



Charles Bedforth with MD of dealer Netherton Tractors, Harry Barclay, in December 2020, as Netherton expanded its Opico partnership to include Maschio Gaspardo tillage and seeding equipment, and Maschio flail mowers, Sky grain drills and Strautmann Forage and feeding wagons

FOCUSING ON KEY DEALERS

Charles Bedforth has recently been promoted to the new position of Sales Director with agricultural machinery distributor Opico Ltd. Having built up strong relationships with the company's dealer network over the past 11 years, he looks back over his time with the firm, how it's coped this past year, and considers what may lie ahead

SERVICE DEALER: How did your time begin at Opico 11 years ago?

Charles Bedforth: I knew James (Woolway & MD of Opico) previously when he was working at Amazone and I met him at dealer events whilst I was working for Suzuki. When I read that James had bought Opico in 2008, I recognised his name and the company stuck in my mind. I congratulated him at the Highland Show in 2009 and later that year saw an ad for the Sales Manager role at the company. I saw the appeal of working for an independent business owned by one person, representing a number of interesting brands. Having had a previous connection with James I decided to apply, and here I am 11 years later!

SD: Do you have any dealers from when you first started who are still representing the company today?

CB: I still work with many dealers who have been with Opico since I first joined – too many to mention individually! More often than not, I have been dealing with the same people at the dealerships too. I've gone all the way through my Opico career with them.

SD: How has the company changed during your tenure?

CB: When I joined in 2010, the product offering was Opico grassland and dryers, as well as the HE-VA cultivation range. In 2012 we took on Maschio Gaspardo, and then Strautmann and Sky at the end of 2015. Most recently, mechanical weeding was added to the Opico product range in 2019.

Back when I first started there were five territory managers (TMs) who worked with every brand, but when we brought on Maschio we realised we needed dedicated TMs who could focus solely on Maschio products. The whole company has grown over the past 11 years, going from around 30 employees when I first joined, to nearly 40 now.

SD: How has it been for you this past year with all the restrictions in place?

CB: Like many other companies, we nailed Zoom during 2020. We've been very active on the phone with our dealers to make sure we stay in touch. The whole team has kept going in the face of adversity. TMs have been keeping up with demos and have made sure to adapt to



Charles Bedforth

any new rules and regulations. We've all worked hard to keep feeding the nation!

Farm machinery still breaks down, so our service teams have still been out keeping farmers moving. January and February are normally quieter times when we have dealers in our offices for training, and we're keeping up with this by having Zoom training for dealer sales and service teams to maintain and deliver the next level of knowledge.

SD: What do you think the future direction for agricultural machinery looks like?

CB: I've certainly noticed that as a whole, farms are getting larger across all farming types – all the farm businesses we supply do seem to be getting bigger, both

in the dairy and arable sectors. There's also a movement towards conservation agriculture in both arable and livestock, with a focus on input costs. Then we also have potential Brexit changes to consider. Those who don't adapt may end up being left behind.

Across the years we've also seen changes in how dealerships work, and we have learnt to do more business with fewer dealers. Focusing on our key dealers – that's where it's at.

SD: What are the company's plans for 2021?

CB: Our main focus is to continue to grow all our brands and to develop our dealer network to its full potential. We all know that people want to buy from people, and I can't see that changing any time soon. We need to develop our dealer network accordingly, invest in training dealer sales and service teams – I can't see people buying our machines on a computer.

We're going into 2021 with a solid forward order book and, as I mentioned earlier, it's thanks to a massive effort from our whole team. I see our TMs less as salespeople and more as agricultural machinery consultants. Between them they have lots of experience, have seen farming change over time and are still hungry to keep up with the changes that are coming in. It's not just about selling metal – we're giving advice, using industry knowledge to assist dealers and end customers. I'm proud to lead a team of TMs who are so knowledgeable that no matter where you are in the country, you can tap into an absolute wealth of experience and knowhow.

Because the majority of our TMs work across all brands, their understanding has to be strong across all farming practices; their knowledge extends across the board, from grassland maintenance to diet feeders and from racehorse stud operations to veg growers and pretty much everything cultivation-wise in between.

SD: What further developments can you see looking ahead?

CB: We have an excellent range of products to offer UK farmers and we need to focus on these for 2021. It's important to us that we have the right brands to take conservation agriculture forward, with Sky drills and the HE-VA Stealth being prominent in leading the way in this.

My role certainly also involves managing the relationships with our suppliers, and as we are an independent and agile company, we have the opportunity to work closely with our brands to bring the most suitable products to the UK market and to help with the development of new products. We can bring products to the UK market that the UK wants and we work with our manufacturers to import, what we see as, the best for British farming.

SD: Thank you.