

Group dynamics

LSi talks to France's Novelty Group, an emerging force on the production rental scene . . .

[France] In the southern suburbs of Paris sits the central warehouse of an event production supply group that is among the fastest-growing in Europe. Novelty Group, already a leading force in its domestic market, is pursuing a strategy of international growth that has in the past decade seen it extend its operations beyond France. Like the rest of the industry, the company is currently navigating the troubled waters of the COVID-19 shutdown - but they have been putting the pause to good use (more later) . . .

Don't take the name too literally: Novelty Group is neither new nor a passing fad. It consists of a carefully-chosen selection of specialists, the oldest of which, JLT, was formed in 1973. Novelty Group's CEO, entrepreneur Jacques de La Guillonnière, founded his first company, Euphonie, in 1987 whilst still a student at the Institut Supérieur de Gestion (ISG), one of France's leading business schools. Euphonie later became Euroson, which would become a key component of Novelty Group. Since 2003, La Guillonnière has steadily expanded the Group through a series of astute, targeted acquisitions.

Recent years have seen the biggest statement of Novelty's intent. In 2016, the company merged with Magnum, a leading provider of lighting, sound and power distribution equipment and services to France's live events industry. This was followed in 2017 by the acquisition of Potar Hurlant, a live sound rental specialist of 30 years' standing. 2018 saw the acquisition of sound engineering specialist, De Preference, and the takeover of another giant of France's event production industry - Dushow Group.

GLOBAL EXPANSION

By this time, Novelty Group could boast 800 employees and a turnover of €200m from servicing 20,000 projects annually in France and overseas. It had become one of

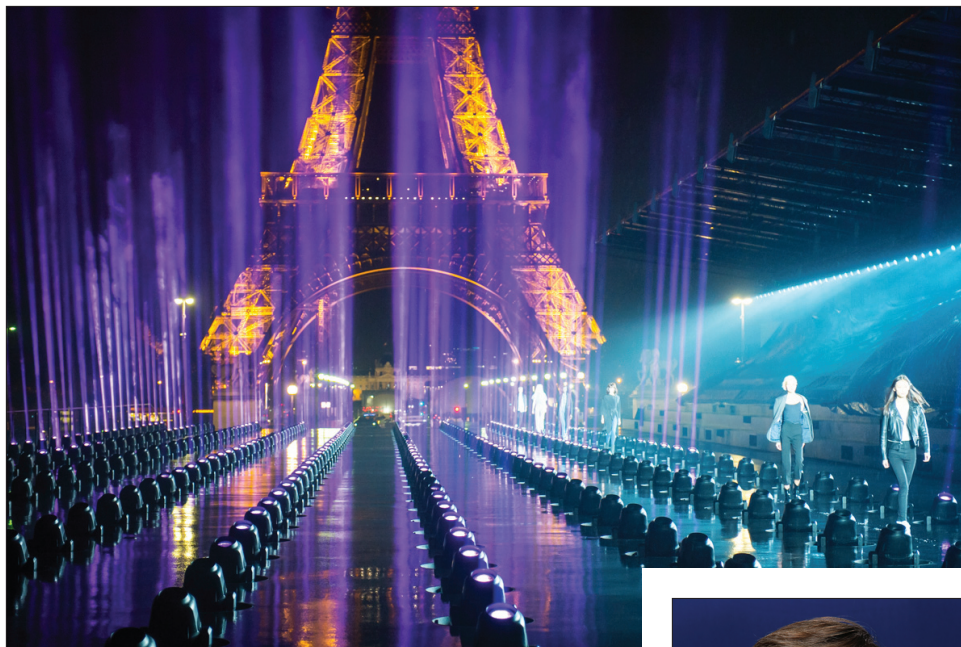


Photo: Stephane But

Europe's leading players in the provision of pro audio, lighting, video, rigging, trussing and power distribution equipment and services. The 34,000sq.m warehouse at Longjumeau is now at the heart of a network of locations covering all of France, plus branch locations in Belgium, Spain, Morocco, the Middle East, Brazil and the UK.

Opened in November 2014, Novelty Group's London branch is headed by director Marc Wegscheider, who has more than 20 years' experience in the events industry. He says: "The UK office came about because we were working with many events clients from the UK, realising their events in Europe and the Middle East, and we found that often they were not happy with the suppliers they were using for similar events. They said: 'We wish we had you in the UK as well!'. So we knew there was a demand for what we were able to offer - and here we are."

