

Encouraging expansion

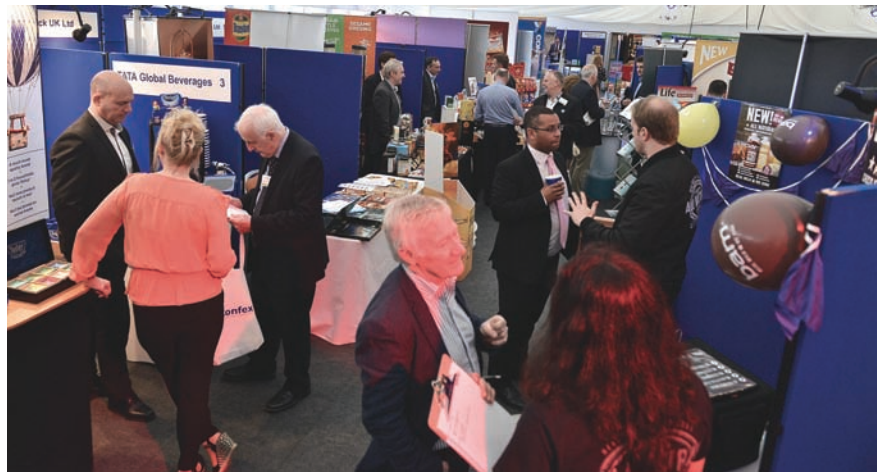
Confex looks to youth and diversity as a way to build business as its members get a full house of suppliers at the group's eighth annual trade show. Siobhan Kielty reports.

The eighth Confex Trade Show was held last month at the De Vere Water Park Hotel, its sixth year there, and welcomed 600 people through its doors – approximately 70% of the membership and a record number.

The buying group is continuing to grow, with six new members so far in 2017 and a turnover of £2.67 billion. Its biggest category is soft drinks, then snacks and confectionery – where Confex began – and its composition is now about 60/40 in favour of foodservice, according to Tom Gittins, business development manager.

Held over two days, the event is designed to give delegates plenty of time for building relationships and exploring growth possibilities. Day one is a social affair, with a charity golf day and awards dinner and casino allowing wholesalers and suppliers to catch up outside of the usual business environment.

Day two is the trade show, at which 85 suppliers were exhibiting. "We've got 220 suppliers but we limit the show to 85," explains Gittins. "The reason is that members can't see more than 85



and I want them to stop at every stand. Even if they're not dealing with these suppliers currently, there's something of interest – even if it's not for them now, it might be in the future."

This is where Confex believes its strength lies – in giving smaller wholesalers the opportunity to benefit through the expansion and diversity of their range. Gittins explains: "This is where a lot of the growth of Confex is coming from. Many of our wholesalers are very specialised – they're based on service, they're local wholesalers. If the

customer asks them for something they don't currently stock, it's great for them to find it at the show and perhaps start to go into a new category." This is, he points out, particularly important for delivered wholesalers, who need to have a broad offering to maximise the benefits of every drop.

For this reason, the show is designed to cover as many categories as possible, as effectively as possible. "The supplier selection kind of picks itself, but we always have a waiting list," says Gittins. Supplier choice is dictated by offering a



Confex's team, including managing director Nicky White (fifth on right) and business development manager Tom Gittins (right).

Green Wholesaler award plants seed for commercial growth

From its beginnings five years ago as a platform to give an advantage to the smaller wholesaler, the Green Wholesaler award has become a prestigious accolade in its own right. As well as benefiting from sustainable activity, winners have found that the title has helped their businesses commercially and with PR. Entries for the award have grown year on year, with this year's winner a first-time entrant.

Green Wholesaler of the Year

Overall and Foodservice Wholesaler Winner: Thompsons Food Service, Great Yarmouth
Retail Wholesaler Winner: Lansdell Soft Drinks, Whitstable



Eddie Thompson (second on left) and Tracey Thompson (right) accept their award from judge and environmental consultant David Hilton and Confex's Nicky White.

Retail Supplier of the Year

PepsiCo

Foodservice Supplier of the Year

Tate & Lyle

Supplier stands accolades

Gold: Twinings

Silver: Kara Foodservice

Bronze: Mars Chocolate

mix that most benefits the members and enables new business opportunities, from the big names to smaller, specialised exhibitors. "We've got to have the top 30, but I also like to have some new stands," says Gittins. "The smaller pods in the second room are where we put the new exhibitors." Once a supplier has been given initial exposure, the

A member's view

"The trade show was a great way to find out about suppliers, and very useful for us. We were reluctant to join a buying group because we were put off by the complexities involved with the process, so I'm delighted that becoming a member of Confex has been straightforward as well as beneficial. The ability to access products and the presence of the central distribution facility has allowed us to increase the range we can offer. Because membership provides greater reassurance in supplier dealings, we can pass on the benefits to our customers. For a smaller wholesaler, being able to offer consistency and quality, along with the exposure possible through membership, is a great tool for business growth."

Lucy Bartlett, owner, Elm Valley Foods (joined Confex in January)

amount of members they deal with dictates what sort of stand they have when they come back in years two and three.

To encourage members to visit every stand, 'Supplier Bingo' gives attendees a prize if they get a stamp from every supplier and hand in their card with a 'full house'. Introduced two years ago, the gimmick ensures that the suppliers receive the exposure that they need. "Half the battle for these suppliers is that they do so much and have such a wide range now – even through buying other companies. You won't believe the amount of members that walk round and say 'I didn't know you did that', even though they've dealt with these companies for years, as they always talk about the same thing when the rep comes," explains Gittins. "That's maybe

a role that Confex plays: making sure that everyone knows what everyone does."

Confex is also proud of its youthful outlook, from its championing of green issues to its strong social media presence. "We're a young group as a whole – a lot of our wholesalers are second-generation or younger wholesalers coming into the industry," says Gittins. As a third-generation family member in Confex himself, he intends to keep the progressive approach going, helped by the new role that his sister, Jess Douglas, is taking on. She will replace Gilly Hunt (who is retiring) as marketing manager at the end of this year and has a strong background in digital marketing which will continue to feed the group's social media growth. CCM



Confex offers opportunities to build business outside the usual working environment.