

This can't be just 'another' event, it needs to be the **best**

by Jennifer Miller



Jennifer Miller.

Various people have debated whether there is a better approach to the traditional contractor-client relationship. So what happens when the caterer and the client commit to a closer relationship and work in the form of a joint venture? Is it easier to get things right or does this further complicate the relationship? *EP* met with Richard Phillips, MD Silverstone Circuits Limited and Sean Valentine, MD Aspire Hospitality, to hear about the future of this car lover's Mecca and the role that their unique catering partnership will play in these developments.

There are changes planned at Silverstone and Richard's office is covered with plans and artist impressions of the new Pit Lane and Paddock project that is currently undergoing planning permission.

"The new development will involve 41 Formula 1 garages, hospitality for 4000 over lunch and a media centre that can cater for 600," Richard explains. "It's an exciting new complex and along with remodelling the existing track, it will give Silverstone the ability to compete on a national and international level - not just in the Formula 1 and car racing arena, but potentially as a world class motorbike racing circuit as well."

Driving around the existing circuit, you get a real feel for the impending Grand Prix event. Enormous temporary structures to house some of the thousands of spectators who will descend on Silverstone for the Grand Prix are nearly complete. With corporate and public hospitality catering for more than 240,000 over the three day event, it will be more than just the skills of the drivers and the cars that will be on show. The whole experience needs to be first class.

"This can't be just 'another' event, it needs to be the best" comments Richard, "There can be a tendency with experiences such as the Grand

Prix to hope that the sporting event is so good that it makes up for the other areas such as service and catering. That's not what we want to offer here, so when our previous contract came up for tender we went to the market to find the right partner for our future plans."

This is when Silverstone and Aspire first came into contact.

"We met with Sean and Creative Director Steven Saunders and found a very new company who actually did care about the fundamentals of quality and service. It really struck a chord," says Richard. "Not only that, their attitude to our future developments and plans was both positive and genuine. Far from others who came to us and said 'this is what you have, we can do the same but we will do it better', they came to us with some new ideas and some really fresh thinking."

Sean agrees "There are some excellent caterers out there, who are very good at doing what they do in their environment. As a new company, we have the individual experiences alongside the enthusiasm and the drive to do what we do really well, but we have no set pattern regarding how that might be achieved."

"We really think about the whole, it is not just corporate hospitality with public catering as a sideline. This year for the first time we offered a pay-on-

the-day restaurant facility with over 100 covers. We also realised that at these events people don't like to 'lose their spot' and this can limit both their experience and spending! So we introduced a much larger number of hawker style roving food and beverage offers, plus the opportunity for the public to call a pizza and have it delivered to their seats."

Relaxed...

The relationship between Richard and Sean is relaxed and open, and reflects closely the arrangement between their two companies. In many situations such as these there is a clear 'us and them', a traditional client/contractor relationship. This is something that Aspire and Silverstone have worked hard to remove. Richard comments:

"I've worked for 25 years in this industry, and there is always that core issue: a venue has customers who ultimately judge us as a whole - as Silverstone, not as each individual part. If things don't run smoothly, with all the partners coming together, then this can lead to problems. Our venue here is not just about the Grand Prix, there are many other meetings and events happening on a weekly basis. I am acutely aware that when someone attends a substandard event; the impression that they leave with is that of Silverstone as an entity."

"I saw a need to break that down



Richard Phillips and Sean Valentine.

and that is where the joint venture style arrangement with Aspire fits in. We have a very open and integrated approach to the management of the circuit. The most senior manager on site from Aspire attends all our weekly management meetings and when a client comes to visit us or see the venue we meet them together to make sure that we can offer, and deliver, exactly what they are looking for."

Sean feels the same way "It really is about the longer term view. Take the visitor centre coffee shop. As a commercial opportunity, we would not be operating that site, but it does make commercial sense for us to work together on the whole and support Silverstone in every aspect of the catering provision."

"The relationship really helps us to think differently, for example we have a real desire to achieve restaurant style levels within the large event market but encountered problems with catering in the boxes. The kitchen facilities are far removed and there were a lot of logistical problems to overcome, but we knew that we had to make it special - not just pull cling wrap off platters, no matter how good the food was. We invested, well above budget, in chefs to visit each of the boxes. They were there on hand to receive the partially

finished food and other ingredients, and they completed the menu in the boxes in view of the corporate customers, and discuss the ingredients and the food with them. It was a hit and we have had exceptional feedback."

Richard adds "It certainly was successful. The fact that we got feedback really confirms that - we didn't used to get feedback at all regarding the catering."

Partner involvement...

I'm intrigued as to how a very young company (Aspire was only two months old when awarded the Silverstone opportunity) initially secured and manage such a large catering operation?

"We have a team based here on site 12 months of the year and Steven spends a lot of time here working with that team to deliver throughout the year," explains Sean, "Then when it comes to the large events such as the Grand Prix, we call on our consortia partners to help us deliver. We are not so proud as to 'have the whole site and deliver it all!' Each partner is involved in a different area and we find it helps everyone to maintain focus and to provide the best experiences. Our partners all operate under the Aspire banner, so there are no multiple client contracts

and they are all best in class; owner driven and operated with very similar values to us and Silverstone."

Richard continues "That was really what helped us to make the decision. We met with Sean and Steven and I suppose in the end we really bought into the people. They haven't just promised - they have delivered. Take Steven for example, when you are presented with an offer that includes menu planning and design by a Creative Director who is a celebrity chef and a Fellow Master Chef of Great Britain you really expect that he is likely to be on the ground for about six days a year. In reality, it is much more than that, he really is involved with planning, training and overseeing the delivery of the catering services."

And what of the challenges?

"Well, we have come a long way in a short time, but we realise that we are not there yet," comments Richard "but we are both committed to finding the way. The key ingredient is to maintain the openness and honesty that is needed in order for both partners to embrace each other fully - warts and all! We all encounter problems, but when you really believe that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, you work through it." ■

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