ASSET MANAGEMENT

Through its strategy of acquisition, Novelty Group has transformed from a niche specialist, providing event services to France's luxury and fashion markets, to a global operator, active in every

entertainment sector, across five continents. The company stocks a vast array of equipment from premium brands and routinely reinvests 5% of its turnover in new technology.

Whereas many popular service brands in the production industry tend to disappear following acquisition, Magnum and Dushow have continued to trade under their own respected names. They have been allowed to maintain the links of familiarity and continuity with their existing customer bases, while at the same time being recognised as members of Novelty Group - with all the additional strengths and advantages that that entails.

Importantly, Novelty has also retained key people from its acquisitions. Dushow's CEO and founder Eric Alvergnat continued as part of the Group's management team, while Magnum's Jérôme Chupin also stayed to oversee Magnum's operation. Olivier Hagneré, now general manager of Novelty France, became part of Novelty in 2003 with the acquisition of JLT Services.

"The strength of our Group is its people," says La Guillonnière. "We consist of a number of complementary businesses, all of which have established great



Photo: Charline Bon



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➡ Top: The YSL show at Paris Fashion Week, 2019

Jacques de La Guillonnière, CEO

Marc Wegscheider heads the London-based UK office

➡ Facing page, top: Novelty projects include Fête des Vignerons, Switzerland . . .

. . . the amfAR Gala, Cannes (left)

. . . and an exclusive restaurant experience at Al Ula, Saudi Arabia

“Novelty Group has transformed from a niche specialist, to a global operator, active in every entertainment sector, across five continents ...”



Photo: Philippe Fitt



personal relationships with clients over many years. There can be no doubt that it's those people and those relationships that are the true power of Novelty Group. We want them to become a part of our family and continue providing the great service that made them leaders in the first place."

Although specific details are understandably under wraps, the company does have plans for further acquisitions and geographical expansion in the future, both in Europe and further afield.

BOXING CLEVER

Like many event production suppliers, Novelty prides itself on its ability to offer a bespoke service for its high-end clients. "Our integrated design office produces specifications, preliminary drafts, 2D plans, 3D animations, graphic inlays, models and more," explains Nicolas Savigny, Novelty Group's technical director. "Its purpose is to understand and record, in advance and in the finest detail, the technical elements of an operation and

exactly how it will be executed."

However, for customers at the far more populous lower end of the market, such detailed show planning is not required. For these customers, Novelty Group developed its 'MyBox' range of off-the-shelf, turnkey production packages. These are tailored for small- and medium-scale applications in a wide range of target markets including live music, exhibition stands, business meetings, weddings, sports viewing, catering and parties. The MyBox strategy understands that for many customers, a headache-free, value-for-money set package - delivered, set-up and taken away after use - is exactly what's required.

GREEN CREDENTIALS

Novelty Group's senior management have long taken a positive stance on environmental responsibility. Along with Dushow and Magnum, Novelty is a signed-up member of a French initiative called Prestadd, which was introduced in 2011 by Synpase, the French trade association

representing scenic and AV suppliers.

By carrying the Prestadd label, suppliers guarantee a commitment to sustainable business practices. Members collaborate to identify and adopt best practice; for Novelty Group, this includes a range of initiatives including investment in power-efficient LED technology, and in projectors with long-lifespan lamps and lower-than-average power consumption. Such an initiative has never been more relevant, or more necessary, than in 2020.

Originally driven by an acute awareness of the risks posed by climate change, Novelty Group's commitment to sustainability has been given even greater impetus by the COVID-19 crisis. La Guillonnière explains: "The lockdown has meant that many in the industry who used to travel all over the world for meetings and exhibitions, have had to look for alternative methods of doing business. For example, COVID-19 has driven our collective adoption of video conferencing platforms more than the fear of climate change

ever did. The reduction in travel is just one of the many areas that we, as an industry, need to learn from."

Novelty Group has also used the downtime to continue to improve and refine its internal processes and working practices, its supply lines and its service offering, to ensure maximum sustainability for the future. Much of this is integral to the company's efforts to achieve ISO 20121, a voluntary international standard for sustainable event management, in order to put sustainable development at the heart of events production.

Policies on recycling and waste management are also important. But the Group's environmental care does not stop there. Beehives have been installed on the rooftops of its Longjumeau HQ, where bees (kept under the care of the logistics department, naturally) make the production industry's first "technical" honey. If that's not a sweetener for a new business relationship, what is? 🍯

➔ www.novelty-group.com