

Firm breaks into Mexican market after 11 years of trying

Steelite wins £122k

restaurant contract

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BUSINESS REPORTER

THOUSANDS of restaurant customers in Mexico will be eating from plates made in Stoke-on-Trent after pottery manufacturer Steelite International won a major contract there.

The Middleport-based hotelware specialist had landed a £122,000 deal to supply VIPS, Mexico's biggest restaurant chains.

The company, owned by retail giant Walmart's Mexico and Central America division, has 269 outlets in the country. Steelite has been working to win business from VIPS since 2001.

And a night shift introduced to fulfil the new contract has proved so successful that it has now become an ongoing fixture.

Steelite has provided VIPS with almost 25,000 pieces from its Taste Rectangle Three Platter range.

The firm, which employs 650 people in North Staffordshire, was first approached by VIPS at the end of January and asked to provide a sample for its management team.

Once testing had been completed, Steelite was asked if it could deliver 9,000 pieces in 30 days.

Chief executive Kevin Oakes said: "I am very proud to say we were the only company that could meet their delivery request while also providing the very high quality the restaurant chain required. So we were given the order."

After Steelite delivered the order at the beginning of March, VIPS requested a further 14,760 pieces, with the challenge to deliver 8,100 pieces by May 6 and 6,660



The Taste Rectangle Three Platter range which is being supplied to Mexican hotel chain VIPS.

by a month later. This time around other manufacturers were also invited to tender for the contract, but were told that if they could not meet the exacting delivery schedule they should not even bother presenting their products for consideration.

Steelite employees worked around the clock to fulfil the order and night shifts were introduced for the first time at the Orme Street factory.

Mr Oakes said: "We've been doing night working for three months now, 32 hours per week. It was originally introduced to fulfil the demand of the VIPS contract but it is now ongoing."

"We have a number of major contracts and demand is high – it's great to have a small team of skilled workers who are able to do night working and ensure the orders are fulfilled."

He added: "Winning VIPS' business is huge for us. We've been trying to break into the chain for almost 11 years, and are delighted that we can now start to build a strong relationship with them." Steelite's products are also being featured in VIPS' new advertising campaign on billboards across Mexico.

In April, the manufacturer posted record sales of £60.6 million for 2010, up from £51.9 million the year before.

Pre-tax profits rose by 45 per cent to reach £7.9 million.

Steelite, which counts hotel chains Hilton and Four Seasons among its clients, makes up to 500,000 pieces a week at its Orme Street base.

Last year it launched a Made in England, Made for Life campaign to highlight that the region still boasts world-class manufacturers and to persuade politicians to support Stoke-on-Trent and its firms.

In September it took its campaign roadshow around the UK to showcase its 'bus-jacking' feat – where a double-decker is balanced on four Steelite mugs to show the strength of its Made for Life brand.

Chief executive Kevin Oakes has also written to Prime Minister David Cameron urging the Government to adopt European Union guidelines that would force goods sold in the UK to have clear country of manufacture labelling.

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