

# PUSHING BOUNDARIES

Fresh from opening a Glasgow showroom, Paul O'Brien of Kitchens International says there are no limits to the company's expansion plans

Words **Amelia Thorpe** Pictures **Paul Zandre**

essential retailer profile Kitchens International

A curved white glass worktop accentuates the drama of the Ebony Macassar veneer island by Stoneham



It's a tight marketplace here in Scotland, and some of the most efficient kitchen retailers exist north of the border  
**Paul O'Brien**, sales and marketing director

After spending all morning in a business development meeting, Paul O'Brien, sales and marketing director of independent Scottish retailer Kitchens International, is in bullish mood. It was only January when the company opened a new showroom in Glasgow, but O'Brien is already looking at opening another site in Scotland – the company's sixth – before December, and it doesn't stop there. "We're looking at Stirling or Perth," he says, "and we're giving serious consideration to south of the border – perhaps London or Manchester."

In less than six months, the new Glasgow showroom has already clocked up £500,000-worth of sales, and is, says O'Brien, well on target to achieve, if not beat, its projected first year turnover of £1m.

Given the continuing economic uncertainty, how come Kitchens International is bucking the trend? Licia Di Pasquale, showroom manager,

explains: "People may not be moving, but there are lots of people here building extensions and doing major refurbs," she says. "It's been a lot busier than we expected."

As Scotland's largest city, it's perhaps not surprising that Kitchens International has opened in Glasgow. More surprising is why it took so long to do so, especially as the company has been going since 1994 and has not one but two showrooms in Edinburgh, plus one in Broxburn in West Lothian and another in Aberdeen. "It was always our intention to have a branch in Glasgow," says O'Brien.

When a partnership with Kilmarnock-based JS Geddes, thought to be a stepping stone into Glasgow, didn't work out, they parted company in January 2010. O'Brien then set about looking for a site in the city. He settled on premises on Great Western Road in Glasgow's West End, home to about six other kitchen companies. "It's quite a





retailer profile

**Kitchens International**  
**Who are we?** Paul O'Brien, sales and marketing director, and Licia Di Pasquale, Glasgow showroom manager  
**Where are we?** 220 Great Western Road, Glasgow, G4 9EJ. Tel: 0141 404 7744. www.kitchensinternational.co.uk  
**What we do** Independent Scottish kitchen retailer, specialising in the top end of the market  
**Business history** Kitchens International was founded in 1994 by Paul O'Brien and Gerry Watson. In 2007, as part of an expansion plan, the company merged with Homes Interiors in Aberdeen and JS Geddes in Kilmarnock, but a change in strategy resulted in the Kilmarnock branch being sold back in January 2010. Kitchens International now has five showrooms across Scotland: Murrayfield and Dundas Street in Edinburgh, Broxburn – which is also the site of the distribution centre and head office and has just benefited from a £75,000 refurb – Aberdeen and Glasgow. Co-executive directors Sandy Park, Charlie Stephen, Kevin Buchanan and Barrie Caw sit alongside O'Brien and Watson to form the board of Kitchens International. The company specialises in luxury kitchens from brands including Poggenpohl, Mowlem & Co, Callerton, Leicht, RWK and Stoneham. Appliances are by Gaggenau, Siemens, Miele, Wolf, Sub-Zero and V-Zug, with most sinks and taps by Franke and Dornbracht  
**Sales stats** "Our first year turnover projection for the Glasgow showroom is £1m," says Paul O'Brien. Kitchen prices at the Glasgow showroom start at £15,000 and rise to £70,000, averaging about £26,000. The company's annual turnover is about £11m; sales are split 70% retail, 30% contract  
**Staffing levels** The Glasgow showroom is served by three members of staff: showroom manager Licia di Pasquale, sales designer Duncan Heeles, and a design support assistant, currently being recruited. There are 65 employees across the company  
**Favourite aspect of job** "Dealing with customers," says Licia Di Pasquale  
**Least favourite aspect of job** "Dealing with customers!"  
**Strange but true** "One guy came in to ask us if we sold cheese boards"



