

## Association of Master Upholsterers & Soft Furnishers Questionnaire (01.06.2015)

Name of business: Dee Cee Upholstery and Interiors

When established: 1978

Owned by: Derek and Karen Caplen

Location: 502 Portswood Road, Portswood, Southampton, SO17 3SP

Speciality: Modern and traditional reupholstery, retailers of rise and recline healthcare chairs

Number in Business: 5

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How long have you been in your job?

Since leaving school. I started an apprenticeship where my dad worked as a carpenter and joiner.

How long did it take to really learn the skill?

It seems like forever. It is a fact that like most trades, and particularly ours, you never stop learning and improving your skills and techniques.

Do you consider yourself a craftsperson or tradesperson?

I think this question needs to be changed to three choices – craftsman, tradesman or businessman. In my case I would answer 'all 3' as in the modern business world you need to be that and more!

What makes up the bulk of your work?

I would say it's probably about 50% reupholstery, repairs and diy, and 50% retail of rise and recline healthcare chairs together with high seat armchairs. It seems when one side of the business is up the other is down, but never the twain should meet.

What keeps you motivated?

The next customer coming through the showroom and the furniture being renovated in our workshops. In some cases we have preserved our countries heritage in the traditional upholstery we have carried out, plus the fact that I am self motivated.

What aspect of your job do you most enjoy?

Seeing furniture that is ready for the skip, or in some cases has come from the skip, being restored to it's former glory and given a new lease of life for your customers to enjoy for years to come. I am always on the lookout for new avenues that will help us make a living from the trade of upholstery that I chose when I was 14½.

Professionally, what is your greatest frustration?

One of my greatest frustrations was being stopped by Trading Standards from manufacturing upholstered armchairs with real football shirts tailored on the backs of the chairs because the covering (the dream team range of football shirts) were not fire retardant and did not meet the 1998 Fire Regulations.

On the plus side, I did make it to a small article on Page 3 of The Sun, a national newspaper, on 13<sup>th</sup> November 1998, which was good **exposure** if you know what I mean. It can also be helpful if you can build up a relationship with your local news media to publicise your business for free! Another is the lack of appreciation of some customers who do not value your skills, especially when you 'go the extra mile'.

Tell us about the most challenging project you have ever undertaken?

In 2007 we were awarded a prestigious contract to carry out the reupholstery and renovation of 500 original seats for The Mayflower Theatre in Southampton which was built in the 1920s. We beat local and national companies to win the contract because they couldn't complete the job within 2½ weeks, or work around the theatres tight schedules in terms of completing a set amount of chairs in a day and having them refitted for that night's performance. In fact we finished one day early!

### And the most unusual/bizarre/funny request you have ever dealt with?

In January 1997 we were asked to make a new, fully upholstered wing chair for a corgi (yes, it was fit for a queen!). Our customer even brought her dog in to our showroom to be measured up. Incidentally, the dog really loved the plush deep pile dralon velvet that it's owner had chosen (not to mention the colour).

### What are the most pressing issues currently facing your business?

Two of our biggest problems are the high street business rates which are still very high, but also just educating the general public about the benefits of reupholstering and what services we provide.

### How long have you been a member of the AMUSF?

I have been a proud member of the AMUSF since 1979. At the age of 22 I became their youngest member. Following on from that, in 2001, I was just as proud to become one of the youngest to be elected as a Fellow of the AMUSF and served on the board for ten years.

The association has played an important part in both myself and the development of Dee Cee Upholstery and Interiors. For instance, going way back to 1979, when I first started my own business, I found it difficult to get work when quoting against older, more established, businesses. Joining the AMUSF gave me and my business instant credibility and has opened many doors, then and even now. My membership is not a cost, it's an investment!

### Professionally, who or where do you turn to for advice/a second opinion?

Initially I would turn to the late Ron Eldridge FAMU. In fact it was Ron who, as my previous employer, advised that I join the AMUSF. Now I look for advice from Toni Shawley, a retired business advisor/trainer.

### When you talk to a fellow upholsterer/soft furnisher, the talk always turns to...?

What project are you working on? How is trade? Busy or quiet?

### What is the single most important piece of advice you would give to someone starting out in this business?

Now you've learnt the basic skills to do the job, keep on learning and perfecting those skills and remember, you're only as good as your last job. It may sound obvious, but only undertake work that you are competent to do.

Try to run your business efficiently, as with efficiency comes extra profit; the primary reason you're in business.

Away from your workshop allow a certain amount of time for the development of your business, i.e. work on your business not just in it!

### Where do you see the future of the industry?

In terms of recovery and reupholstery industry, I think it is a shrinking market in certain aspects. For instance:

1. Modern, cheaper furniture is often not worth doing because of either quality or price.
2. Some upholstered furniture may well be of a very good quality, but due to the complexity of design or stitching detail elements, it is not possible to reproduce the same factory finish, or the time required to do so would make the job uneconomical to do.

But on a positive note, there is still plenty of good quality modern, traditional and antique furniture in need of expert care and restoration for our members to carry out.

Diversification has also worked for us. DIY supplies, soft furnishings, and offering a cushion interior filling service have all added to our bottom line.

### What has been your proudest professional moment?

It has to be being accepted into the AMU at the age of 22. As the Daily Echo explained "The AMU is an organisation which judges applicants on the quality of their work rather than the total number of years' experience they have". Derek said "I am very pleased to be able to say that my work comes up to the AMU's high exacting standards".

On a par with this was the opening of our second showroom with my partner Karen Caplen, and purchasing the freehold/goodwill of my ex-boss Ron Eldridge Upholstery FAMU.