position to compete with established national websites, he said, therefore, they have to best utilise what online channels bring, if only to generate footfall to their branch.

Glenn said that a digital presence such as a website becomes like an extra branch for a merchant, and possibly the most important one because it is the cheapest to set up and run, and the only one open 24/7.

While there are possible difficulties around managing accurate product data,





■ Paul Cosgrove

something that, as Glenn said, The IPG platform helps minimise, Paul saw many advantages to e-commerce, including instant payment without the need to create a customer account, reaching a bigger audience and fewer overheads. It's "a bit of a no-brainer" for him.

Tim turned the discussion to the way the panellists' companies encourage and support better work/life balance for their employees and how that was impacted by furlough.

Glenn was first to respond armed with some revealing figures. In 2019/20, 828,000 people in the UK suffered from work-related depression, stress or anxiety, and 17.9 million working days were lost to work-related mental health issues.

This underlined the size of the problem and argued that, had the health issues been physical rather than mental, something would be done to prevent them from happening. There is an added difficulty in that people do not particularly want to speak about mental health and are often not qualified to do so.

"It's scary when you look at the figures and

we don't do enough," he said, adding that, in the context of the pandemic, he had additional big concerns about the dramatic drop in the level of personal interactions people experience.

For Glenn, there is also a risk that people could become stuck in new isolationist ways. Employers have a role to play here.

Keeping vigilant for signs of mental health issues

Gareth explained how Bristan encourages managers to keep vigilant for signs of mental health issues in their team members.

This could be made more difficult when people are working from home, but technology can be a resource, allowing people to communicate more frequently. Staff are having shorter meetings, more often as a way to keep team spirit and morale going.

Panellists were keen to share some of the initiatives already brought in or set to be introduced by their employer. Bristan, for example, is about to roll out a programme of mental health first aiders, The IPG already has such a scheme in place, while at Snug, people are encouraged to be open to talk to their superiors, through an "open door policy".

Jennifer agreed that the pandemic has heightened levels of anxiety and that managers therefore have a duty of care towards their employees to make sure they are ok and dealing with the situation well. This

can take the form of extra leave or extended deadlines.

She felt that everybody's needs are different and communication is key to work out what those needs are and how they can be met. "You have to wrap your arms around them, it's the only way," Jennifer added.

Glenn listed common signs of stress to look out for: troubled sleep, racing thoughts, clenching of teeth and jaws, indigestion, and either reduced or increased appetite. Stress leads to bad decisions, he added, which can clearly impact a business.

Keeping with the subject of employees, Tim asked about recruitment and the ways to attract and keep the right staff. He gave a few basic principles:

- provide a positive work environment
- recognise, reward and reinforce the right behaviour
- involve and engage staff
- develop skills and nurture potential
- evaluate and measure the staff you have.

David thinks that a robust appraisal system is very important to retain staff. This includes formal and informal processes. Training is also key for him. Company objectives are identified and broken down to individual staff member level to work out personal development plans (PDP).

David's company also offers occupational qualifications that in turn allows staff members to take on more responsibilities within the business.

Employees feel more involved with the company as a result.

Bristan tries to get its corporate culture across to candidates when interviewing them to make sure people fit. Managers have regular one-to-ones with staff, backed by a clear performance management system and a career progression planning and development scheme.

The company has recently launched an online reward system, where colleagues can nominate each other to give thanks for jobs well done.

Green businesses and life after plastic were the next topics up for discussion. Tim argued that being seen to be friendly to the environment enhances brand image, increases productivity, reduces costs, and, as already discussed, improves the recruitment and retention of employees.

Andrew joked that sustainability was an interesting question for the suppliers on the panel using plastics, but Glenn defended Davant, having witnessed first-hand its recycling effort at its factory in Ledbury.

Merrick added that 80% of Davant's products are made from recycled material. The company also focuses on recycling its own waste as much as possible.

Snug, which is in a similar position, product-wise, is trying to include as much recycled material as possible in its processes, according to Jennifer.

Gareth said that, while there is a market for greener products, there is also some resistance, with



■ Jennifer Hollingshead



■ Gareth Griffiths





■ Nick Khaira



■ David Merrick



■ Andrew Surtees

customers sometimes asking for water efficient elements in Bristan products to be removed by installers.

For Glenn, however, the responsibility to effect change lies squarely with the Government, through either incentives or penalties.

Customers definitely becoming greener

Nick remarked that customers are “definitely becoming greener, definitely thinking more about the environment and sustainability”.

He added that merchants will get more questions about how environmentally friendly the products they sell are and they need to be prepared for that.

Andrew noted that the Government has started to introduce green product directives that means suppliers are increasingly being monitored for their energy usage, their products’ recyclability and sustainability, and their role in the circular economy.

Bigger contractors are already asking for that sort of information, he added, but that is not yet the case for installers and consumers.

Andrew also mentioned the ethical purchasing gap, a phrase

he encounters more and more frequently. This describes the restrictions placed on “people who want to do the right thing” by prohibitive prices.

Asked about the sales of heat pumps by Glenn, Nick answered that manufacturers tended to contact installers directly for those and for greener products in general, which, he thinks, is possibly a significant obstacle to merchants getting into that market.

For Robin, this is still so niche that there is no need to worry right now. He quoted the figure of 1.6 million boilers being sold in the UK last year, with about 20 million in service in total, against 30,000 heat pumps being sold.

While the figure is currently miniscule, it will grow, Robin added, particularly as gas boilers will be phased out eventually. This is why he strongly encourages his members to be involved with renewables and be “part of the action”.

