

Using innovative technologies to disrupt the drone retail market

The 'one stop shop' for the drone industry worked with Made Smarter Adoption North East to bring manufacturing capabilities in-house as part of its retail expansion plans.

“I think we'll be able to look back at Made Smarter and say it had a really significant impact in helping us take retail products to market.”

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heliguy, the trading name for North Shields-based Colena Ltd, has invested in new machinery through the Made Smarter Adoption North East programme to help future proof the business, and expand its growing in-house product development team.

The company's ambition is to see more of its own designed and manufactured products in the retail market, and more of its revenue coming from internal projects.

Sam Barnes, Product Development Manager at heliguy, said: "Our Managing Director was very keen that we support the future growth of the company by moving from retailing other brands to developing our own products, using all the expertise we've gained over the last decade.

"We now have a flourishing product development team which is growing rapidly. We started looking into funding, grants and other support available for our business, which was fundamentally a retail company moving into the manufacturing world."

The Challenge

heliguy began life in the mid 2000s as a RC helicopter specialist working mainly with hobbyists before expanding into the drone industry and retailing off-the-shelf products. As the sector expanded and more regulation was introduced, heliguy created a dedicated training team that is able to train drone pilots to varying

accredited levels. The company also created a repair centre and logistics department.

Managing Director, Joel Ross, identified that retailing other people's products could restrict company growth, and that prompted the creation of a new product development team.

Sam continued: "The three big challenges for us were how do we scale production from a lower level? How do we access different materials that would normally cost us an awful lot of money, and how do we build limited, small run electronics in-house?"

"Those were our three big questions when we first engaged with Made Smarter Adoption North East."

The Solution

With grant funding support from Made Smarter Adoption North East, heliguy was able to purchase a more powerful version of an existing 3D printing machine that allows it to use a range of different materials. The new machine also significantly reduces the company's training requirements as it provides continuity of production.

A second machine used for prototyping electronics was also purchased, allowing heliguy to print circuit boards and place components.

Sam continued: "For a relatively small outlay, we now have the ability to design a circuit board, print it, get components on it,



and test it in days - not months. I can't underestimate how big an impact this will have for us."

The company also invested in a desktop five axis CNC machine, which will allow the product development team to work with any kind of material; expanding the possibilities of what heliguy can produce.

Sam said: "It's about being at the forefront of everything and trying to stay ahead of that curve. When we design something, we now have the wonderful ability to print a product, and the electronics that go in it, and have it tested by the end of the week."

The Benefits

As a result of the new machines being installed in the business, tasks that were taking months to complete are now only taking weeks or even days.

heliguy is also appointing a new electronics engineer to meet growing demand in the business now process times have been significantly reduced.

Sam continued: "There was almost an immediate benefit within weeks of the grant being approved, and that will only stack up over the next year or two. The impact of Made Smarter Adoption North East is not just the output of the business, but the strategy and the direction behind it. And I think the potential for job creation longer term is huge."

The company also benefitted from attending the events and workshops delivered as part of Made Smarter Adoption North East; giving them an insight into how manufacturing companies operate at scale. This allowed heliguy to plan for and anticipate some of the issues it might experience over the next few years.

The Future

In the short to medium term, heliguy aims to have three to four products in the marketplace that are manufactured, designed, produced, tested, and deployed in-house; ensuring more of the company's revenue comes from internal projects. That ambition will likely see the product development team double in size over the next 12 months.

The company also sees its commitment to continually invest in new technology as crucial to its future growth.

Sam said: "Because of Made Smarter Adoption North East, we have more confidence moving forward now. Making sure we stay at the forefront of this technological wave is going to be absolutely crucial for us."

