

Elite Balustrade is using DriveWorks to allow customers to create their dream balcony

» Having embraced 3D technology, a small family business is now providing balconies and balustrade systems around the world. **Stephen Holmes** finds out how



THE BALCONY SCENE

Emanating from the small Lancashire town of Clitheroe, a global takeover is in action thanks to the internet and measured adoption of 3D software.

The idea for Elite Balustrade, a balcony and balustrade sales and fabrication company, came when its now managing director David Martin began selling the component parts to fabricators.

Realising that he could design and build the full systems as well as simply supply parts, a family business was born.

In 14 months the company, also employing Martin's mother, brother and brother-in-law, has experienced a truly international expansion.

The reason for this is not only the dedication and hard work of the Martin family and its employees, but the successful adoption of SolidWorks and the design automation system DriveWorks.

Customers are funnelled through its automated website, offering customised

fittings, configured to their choice using some simple data entry and selection options.

"Most of the kits that we send out are installed by DIY'ers, fabricators or builders," says Martin.

"Everybody's requirements are different – their idea of style and look. Although it's all on the shelf, we have to build it up to their specification, so they'll need the right height and width. Everything is made to measure."

The individual component parts all have to be modelled and fed into the software using SolidWorks due to the manufacturers being very protective of the data.

These dimensions, plus a lot of rules-driven mathematics and equations are then fed into DriveWorks, giving hundreds of configurable permutations.

EASY BUILD

The fabricated outcome, conforming to all safety and building regulations, is then collated as a flat-pack kit and shipped.

"We build it up to a stage where it's a Meccano set, so all they're doing is screwing it

down and bolting it together," says Martin.

The data input, far from simple queries, is a time consuming process.

Some of this is alleviated through a dedicated member of staff, DriveWorks' inbuilt query wizards and support from its reseller Solid Solutions, although much of it comes down to a gradual learning process that is unlocking all the software can offer.

Yet the man-hours spent on this single process are paid back in the savings made in the sales process.

"Before we had DriveWorks I did everything," says Martin with a grumble. "We generally don't go to see clients, they would send us a sketch or architect's drawing, and from that we'd have set dimensions and we'd create it."

Building individual balcony systems meant that Elite could offer up 20 models a month to be quoted. However, the majority of these requests didn't result in a sale.

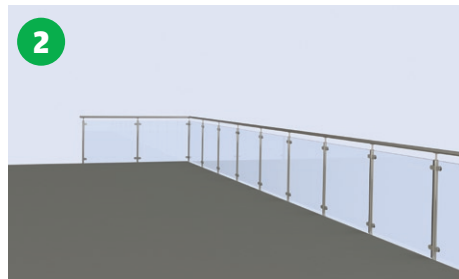
"When we first started up we were bombarded with people wanting a bargain; we're not here to sell a bargain. As soon as

“ We’re coming up with new ideas for it all the time. There’s so many different things we can do with it – it’s mindboggling ”

1 + 4 The balconies and balustrades fit all safety and aesthetic needs, using algorithms entered into DriveWorks

2 Elite Balustrades recently provided a golf club with a balcony. The PDF documentation was sent to the customer instantly and included an eDrawing of the CAD model

3 The resulting balcony



they get a quote [from the online DriveWorks system] they now know straight away if it’s in their price bracket.”

Fourteen months on from adopting DriveWorks into its web-based setup, Elite is now providing on average 20 quotes a day to engage potential customers.

This boils down to sales of 25 to 30 kits a month with no need for extra CAD personnel, allowing Elite to work 24 hours a day, seven days a week, across five languages.

TIME IS MONEY

The system helps get rid of timewasters straight away – which might sound harsh, but given the size of this small business, time is very definitely money.

“Everything we get is positive feedback: the person that we’re dealing with wants to buy our product and can afford it.”

Moments after submitting the details into the Elite Balustrade website the customer is emailed five documents. Amongst these are the cost and a visualisation of what the assembled product will look like produced in

SolidWorks eDrawings.

The system creates a further ten documents, including assembly instructions and the Bill of Materials (BOM).

The system is available online from anywhere in the world, although Elite operates using independent sales agents as far away as the Caribbean.

The agents are able to feed the same information into the website, which will automatically generate documentation with that agent’s logo and details on it, while Elite takes the role of supplier.

Adding agencies across the world, the

future expansion of the system is to increase the visual marketing – allowing customers to upload their own photo of the position of the balcony, and have the render superimposed on it.

Equally viable is using the augmented reality abilities of eDrawings.

“We’re coming up with new ideas for it all the time,” concludes David. “There’s so many different things we can do with it – it’s mindboggling!”

Clearly Elite Balustrade hasn’t reached a barrier of its own.

elitebalustrade.com