To wind up the discussion, the panel moved to the subject of products manufactured in the UK.

For Paul the past year has made it clear how much the country relies on imports. Therefore, being able to deal with a manufacturer in full control of its production process is a “huge thing”.

David agreed, predicting a significant repatriation of manufacturing to the UK to bypass supply chains that he does not see as robust enough. His company’s strategy is, therefore, to try to manufacture a lot more of its products in the UK.

Investment in that direction has already

started and is being fast-tracked, which David sees as a good thing for the industry as it shifts the focus away from pricing towards quality, availability and service level.

When asked by Glenn, if they had registered an explicit demand for British-made products from their customers, both Nick and Paul replied that they had not.

Andrew, whose products are manufactured in Britain, expressed gratitude for the fact that they are, even if it is something he has never particularly promoted.

He thinks that should customers be aware of this, they would choose his products over an import and would even be willing to pay a little more for it.

He argues that installers will ask for British-made products more and it is down to the producers to publicise the provenance of their products.

For Jennifer, customer demand is the key driver and the main challenge. While Snug would like to be a British system, the desirability and brand recognition of certain foreign-made components means that it is not currently possible.

Robin identified possible reasons for people to want to buy indigenous products. There is the traditional ‘patriotic’ reason of wanting to keep currency circulating within the national industries.

However, for him, what he called the “food miles” and green considerations around sustainability and carbon footprint due to

transport come into play.

Price is the be all and end all

For Nick, the crux of it, however, is price. There may be a nationalistic undercurrent to certain decisions to buy British, but those products will have to be competitive for the trend to be sustained.

David thought this was possible due to the “other costs” attached to importing products that are not necessarily normally factored in. He thinks the material cost of the product can be balanced out by other benefits.

David referred to cost/benefit analyses done by his company that made it confident that this is a strong way forward. This argument is strengthened by the current disruptions to the economy caused by Brexit and the pandemic, which Paul also sees as an opportunity for British companies to get ahead.

Customers may find themselves in a position to have to try the slightly more expensive British product and end up liking it.

Nick agrees that it will be down to the consumer to buy into the idea, as it is doing with sustainability.

If this happened, he added, a small premium would become acceptable.

The final say on a lively and thought provoking two hours belonged to Gareth who said that sourcing products more locally could make sense, but it will not be possible for all, as the British industry is not currently offering alternatives to foreign products. ■



Helping children in crisis

In September 2018, The IPG began a partnership with Missing People, with the aim to help bring missing children back to their families and friends. Alex Livingstone, Corporate Partnerships Manager at Missing People, highlights the support the membership group has given the national charity.



Nearly 80,000 young children go missing in the UK every year - a number that could almost fill Wembley Stadium.

This is an issue that Missing People #FindEveryChild tackles daily, and one with which The IPG network is well placed to help.

The charity felt that The IPG's national reach combined with its local presence through its members could make a huge difference in the search for lost children.

Jo Youle, CEO of Missing People, said: "Thank you so much to The IPG team for supporting our campaign to #FindEveryChild (launched in 2017 to increase awareness of the issue of missing children and to raise vital funds for the search) and Missing People. This campaign is integral in helping us extend the reach of our publicity appeals and we really hope it will play a

role in reuniting missing children with their families."

Making a difference

The relationship was set up by Nike Lovell, The IPG's Head of Marketing. Her passion for making a difference to children thinking of running away and those already missing was crucial in kickstarting the partnership.

Now The IPG and Missing People work in close contact throughout the year in its mission to raise awareness and funds for the #FindEveryChild campaign. This includes extending the reach of #FindEveryChild appeal posters in the area where children went missing, and collaborating on campaigns such as:

- The IPG's Orbit the Moon cycle - to cycle the circumference of the moon, and the London to Brighton cycle ride, which raised over £3,000.
- Home for Christmas campaign (supported by suppliers Wavin and Britan). The IPG members sold raffle tickets to win a luxury hamper, raising almost £10,000 and achieving over 10,000 Twitter impressions.
- A secret auction at The IPG 2019

conference held at the National Space Centre in Leicester, hosted by Ross Miller, Director of Fundraising and Communications at Missing People, and Kate McCann, mother of missing Madeleine.

- Support to Missing People events such as International Missing Children's Day (25 May).
- The IPG member stores have collection tins for Missing People.

The IPG's backing is incredibly important to help children in crisis and ensure support is available to them and their families. IPG members have raised over £21,000 during the partnership to date.

Alex admitted that the support of The IPG members is vital, as like most charities and businesses, #FindEveryChild has been badly affected by Covid-19.

"Fundraising from voluntary sources has significantly reduced as social distancing restrictions continue to limit public fundraising events and employee fundraising," he said. "This is why long-term partnerships with amazing supporters such as The IPG can make all the difference.

"An example of how IPG make a difference.

With a donation of just £3 Missing People can send ten missing children a police-approved text message as soon as they are reported missing. Our supportive message will explain to the missing child how they can contact us to speak to one of our trained helpline advisors."

The IPG has also significantly extended the reach and visibility of #FindEveryChild appeal posters.

Through its network of local independent businesses, The IPG provides a presence in over 200 communities across the UK, ensuring greater awareness of missing children in each location among their members, becoming extra eyes on the ground to help with the search to find them.

Furthermore, The IPG has also created original content to raise awareness among its audience, recently releasing a mini documentary on a family with a missing son.

Companies can join the campaign to support #FindEveryChild by either downloading physical posters from Missing People's website or sharing our social media posts of missing children appeals. ■

To find out more, visit: <https://www.the-ipg.co.uk/charity>

FIND EVERY child





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