

Generation next

Could youthful new national chair Richard Hibbert bring the KBSA into the 21st century and appeal to a new generation of KBB retailers? In the first interview in his new role, the showroom designer tells **Rebecca Nottingham** how he's aiming to build a stronger association



The KBSA has often been the subject of criticism for failing to be representative of the KBB industry of today. It's been described as 'old-fashioned', 'elitist', even 'an old boys' club'... not particularly positive perceptions of an organisation that was set up specifically to be the 'voice of the industry'.

There's a general feeling that the KBSA doesn't do enough and many retailers feel reluctant to pay the annual £1,150 membership fee. So could the appointment of showroom designer Richard Hibbert as its new chairman trigger a change in opinion and attract the support of a new generation of retailers?

"Half the problem, I think, is that people are a bit blinkered when it comes to the KBSA. They get caught up in the past," Hibbert tells me. "I'll admit that, with certain criteria making it impossible for some retailers to join, you could definitely say the KBSA hasn't always been open to new members."

"But, that's changing," he adds. "We've modernised the association over the past couple of years and we're now fit for purpose and ready to rock and roll. It's about communication and that's what I'm making my priority going forward."

According to Hibbert, the 'elitist' label stems from the idea people have that the KBSA only accepts retailers with a massive turnover – but in fact, he explains, there are no financial criteria for members.

"It's actually pretty simple – we don't care how many kitchens you sell or how much you make per year. As long as you're doing a good job, you've got happy customers and you haven't got loads of bad debt against your name, then we want you as

a member. And, with so many benefits, more to the point, why wouldn't you join us?"

I am talking to Hibbert at his KSL Design showroom in Sudbury, Suffolk. He may be juggling a successful business, an ambitious showroom extension and redesign alongside a young family and the demanding new role of KBSA national chair, but nothing seems to phase him. He appears laid back, calm and relaxed but hugely passionate and driven at the same time.

He's only 34 years old, and could easily pass for someone 10 years younger, but with over 15 years of retailing experience already under his belt, despite his youthful appearance, he's well on his way to becoming an industry veteran.

"I joined my dad in the business 15 years ago," he explains. "But, he started KSL in 1989, so it feels like I've been around the industry forever really."

National chair

So it's perhaps no surprise that after three years as a member of the board, Hibbert was chosen to take over as national chair after Tina Riley, who had held the role for the past two years, stood down to spend more time on her own business, Modern Homes in Leamington Spa.

He works alongside acting KBSA CEO Uwe Hanneck, who joined in December 2015 on a consultancy basis after the retirement of chief executive Graham Ball in May that year.

"For me, taking on the role as national chair was a natural progression," he explains. "Since joining the board three years ago, I've been pretty active in the association and had been helping Tina with a variety of matters. I'm now working closely with Uwe [Hanneck] and the rest of the board to move the association forward."

The KBSA, or to give it its full name, the Kitchen, Bedroom, Bathroom, Specialists Association, is a non-profit organisation made up of independent KBB retailers and corporate members. The organisation was set up 30 years ago by a group of retailers with

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the aim to protect consumers, raise standards across the industry and support retailers.

The KBSA has just over 100 retail members – a figure that Hibbert admits has remained relatively static throughout the association's history. Although, as far as I'm aware at least, there's no definitive record of the exact number of KBB specialist retailers in the UK, I'd hazard a guess that it's significantly higher than that. So, if it's really beneficial, why aren't more retailers joining and what's the strategy to increase numbers?

"Our policies are changing," he says. "We're breaking down barriers and we're already seeing people's attitudes change towards us."

"We don't have a target figure but, expanding our retail members is a priority of mine in the role of national chair. Our aim is to make this association much more representative of the industry and to do that, we have to increase our membership levels."

Step one of Hibbert and Hanneck's plans to modernise the association involved major improvements to both its consumer-facing and trade websites and social media presence, in order to improve communication and raise the profile of the association among consumers and the industry.

According to Hibbert, historically, one of the biggest barriers to attracting new members was having the Consumer Care scheme as a condition of membership. As I understand it, the main bone of contention being that, under this policy, retailers could only take a maximum deposit of 25% from customers.

"Dropping the Consumer Care insurance as a condition of membership has been a talking point for five years, maybe more," he explains. "It's always been a barrier to attracting new members."

"We put it to vote at the last AGM and our members voted to have it as an opt-in condition. Consumers now have multiple ways of protecting themselves and have many more rights with consumer law. We, as an association, are still very much engaging with consumers, but our focus ►



moving forward must be supporting our members in all aspects of their business.”

