

Support for smaller players

Confex returned to the Cotswold Water Park to host its annual trade show, which was a chance for wholesalers to see what opportunities await them with the buying group.

Around the De Vere Water Park Hotel in the surprise April heat, the mood at the Confex Trade Show was a sunny one. The atmosphere was upbeat for an industry currently being buffeted by economic and legislative circumstances. Confex is thriving, with membership now at 236 and a turnover increase of £1 billion since 2014.

About 300 people made the most of valuable social and business opportunities offered at the event, which recruited two more members: All Shires Foods of Nottingham and Tasty Tubs of Lawford, Essex. "We haven't looked back since we started the trade show in 2009," said Jess Douglas, marketing manager.

As a buying group supporting so many delivered wholesalers, the management at Confex is aware how important this trade show is for its members on many levels. "For everyone, it visualises what we're part of," explained Tom Gittins, business development director (foodservice). "A big thing about being in a group is that you learn from your fellow members: they share information

about what's going on in the market and what products are performing well. These wholesalers are so on top of their own businesses and working 24/7. It's an opportunity for them to take a step back, see what's going on and what other people are doing, and take it back to their businesses."

The family feel that characterises Confex spreads through to this event – the group keeps attendance at a level that allows everyone to interact sufficiently and it limited its supplier stands to 89 this year. "We have to be accessible to our members; we're a family business, they're family businesses, we're all doing the same thing and need to be collaborative. You need to have open lines of communication," said Gittins.

With several larger members of the wholesale industry recently derailing, Confex is looking at both the challenges and opportunities coming up for its members. "It's carnage at the moment in this sector and I think that if you're here even at the end of the year then you're going to have more market share just by default, as there will be fewer



Dave Lunt, business development director (retail), addresses the guests.

players," he predicted.

"The great thing about Confex and its members is they're smaller, they're stealthy, they're able to change their environment more quickly. They don't normally have shareholders that they're accountable to, as they're family-owned businesses," he continued. "It's our job at head office to ensure they have the tools for change and that we're keeping them abreast of everything." →



The Confex line-up: left to right, Susan Hutchings, Kish Ramasamy, Sarah Edginton, Diane Woods, Nicky White, James Loffet, Dave Lunt, Jo Finn, Karen Smith, Sharon Mander, Leah Hillier, Jess Douglas and Tom Gittins.

Confex rewards best practice with a new Green Wholesaler category

The Confex Green Wholesaler Awards included a 'Best Practice' category for this year. This addition represents the focus of marketing manager Jess Douglas in her present role. "It's rolling with the old ideas but bringing some new elements in," she explained. "I'm really interested in the best practice element in that it's looking at companies to see how they're changing to be more green, not necessarily physically but ethically and sustainably for employees."

Best Practice

A to Z Catering, London

Green Wholesaler of the Year

Foodservice: Penta Foods, Hampshire
Retail: Right Price, Sheffield



'Best Practice' winner Trevor Richman (second on left), finance director at A-Z Catering, and David Storey (right), director at runner-up GWD Convenience, with Nicky White, MD of Confex, and Richard Anthony of sponsor Nestlé Professional.

Supplier of the Year

Foodservice: Kraft Heinz
Retail: PepsiCo

Supplier stand awards

Gold: Unilever; Silver: Quorn Foods;
Bronze: Sleaford Quality Foods

→ The Confex app – available free to members and currently being trialled by a selection of wholesalers – is the group's main investment at present. "We have some small members that don't have a full website, so if we're giving them this app for free, that's putting them from nought to a thousand in one technological step," explained Douglas. "This is the way we can give our members the support to enable them to be one of the big players."

There's no doubt that assistance with technology is a great benefit to these smaller, hardworking and customer-facing businesses. "It's about making their lives easier. Helping them

with marketing, growing sales and getting new customers through technology is, we believe, the answer to future-proofing," said Gittins. "I think it will really put our members ahead and that's what we have to do, keep ahead of the market. That's what a buying group head office can take on that smaller wholesalers don't have the resources to do."

The show enabled suppliers and wholesalers to give feedback and form new beneficial relationships. "Even in our sector there's consolidation and liquidation, so there's a lot going on," Gittins said. "The environment is tough, especially in foodservice at the moment.

"On the other side there's an upturn in retail, and grocery continues to be strong and grow because there seems to be more buying local – when retailers are going to their wholesalers for local products, they're buying their brands from them as well, which is where Confex comes in."

It wasn't just networking over the two days – business was brisk, with trading at over £1 million. "It's great timing to launch products at the show; the weather's changing and that's when wholesalers take new lines for the summer," said Gittins. Judging by the show's success, sunshine seems to be the prevailing forecast for Confex. CCM

A supplier's view

"The event was organised really well, as it always is. That was our launch into Confex as a group, so we were using the show to introduce the brand, product and range that we can offer to members, both in retail and in foodservice. It generated a number of positive leads for us that we hope to convert into future happy customers very soon."

Gary Routledge (pictured right, with glasses), national account manager, Quorn Foods

