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Bristol Uniforms on operating through the pandemic

New awards date:
March 19
2021





Author Ian Mitchell, Joint Managing Director of Bristol Uniforms

The global effects of the Coronavirus pandemic continue to evolve rapidly, presenting huge challenges for all businesses in the industry. As a supplier of PPE and managed services to the UK's fire and rescue services, Bristol Uniforms qualifies as an essential service that must remain operating if possible. Ian Mitchell, Joint Managing Director of Bristol Uniforms, explains how the company has navigated through these difficult times

Steering a business through a pandemic

Early challenges

Bristol Uniforms began to feel the first effects of the Coronavirus pandemic well before lockdown in the UK. We have a network of distributors supplying customers around the globe and we rely on suppliers and manufacturing contractors based in many different countries. We have weavers based in Spain, for example, and gloves are sourced from Germany. Our principal supplier of leather boots is Jolly, a specialist boot manufacturer based in the Lombardy region of Italy.

On March 8 this region went into lockdown and Jolly had to close completely. Fortunately, since we had been preparing for Brexit, we had pre-ordered a fair amount of stock from our European suppliers in the event that future trading became difficult. We were just about able to manage with existing boot stocks until their lockdown eased. Then on March 16 we were very concerned to hear that the Czech Republic, where two of our manufacturing contractors are based, was closing its borders. It was a huge

relief when we received confirmation that commercial freight was able to pass through.

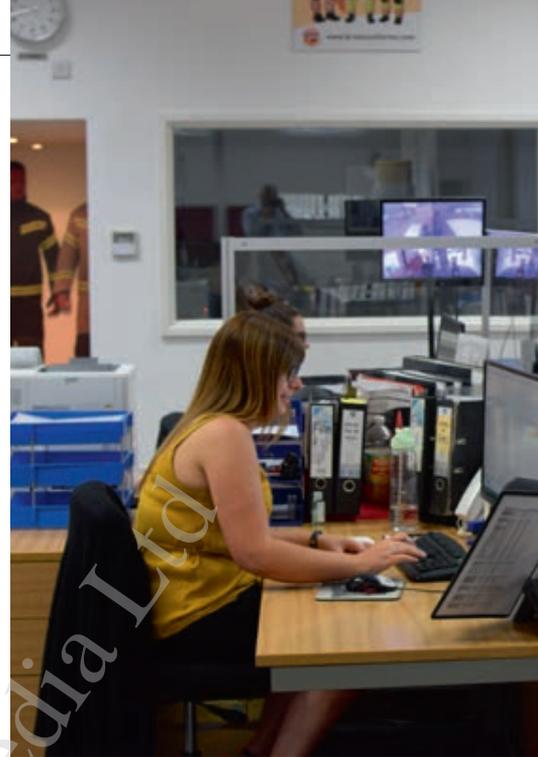
During this period, we had conversations with many customers who were concerned about what might happen if we had to cease operating. As essential key workers, firefighters would of course continue to work during lockdown. Their PPE would need cleaning and repairing, and many were expecting deliveries of new kit. As an important supplier to the emergency services it was clear that we too would need to keep operating to support them.

Since we have a mature Business Continuity Plan (BCP) and Committee, we were able to immediately enact contingency plans in case any of our facilities were affected by a coronavirus outbreak. We have two Service Centres operating in different parts of the country (Bristol and London), so we were able to reassure our customers that we would have been able to manage the cleaning and maintenance of kit if one were to close. As an additional back-up, we have BCP arrangements with a commercial laundry in Bath that would step in if both sites were compromised.

Lockdown

When lockdown in England was announced on March 23, I can remember watching Boris Johnson's briefing on TV. Even though we were expecting this news, it felt like a dramatic moment. Almost immediately, I began to receive phone-calls from our site managers to confirm whether our facilities would be open the next day. Understandably, some of our staff felt concerned about coming in, and it was paramount that we had a clear plan

“With all these new practices and procedures in place, we did our best to continue working to our usual high standards, providing our customers with a reliable service”



New screens help to protect office staff



The new social distancing sizing mat

of action to reassure them that we could operate as safely as possible without putting staff at risk.

The following morning, we quickly and carefully put a number of new measures in place. The workforce would need to be separated by two metres which meant re-evaluating all our workspaces. Our machinist stations in the factory were already a good distance apart, but where we could we provided additional space. We introduced a one-way system in our storage facilities to protect warehouse staff. The open-plan office area was more of a challenge, so most of our office staff were asked to work from home with laptops. Our IT team had a huge undertaking that morning, allocating laptops and screens to everyone (they were very hard to source at the time) and providing access and training for everyone to work securely. They did a sterling job and all remote staff were up and running in a very short space of time.

