

EXECUTIVE

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TEAM PLAYER

How ex-footballer
Mike Rae is
achieving new
goals in business

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Some of the team at the Highland Copiers/ Inverness Office Equipment base. Pictures: Gary Anthony. Image No.038052

Team effort still the name of the game for ex-goalie's office supply firm

Transfer of skills for former ICT footballer

TEAMWORK is important to Mike Rae.

It is a lesson the former professional footballer learnt as a goalkeeper with Caledonian Thistle before moving on to a busy part-time career with Third Division Elgin City and Highland League sides Nairn County, Forres Mechanics, Wick Academy and Brora Rangers. He maintains his football links by coaching for Ross County youth teams – seemingly one of the few north clubs he never played for.

However, as managing director of Highland Copiers, he has been building a team of his own over the last four years as the locally owned company has steadily grown.

The firm is now approaching a 500-strong customer base, one that is spreading from Highland Copiers' core area of Moray and Highland to include the islands, with a permanent presence now set to be established on the Isle of Lewis.

This has meant adding more staff to the payroll of a firm that prides itself on its local roots, as reflected in Highland Copiers' motto: "Discover true local".

Coincidentally, one of the new recruits, salesman Derek Bell is another ex-goalie for Reading, Clyde



Highland Copiers managing director Mike Rae.

and Queens Park another footballing connection for Highland Copiers, which also sponsors a Ross County youth side and the technical areas at Caley Thistle.

"One of the most important things for me is building a team of good people, and that's what I feel I have

with Highland Copiers," Mike said.

"Chris Rae, our service manager and Iain Sutherland, our most experienced engineer, have an incredible amount of experience – Iain alone has chalked up over 43 years in the industry – and even though Fraser Macdonald has just

joined the company as a trainee engineer, I've known him for 20 years. We have a very experienced team here."

In fact, Mike values Chris's contribution so highly that he has given him a small stake in the company.



DEALER OF THE YEAR

HIGHLAND Copiers' growing success has not just been recognised by its ever-expanding customer base.

Copier manufacturer Develop and its UK sales distributor DSales (UK) named the company Develop dealer of the year for Scotland, after Highland Copiers became the fastest-growing authorised dealer in the Develop family.

DSales UK's managing director Jonathan Whitworth said: "Mike and his team are a valued member of our

national authorised dealer network. They are a very pro-active dealer with outstanding service and innovative ideas and they serve their local and wider area with distinction."

The Develop ineo range comprises a wide range of office devices from A4 mono printers through to 75-page-a-minute full colour A3 multifunctional copiers which promise cutting-edge design, industry-leading print quality and advanced connectivity features in addition to outstanding environmental credentials and production printers.

Mike's own progression to boss of his own increasingly successful office equipment company is something he would have been unlikely to predict.

While still playing football part time, he started work as a fitness coach at Living Well in Inverness, an experience he credits with helping him learn to talk to people and understand the value of providing good customer service.

Yet when one of the senior partners at local firm Highland Office Equipment suggested he would make a good salesman, Mike's immediate reaction was: "I don't think so."

"The irony was that he was completely right," Mike laughed.

That led to a long and successful sales career with Highland Office Equipment until Mike decided to leave the firm shortly after it was acquired by a national company and set up on his own pioneering local back into photocopier sales in the Highlands.

"I believed there was a gap for a Highland-owned business, one with ethical contracts that wouldn't needlessly tie people into contracts they would struggle to get out of and one with no nasty surprises in the small print," Mike said.

He readily acknowledges setting up his own company would hardly have been possible without the support of his own personal Dragon's Den of experienced local businessmen Adrian Gray and Fraser Maclean.

"Although no longer part of Highland Copiers they wanted to support a young local businessman and put something back into the local business community. They



didn't take an active role, but they gave me a loan, which I was able to quickly repay, and were there as business advisers.

"I was a salesman, so it was scary for me to set up my own

business. I'd been on a very good salary, with two cars in the driveway and a sizeable mortgage. Then my wife fell pregnant with our third child Holly, shortly after I resigned, so that all added to the pressure."

The company that now has customers across the north had a modest beginning, Mike revealed.

"Highland Copiers started from the boot of my car," Mike said.

"I'd drive through to Elgin and Forres five days a week with my brochures and sell machines. We got a great reception in Moray and that gave us a great foundation to come back to Inverness, where our showroom base is, but the trust I had built up over the years with my previous employer in Inverness and Ross-shire also paid dividends when I came back and started selling copiers for myself."

From the boot of his car he moved to his dining room table and then to his first office in Baron Taylor's Street before eventually moving to their new home on Longman Drive which he shares with separate but complementary company Inverness Office Equipment, headed by another former colleague Willie Main, which provides the equipment needed to

keep an office productive, from stationery to ergonomic furniture.

"Since our new branded signs went up in April, we have seen incredibly fast growth," Mike said.

"We've taken on a further two people this year and our fleet of Highland Copiers liveried vehicles seems to be growing by the month, but at the same time, although we are expanding, there are still those old fashioned ethics of service and being honest and trustworthy that were taught to me back when I started."

Experienced salesman that he is, Mike has even found a new source of customers.

"We now have a lot of very small customers who, up until now, have probably been using inkjet machines or internet laser machines which have very high running costs," he said.

"People have come to us and been very surprised to learn that a commercial desktop machine that we can supply can be much more effective and cost efficient. Probably five of them go out of here a week, and more often than not to people who have not had a proper photocopier before. It's a whole new market that we have tapped into."

And being a local company does bring advantages.