



## Business News (WA)

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# Tradition and technology a successful mix

■ Adam Orlando

KIM Fitzpatrick has a lot riding on the success of his North Fremantle-based small business, Tradition Stained Glass.

The business was started in 1908 by his great-grandfather in Bergen op Zoom, Holland, and has been handed down through the family after coming to Western Australia in 1952.

Mr Fitzpatrick became involved in the business after receiving a letter from his grandfather in 1982 offering to teach him the family trade.

"The family linkage and encouragement from my grandfather was a major motivator in the beginning; he gave me a one-way ticket home [to WA] from Canada to join him," Mr Fitzpatrick told *WA Business News*.

"I want to leave a legacy for future generations to admire and enjoy my glass artwork. I enjoy the twin challenges, and often-opposite skills, of artistic creativity and being a business owner.

"Few artists, designers or creative people get this balance right."

Mr Fitzpatrick has since combined traditional design, artistic glass painting and manufacture techniques with the latest technology, building a strong local, national and international reputation for quality, design and technical work.

Despite the economic downturn, the five-person team has maintained and expanded the business and invested in new stock, equipment and staff.

Mr Fitzpatrick attributes this to his business strategy of operating in the high-quality and high-end market.

But it hasn't always been that way.

"We had one major client, a large door manufacturer, who made up 30 per cent of our sales. This was mass produced, high-volume, low-margin

work," Mr Fitzpatrick said.

"We were supplying the leadlight door inserts. They started squeezing prices down, citing cheaper alternatives overseas and foreign imports like Indonesia, for example. They would copy designs, and mass produce a lower quality, cheaper product because of lower labour costs. Stained glass is high labour-intensive product.

"We had to make the decision whether to work ourselves to the bone trying to fulfil these high-volume, low-margin orders to maintain market share and be competitive, or take a different strategy."

Mr Fitzpatrick decided to redefine and reinvent the business and take on the high-end market, eventually cutting the client loose.

"After years of pencil sharpening and finding efficiencies, we decided to move from assembly line mass production to value adding and more niche high-end work in the residential and commercial market," he said.

"There was a lot of apprehension at first, especially as you lose 30 per cent of your regular work, so this was tough on cash flow.

"We lifted our quality control program – less work but higher quality. Slowly we began to get bigger high-end work and the margins were better.

"We didn't have to work as hard; we just had to work smarter. We spent more time working on the business with positioning and marketing rather than working in the business fulfilling mass production orders."

Mr Fitzpatrick said that, as a result, his team began to enjoy the work more and rekindle their love

and the passion involved in producing a "beautiful and stunning piece of glass art work".

"This has been the driving force for opening up new markets overseas and our success in these markets has been testament to our mindset and belief in our abilities," he said.

"We now have a very strong confidence in the quality of our product for international high-end markets."

The company underwent a total transformation, rebranding with a new logo, signage, stationary, uniforms, marketing materials, displays, trade shows, a website, and a refined database.

It also had a more targeted marketing strategy with high-end magazines and a distribution and referral system through a major home display centre located within its demographic and geographic targets.

Mr Fitzpatrick said this was very successful in improving the bottom line profitability, but also improving staff morale, as well as the home life and work-life balance.

"We also have more realistic deadlines that allows more time for creative design, which adds value," he said.

"We get better remuneration for our efforts. We are constantly looking for new markets and assessing trends and technology and innovative ways of working with glass.

"I have a quote near my desk and it reads: 'The harder you work, the luckier you become' and so far this philosophy has worked well and I will continue to follow those words of wisdom as I grow the business."



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### PROBLEM SOLVING

**COMPANY:** Tradition Stained Glass.

**BUSINESS:** Global glass artist designing, manufacturing high-end glass for residential, commercial and ecclesiastical clients.

**GROWTH TIPS:** Redevelop business model; enter niche high-end market; employ more targeted marketing strategy.

**“We lifted our quality control program – less work but higher quality.”**

- Kim Fitzpatrick



**QUALITY DRIVE:** Redefining his business by focusing on the high-end market has worked for

Kim Fitzpatrick. Photo: Grant Curraill