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Federation Conference Sends Positive Message

By Paul Wynn, Director Public Relations
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The British Coating Federation held its 2009 annual conference at Marriott's Breadsall Priory Hotel Derbyshire, through 14 and 15 May. The IMF's Public Relations Director Paul Wynn joined over fifty delegates for the programme of stimulating and topical speakers.

During this difficult period of financial instability and commercial uncertainty, it is more important than ever for business leaders to escape the daily routine, to meet with fellow industry colleagues and reflect on their leadership.

The first conference session was opened by the BCF's outgoing President David Thomas of BASF Coatings. He introduced Mike Barry, Head of Corporate Social Responsibility for Marks & Spencer. This well known retailer has introduced a sustainability programme called Plan A. It has already saved the company millions without passing additional cost onto its twenty one million weekly customers. M&S believe that customers will buy green if it is easily accessible and doesn't cost them anything more, Mr Barry adding that "consumers want business to take the lead". As an example he spoke about clothing as being a "linear business model" which is unsustainable. Their high profile partnership with Oxfam has created an opportunity to encourage the recycling of clothing that would otherwise have gone to landfill. Each M&S garment presented to Oxfam is exchanged for a 'money off' voucher; to date 55% of all vouchers have been redeemed in store, thereby creating additional repeat business for the retailer.

Tony Mash speaking at his first conference as Chief Executive Officer outlined his personal vision for the Federation whilst detailing headline priorities, which had been ratified by the board that morning. He spoke of the need to plan to "Prosper and Grow" despite the current economic difficulties and not to simply "consolidate and survive". Mr Mash detailed a six point plan for the Federation: 1. Improve UK industrial competitiveness (through best practise) 2. Sustain and strengthen lobbying and regulatory services 3. Promote industry image 4. Continue to manage relationship with CEPE 5. Energise culture within the BCF community 6. Prioritise activities to control costs to what can be afforded.

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Responding to the speech on behalf of the Institute, Mr Wynn noted that the comments of the new CEO were extremely welcomed and his vision consistent in responding to these challenging times. He invited the BCF to adopt a more collaborative stance with other organisations, if they are really serious in wanting to raise the profile of the coatings industry and to establish greater recognition within government.

Chris Brown, the Bank of England's agent for the East Midlands gave an assessment of the current UK economy and the thoughts of the Monetary Policy Committee looking forward into next year. Mr Brown noted that the rate of economic decline seems to be easing through quarter two, whilst massive destocking during the first quarter is likely to drive a recovery in production output. The Monetary Policy Committee has seen headline inflation record its sharpest reduction since the 1960's driven by falling house prices and a freeze on pay wards. In his statement this week at the inflation report press conference, the BoE's Governor Mervyn King believes that recovery out of the recession will take longer than first thought.

The first day of the conference ended with a black tie dinner, attended by over one hundred Federation members and their partners. Well known media personality Alan Wright gave a highly entertaining after dinner speech.

Chairing the second day morning session was the newly appointed BCF President Richard Chapman of Jotun Paints. The mixed programme included a focus on environmental affairs, a reflection on strategic mergers and acquisitions within the industry and an explanation of lean manufacturing.

Professor Long Lin of Leeds University spoke of 'sustainability through collaboration' and promoted the benefits of academia working in partnership with business. He pointed out that gaining access to government research funding is challenging, calling for a more proactive and transparent system. Leeds Uni has worked effectively with RDA Yorkshire Forward, but the professor admitted that this success is not translated throughout the country. The programme concluded with a presentation from Stewart Ferguson of China Britain Business Council, who spoke of the continued opportunities for UK businesses in China.

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The annual conference was well organised and took place in an extremely charming location. The appointment of Tony Mash as CEO is timely and we should be encouraged by his vision. There is a renewed optimism within the Federation and the CEO's willingness to seek a greater cooperation with organisations such as the IMF is a positive move for the betterment and sustainability of the entire surface treatment industry. Going forward we will build on this good start and ensure we have a healthy and active cooperation.



Conference venue Breadsall Priory

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Bank of England's Chris Brown



Professor Long Lin, Leeds University