As part of their aim to appeal to a wider range of retailers and to turn the KBSA into the “voice” of the industry it aspires to be, another significant change to the joining criteria the board is trying to pass is a reduction in the length of time a business has to have been operating for.

“Currently, to become a member, retailers must have been trading for at least two years,” he says. “This was for insurance purposes. However, as part of our objective to modernise the association, we are actively looking to change this, as we’re keen to support new businesses when they need us most.”

The changes that Hibbert and the current board are keen to make don’t seem unreasonable and it’s encouraging that things are already changing, despite his having only been in the new role since March. But, if he makes it sound so easy, why has the association been so slow to react and change in the past?

“As an association we’re bound by certain rules and regulations that can be frustrating and can mean that changes take longer to pass. If I want to change anything here [KSL], I can do it tomorrow but, while there are certain decisions that can be made at board level, others have to be put to a vote at the AGM.

“We also have limited resources because, on top of the work we do for the association, the board members all have other businesses to run. But we’re all hugely passionate about the future of this industry and are making the KBSA a much faster-paced organisation to help support our members, and their customers, in a changing world.”

Halfway through the interview, we get on to the issue of training. It’s a topic that’s created some widespread debate within the pages of kbbreview recently and tends to split opinion whenever the subject is raised.

Hibbert clearly feels strongly about training and I get the impression that he’d talk passionately about it all day long, if he could. So, how important is it, are we doing enough and, with so many different organisations trying to establish a training programme, exactly where does the KBSA fit in to it all?

“The more training we can offer, the more credible our industry will become,” he explains. “The more credible our industry becomes, the more people will want to join the KBSA and the louder

our voice will be.

“Richard Branson once said, “train people so they’re good enough to leave and treat them well enough so that they stay”. That’s the philosophy I go by here [KSL] and it works. I actively encourage my staff to do more training and, as a result, they’re motivated because they’re continually getting better at what they do, my customers are getting the best service and, therefore, think more highly of my business.

“This is about raising standards in the industry and giving retailers a recognisable point of difference over the competition.”

Industry training

The process of integrating the KBB NTG into the KBSA is ongoing and they are, Hibbert explains, working with The Kitchen Education Trust (TKET) and Furniture and Interiors Education, Skills and Training Alliance (Fiesta) and other related bodies, not only to increase the amount of training available, but also recognise the existing training that’s provided by manufacturers and introduce a Continuous Personal Development (CPD) programme.

Part of the issue kbbreview has found with training is that there are so many different organisations seemingly working towards the same goal that it’s unnecessarily confusing and fragmented and people don’t seem to know where to start.

“The reason there are so many different groups trying to organise training and education is simply because so many people are passionate about it,” he explains. “Each organisation covers very specific aspects of related industries, but there is also an obvious overlap. Rather than looking at it as though it’s fragmented, people should be excited that there are so many interested groups pushing for the same things together across the wider industry.”

In collaboration with TKET and Fiesta, the KBSA is also in the second phase of getting a Design Technician Apprenticeship scheme passed, which Hibbert says will bridge the gap between school leavers and the Foundation Degree in Kitchen Design at Bucks New University.

“Once this apprenticeship is up and running, it will provide a stepping stone for young people to get into the industry,” he explains. “It will bring people of a better level into the industry, again with a view to raising standards.”

Neither Hibbert’s nor Hanneck’s roles at the KBSA come with a specific time frame. Historically, length of service has been driven by how long the role’s previous incumbent could commit. However, Hibbert assures me that both Hanneck and himself will stay until they “get the job done”. And that, he reiterates, is to modernise the KBSA in order to change people’s perception, attract more retail members, create a better association and improve industry standards.

“As a retailer, I pay into the KBSA because I see the benefits that having a stronger association can bring to this industry. I have taken on the role of national chair, for the same reasons. I want to improve things in this industry.

“The message is simple. We’re a modern association and we are better together so get in touch. Let me explain what we’re about and how being a member can genuinely improve your business.” **kbbreview**

The KBSA explained...

To become a KBSA retail member a company must currently:

- Have been trading for at least two years;
- Have a fully fitted showroom with permanent displays;
- Operate within the terms of the KBSA Code of Conduct;
- Offer a full display, design and supply service or take responsibility for installation;
- Operate within scope of the KBSA Consumer Complaints Service;
- Provide trade references and customer references.

What’s in it for you?

- Insurance and legal advice;
- Training, advice and support;
- Access to marketing material and lead generation through website;
- Customer confidence and a competitive advantage;
- Industry conference and awards.