

CRANES AND LIFTING

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GOING THE DISTANCE

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30 candles in the wind

Paul Heeks has been around cranes for most of his life. Early in his career, he worked as marketing manager at tower crane icon Favco. At that time, Favco dabbled in mobile cranes without great success and tower cranes were a feast or famine proposition. Marine cranes were a core line, and sold around the world as well as onto oil platforms in Bass Strait, writes Greg Keane.

From Favco, Paul moved on to a managerial role at Tutt Bryant. At that time, the various companies of the Tutt Bryant group handled franchises as diverse as Deutz diesels, Grove cranes, Euclid dump trucks and Mustang skid steers. It was in an era of structural upheaval, and Paul decided to start his own business, PA Construction Equipment (now PACE Cranes).

The PA stood for Paul Anthony – Paul's Christian names, with the latter also being the name of his son who now oversees the business.

Paul credits the late Tod Kennedy, the acknowledged crane writer of that era (at Thompson publication *Construction Australia*) with critical input in the design of the PACE logo.

The initial PACE focus was on parts and used cranes, specialising in crawler and rough terrain cranes. The business operated from a yard at Mortdale for a short time, before moving to its current location at Peakhurst. New premises are now being built at this location for the start of the 40th decade in business.

The world was a little different in 1987: the internet hadn't made the world accessible to someone chasing a used crane, so Paul's connections and his commitment to ensuring that cranes met Australian Standards before being delivered stood the business in good stead, along with the relationships built up over the years of working for others.

Paul Flood was the first mechanic, followed closely by Anthony Heeks, who joined as soon as his father felt that there would be continuity of work for him. Patrick Mardaymootoo joined a year later. Paul Thomas looked after spare parts. Fay Heeks (Paul's wife) went back to work when PACE started, to help with paying the bills; but she joined the business a year later to look after the books. Current commercial manager Shirley Herbert joined in 1989, when the business was still in Mortdale.

The first sale was spare parts to Ron Knight of Knights Cranes in Ulladulla, on the NSW south coast, while the first crane sale was a used Austin Western 410 Senior rough terrain crane that went to a small engineering shop in Port Kembla.

Maeda was the first new equipment franchise, commencing in 1991. Paul approached Maeda

about representing its cranes but, as things were tight at the time, he had to ask Maeda to cover half of the flight cost to Japan.

Maeda wasn't an overnight success: the first "demonstration" was to Bob Smith of Brambles, who was dismantling air ducting at the Australian Glass Works with the Maeda in a fraction of the time that would have been taken using a block and tackle. Bob didn't want to own the crane as he didn't know where the next job would come from, so Paul decided that hire was the way to get the crane accepted.

Things didn't really take off until 1993/94, and Maeda sales have been a core activity of the business since then.

Over the years, a lot of mobile crane brands have been sold through PACE: amongst them Lorain, Luna, NCK Rapier and Skat. In addition, there were Perry tractor cranes and trenchers, Emu man and material hoists, Jaso tower cranes and Robway load management systems.

Robway was a major supplier to, and supporter of PACE in the early years. Paul said: "I could not overstate how much we appreciate Bob Way's assistance in the early years."

"We have had wonderful support from many customers including Eglo, and Brambles for service work. In the early days, we supplied many used rough terrain cranes to John Farrier of FS Cranes for work at the Shell Refinery, and more recently Preston Hire and WGC have been great supporters.

"Maeda has provided wonderful support for over 25 years, and more recently Sennebogen has become a fantastic partner."

PACE also represents Valla and Shuttlelift, but these service niche markets whereas the Maeda and Sennebogen products service markets that were emerging at the time that PACE took them on, but have continued to grow in size and product range.

The range of brands represented over the years was a result of a willingness to back something that was a bit different to standard market offerings but appeared to have application in Australia once the market understood it. It was also an attempt to avoid competing head-on with the multi-national majors.

The timing of Anthony taking over the management was not planned, and was

precipitated by health problems experienced by the older Heeks. As succession had been planned, the transition was largely seamless. With a core of strong brands, Anthony has focused on ensuring that product support meets or exceeds the expectations of customers, and that the PACE structure reflects this.

A family feel has permeated the business, and this goes beyond the core of the Heeks family, which now includes Anthony's sister and brother-in-law. Having started in the business at a young age, Anthony had mentors in the parts and service areas, as well as his parents in the sales and business areas. There is little staff turnover, and those who have left still feel welcome to stop in for a visit (and do). This family feel extends to the relationships with many customers.

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WGC: PACE STANDS BY ITS CUSTOMERS

WGC Cranes dry hire manager Rob McInnes has a relationship with PACE Cranes that goes back virtually to the time that PACE took on the Sennebogen franchise.

Rob admitted to having some concerns when investing in an unknown brand and type of crane, as well as dealing with a supplier with which there was no previous relationship.

With 16 Sennebogen cranes in its fleet, WGC has clearly overcome those early nerves and Rob said: "The product is good, but so is the service and support. On the very few occasions where there have been issues, PACE has proven that it stands by its product, and its customers."

"We are happy to have established a dry hire market for telescopic crawler cranes, and the recent additions to the Sennebogen range are giving us a reason to fine tune our product mix to match the needs of our customers."



PRESTON Hire Group GM David Serg sees parallels between PACE Cranes and Preston Hire.

"The relationship between our businesses is that both are family-based, having moved through generations, are based on integrity and have been early adopters of new equipment ideas and prepared to educate the market," he said.

"The businesses have grown and evolved and, following the transition in PACE Cranes from Paul to Anthony Heeks, the relationship between us has remained strong."

David believes that a good supplier must have not only a good product but also good support and service. Evidence of its faith in PACE is shown by Preston Hire having the largest fleet of both Maeda and Sennebogen cranes in Australia (it also has the fifth largest Maeda fleet in the world).

From crane hire not being part of its business a generation ago, Preston Hire has grown to have more than 100 cranes in its fleet, and David said: "Without our relationship with PACE, I doubt that we would have grown to this size."

Preston Hire is often the first in Australia with a new model of Maeda or Sennebogen crane, and through PACE it has developed relationships with the manufacturers. At a ceremony in Japan, one such "first of" model was handed over in a black livery that is used to draw attention to the Black Dog Institute - an organisation promoting mental health in the workplace and one of several charities close to Preston Hire's heart.

Preston Hire was named HRIA Rental Company of the Year in the 2017 Hire & Rental Industry Association Excellence Awards - something David admitted was something of a pleasant surprise given the intention in entering was for Preston Hire to benchmark itself against other leading companies in the industry.

