

TALKING **TIMBER**

AGENTS NEVER DIE

Wood Technology Society board member **Andrew True** examines the role of timber agents in the timber trade



Until the mid 1960s agents were the bedrock of the timber trade, playing a key and unique role in the supply chain between sawmills/producers and customers and providing extra services such as shipping and financing.

Historically, they were experts in seeing the future movements of supply and demand, ensuring that the trade functioned smoothly and efficiently, and were extremely influential in the bringing together of supplier and

customer. There were some big names with prestigious offices in London, Liverpool, Hull, and other main centres – Brandt and UCM, to name but a few. The timber trade at this time was very structured, without any crossing of paths – supplier via agent to importer, to merchant/end user.

But the writing was on the wall, and the situation started to change with the creation of shippers, working on behalf of specific suppliers/supplying areas or as an add-on to the sawmill group, and originally staffed by ex-agency people. This was a big sea change as it enabled direct contact between the supplier and the customer without an intermediary. However, there was still a role, albeit less influential, for the agency houses, with smaller suppliers or those suppliers still believing in the traditional way of doing business.

With the 1990s the shippers came under pressure as the companies they represented themselves became larger and more powerful (more so than the shipper), and thus reinforcing the growing trend of direct selling by the producers to the suppliers.

Over this time the timber trade was itself experiencing considerable change with amalgamations and takeovers creating large units, and the rise of the end-user such that they could buy direct and outside of the traditional chains. Also, new UK trading companies were being created, and these wanted to work outside the established structures.

Thus the time was right for more change, a further blurring of the old traditions.

But, throughout this time, the function of agent did not disappear, though many of the “big” houses did. The agent has had to reinvent their role more than once.

There is the continuation of direct selling, especially by the larger sawmills/producers, though they have often initially used the services of agents to establish a presence in the market.

Today, the agent is still in the market place providing a unique service. They are more specialist than their predecessors and as a result smaller. By definition, they are flexible in finding new sources of supply, and new products, and new customers,

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working especially with smaller progressive producers. They bring to the party a wealth of experience, and a deep understanding of the British psyche – very important in building relationships. With their knowledge of the market place they can also act for larger suppliers in market creation and development, without the high costs involved in using in-house “off-shore” staff, or maybe as a second, less direct, way to market without compromising the company’s existing channels.

In fact, today, some suppliers still officially use agents as the most effective and efficient way to the market and to maintain close customer contact.

The role of the agent, and the influence of the agent have certainly changed over time, but the necessity of the function is still of value to the supply chain, and to the progression and development of the market. The agent is visible in the market place, maybe not so high profile as in former times, but still seeking out opportunities to enhance the future of the timber trade.

To coin a phrase “The agent is dead – long live the agent.” ■

Timber agent
Flatau Dick
advertising in
TTJ in 1971



The Wood Technology Society

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