Push-touch doors in Cherry Tobacco laminate below a linear breakfast bar of the same material add to the streamlined design of this Leicht Avance kitchen



The starburst pattern of the Ebony Macassar veneer on the Stoneham Strata display catches the eye

trendy place," explains Di Pasquale, "and Glasgow's version of Kitchen Alley on Wigmore Street in London."  
The 150 sq m showroom is imaginatively designed, with three large displays, featuring similarly large islands and reflecting the current trend towards open-plan living and dining spaces. Two sleek Leicht displays are teamed with one from British manufacturer Stoneham, featuring luxury veneers, bespoke glass and sweeping curves.  
"We specifically chose product that gives us exclusivity in the region and provides a showcase for how innovative and creative we can be," explains O'Brien. "We looked at the other companies in Glasgow and wanted to

differentiate ourselves."  
Having identified the local target clientele, generally speaking, as affluent professionals with more fashion- and style-conscious tastes than those in other areas of Scotland, O'Brien and Di Pasquale set out the showroom with contemporary designs displaying real attention to detail. "With only three displays, we could be very focussed about the way we wanted to display the designs, down to the integrated lighting system and dressing," explains O'Brien.  
The new showroom gave Kitchens International the opportunity to try out its expansion plans, bringing in and training new staff, establishing itself in an area where it is relatively unknown



Siemens appliances and a Sub-Zero wine cooler complete the display of Leicht Ceres furniture

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Paul O'Brien, sales and marketing director

and using its infrastructure to support a new studio.  
"It's a tight marketplace here in Scotland, and some of the most efficient kitchen retailers exist north of the border," says O'Brien, who believes his own employed team – from designers to fitters – is key to the company's effectiveness. "Other companies look at the market and think Scotland has lots of opportunity, and it does. But it's not just about the demographics – it's about how they address the market and achieve solutions."  
The early indications of success at the Glasgow branch have encouraged O'Brien to think seriously about further expansion. "If we can bottle the formula that is making Glasgow successful,

why can't we take that to make it work elsewhere?" he says.  
While the plans to open another outlet before the end of the year, be it in Stirling or Perth, are still on the cards, he's also quite serious about setting his sights on new locations throughout the UK. "Although we didn't set up with great world-conquering ambitions, we called ourselves Kitchens International, rather than 'Paul and Gerry's Kitchens'," he says of the business he founded with md Gerry Watson. "Why? Because we're not a 'mum and dad' company. We've got a staff of 65 people and we bring the knowledge of how to make a good quality kitchen retailer work. If the right business opportunity comes along, why not?"

People may not be moving, but there are lots of people here building extensions and doing major refurbs  
Licia Di Pasquale, showroom manager

designer profile

**Licia Di Pasquale**  
Licia Di Pasquale, 35, joined Kitchens International last autumn to prepare for the opening of the new showroom in Glasgow. After graduating from Glasgow Caledonian University with a degree in interior design, Scotland-born Di Pasquale worked as a SieMatic kitchen sales designer in Glasgow for five years, before becoming a design manager at Porcelanosa, where she spent a further five years. Most recently, she spent two

and a half years as dealer support manager for Poggenpohl, travelling across the UK. "I'd become less keen on travelling – it's something you can only do for so long, so when I heard about the opening at Kitchens International, I went for it," she says. "There aren't many companies I'd want to work for – and I've seen everybody on my travels – but Kitchens International is one of the best dealers in Scotland, if not across the UK." Her role encompasses design as well as showroom management.



A handleless Leicht Avance kitchen in glossy acrylic Frosty White sweeps down the room, teamed with a breakfast bar of Cherry Tobacco laminate



Inset panels of smoked mirror feature in the tall walnut veneer cabinetry with Ebony Macassar detailing



A curved Intaglio glass splashback behind Gaggenau cooktops, mounted on Sensa Abyss granite by Cosentino



V-Zug ovens housed in Stoneham's walnut cabinetry with Ebony Macassar detailing and panels of smoked mirror



A French Grey-painted drum cabinet topped with a circle of Sensa Abyss granite by Cosentino echoes the curves of the island glass worktop



Ebony Macassar veneer detailing completes the walnut cabinetry by Stoneham