From March until May, we were provided with very little guidance from the government on how to continue operating as a key business, and we were left to make our own decisions on how best to keep our staff safe. We decided against masks (other than for service centre roles that already required them) as we were able to establish social distancing, and also, based on World Health Organisation guidance, decided against gloves, instead encouraging handwashing and hand sanitising. Fortunately, we had recently ordered new hand-sanitiser stations in the factory to accompany new finger-print touch screens for clocking-in. Our stock soon ran low in the rush of demand, but we eventually secured a contract with Initial for a regular supply.

Supporting the Workforce

With all these new practices and procedures in place, we did our best to continue working to our usual high standards, providing our customers with a reliable service. Our employees' safety was put first and we had to find new ways of being flexible and adaptable with working hours. Some were at high risk or shielding, many had childcare responsibilities, some had periods of absence when having to self-isolate with family members.

It quickly became clear that we needed to provide staff with evidence of their keyworker status. Parents needed to provide proof for schools so that their children could continue to attend, and a few members of staff were stopped by the police on their way into work and asked to explain why their journeys were essential. But obtaining official keyworker status from the Home Office was surprisingly slow. We did eventually receive a letter confirming that we were an essential service, but in the interim, I made sure that all staff had a letter from me confirming their keyworker status.

A few weeks into lockdown we realised that we had too many of the office staff working from home and it was difficult to get things done. Instead we began alternating staff in the office and put up screens separating desk



Hand sanitisers and social distancing in the workplace



Managed services have continued to hit turnaround targets

spaces. Now all our office staff have returned, and we are getting used to the 'new normal'.

Managed Services

Our two Service Centres have done remarkably well and have continued to operate as normal throughout these difficult months, with our drivers picking up contaminated kit from fire and rescue services (FRSs) around the country and returning it within the guaranteed seven days, cleaned, inspected and where necessary, repaired. With limited firefighter training and recruitment taking place, there has been a decrease in demand for cleaning which helped take off some of the pressure, but nevertheless we are proud to have been able to continue providing this important service to firefighters on the front line.

Collaborative Framework Roll-out

We are also particularly proud to have hit all original 'go-live' dates during this period for FRSs receiving their new Collaborative Framework kit. Bristol is the supplier of PPE ensembles for the UK's Collaborative Framework scheme, run by Kent FRS, which gives UK FRSs access to high quality PPE ensembles and volume discounts through a streamlined procurement process. Thirty-three FRSs comprising 33,500 firefighters are currently benefitting from the scheme. We have been steadily rolling out delivery of new kit to FRSs across the country as their contracts come up for renewal and they place new orders.

So far this year, we have delivered new PPE to seven FRSs. Oxfordshire FRS, for example, had a 'go-live' date of June 1. This meant that we had to begin packing boxes in March, and deliver their kit in April, ready to exchange sizes in May. This was a significant achievement during such a difficult time.

We also created a new socially distanced sizing protocol, which was vetted and authorised by Kent FRS, so that sizing procedures could go ahead as planned. Leicestershire FRS signed up to the Collaborative Framework in May and we began sizing in June. Rather than delay the start or risk mistakes with self-sizing, our sizing team created a circular mat, four metres in diameter with a red spot in the centre, which was laid out in fire stations. Each firefighter stands on the red dot with suitable sizes brought to the edge of the mat to try on, until the correct size is identified. Gloves and masks are worn during the process and PPE and helmets are sanitised in-between firefighters.

The Future

Lockdown was certainly a strange period of time to be operating as a business and came with plenty of challenges and nervous moments. I'm immensely proud of our staff who showed great commitment and resilience throughout this difficult period and continue to behave impeccably to protect the safety of colleagues and customers.

As a business that essential emergency services rely on to support them, we have needed to be extremely robust throughout this period. Having a well-developed Business Continuity Plan has been essential in this regard, but also the need to be innovative, flexible and react with speed has enabled us to find solutions quickly in a fast-moving environment.

We are fully aware that the Coronavirus crisis is far from over and that these challenges are likely to continue for some time to come. However, I'm confident that as a business entering its seventh decade of supply to the fire and rescue services, we will continue to pull together in our efforts to serve and protect firefighters on the frontline, whatever the future may bring.