

INTERVIEW



IPAF training room

From the shop floor



Panther's versatile new Teupen Leo 30, one of the only such models available in the UK

Q. Would you give a brief history of Panther?

A. In 1978 Platform Rentals was set up by Roger Bowden of Niftylift. Brian Fleckley and I set up Panther Work Platforms in 1998, and bought Platform Rentals in December 2000. We've stayed on the Platform Rentals premises; it's got a lot of potential because of its position and size.

The company now runs a fleet of 350 platforms and has 40 staff in three depots.

Q. There seems to be a fair amount of work going on here – are you planning expansion?

A. In the last 6 months we have spent £1 million on equipment. Investment will continue in product lines we get good returns on. Having said that, although our yard is about to be tidied up, we think that it's time to ease off the investment and expansion programme a little now. Since 1998 there has been a very steep climb in growth – say 45 degrees. We want to slow down to about 20 degrees, check our infrastructure is doing OK and make sure that the business is healthy.

Q. Are you confident that your success will continue during 2002?

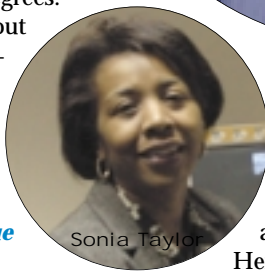
A. Last year we were unscathed by the price war that affected a lot of companies badly. We exceeded budgets by keeping our range and specifications up to scratch, which meant we could charge the right rates and ensure a good rate of utilisation.

If Panther and Platform Rentals hadn't joined forces, things might have been different. The large range of equipment we run means that we have the answer to pretty much any access problem. That's one of the reasons we joined up. Also, you find that certain machines are used seasonally – for example, Panther's truck mounts have had the Oxford Street lights contract for

Rosie Gordon talks to Richard Miller of Panther Platform Rentals about a small business success.



Richard Miller



Sonia Taylor

10 years, which could be a slow time of year for self propelled booms.

Sonia Taylor got involved with Platform Rentals in 1990 and became a director in 1996.

Her expertise is a big contributor to the success of the vehicle mount side of business – she can offer a huge amount of knowledge about the machines as well as lots of experience in liaising with local authorities etc. over the various regulations that apply to most jobs.

I think this year will be tough because of rate pressure, but IPAF training, our Service and Maintenance Agreements and complete service stand us in good stead.

Q. Any other ways of keeping your head above the price war?

A. Large national hire companies are trying to undercut smaller businesses with

disastrous effects on profits. We set up an association called Access Link in 1999. This is a UK wide network of companies who basically think along the same lines as us. It means we can offer customers a consistently good service and that they can keep business flowing in to their local dealers.

Q. Why get into IPAF training?

A. Platform Rentals already had the training centre, so we retained that and enhanced the revenues by advertising it a little more. To be honest, it doesn't represent a huge amount of our turnover – £120,000 out of £4 million per year – but it is growing, very profitable and well worth while. The IPAF courses are all-encompassing; anyone who attends them goes away a lot more confident to operate safely.

Q. Who comes to be trained?

A. We get a lot of emergency business from people who have been stopped by the HSE, but all employers have a duty of care to ensure that their operatives are competent. They don't have to come here – we often do on-site training and whenever we hire out equipment we undertake a familiarisation session and give a card which affirms that this has happened, but states that proper training should be given.

Q. Any other courses on offer?

A. Yes, we run our own. These are slightly cheaper because we are prepared to train larger groups, but of course they won't get the IPAF certification. It just gives customers a choice. We now have four trainers on call in case of emergencies, qualified to run IPAF or Panther courses.

We are also committed to a training programme for our own staff. Having the IPAF training centre allows us to train them in house. ■

Panther Platform Rentals is based near Kensworth, on the A5 outside Dunstable, with depots in Basingstoke and Maidstone.