

Clay Paky's Cutting Edge

By: Lee Baldock

Inside the Italian lighting manufacturer's recent remarkable success



Clay Paky headquarters in Bergamo, Italy.

When *Lighting&Sound International* profiled Clay Paky in June 2009, the success of its Alpha Series of moving heads had recently brought the company back to prominence at a time when much of the market's talk, and increasingly action, was about LED products. With the punchy, efficient Alpha fixtures, Clay Paky had been quick to capitalize on the latest gen-

eration of discharge lamps. Combined with the company's robust engineering and high-quality optics, the range made its mark—and it continues to do so.

Since 2009, Clay Paky has not been long out of the news. On the product front, while the Alpha Series has continued to grow, the headlines have belonged to the Sharpys. This

compact and efficient beam effect, launched at the PLASA Show in 2010, went quickly from strength to strength, winning a PLASA Award for Innovation (like the Alpha Beam 300 before it) and a string of other accolades. Sharpys were soon appearing in every rental company's inventory and, it seemed, on every light entertainment TV show and tour spec.

Gold Sharpys were featured at the 2012 Oscar ceremony, while their stage-front role on the Diamond Jubilee concert (in the now-iconic Union Jack livery) made it one of the most recognizable fixtures in the market. At LDI in Las Vegas last fall, Clay Paky unveiled the Sharpy Wash 330, which, like its sibling, offers punchy output (equivalent to a 1,000W unit, from a 330W lamp) from a very compact form. It, too, looks set to be a big seller.

At the same time, Clay Paky felt the time was right to introduce its own range of LED-based fixtures—notably the A.Leda Series of wash lights—the K5, K10, and K20; the Glow-Up, a cable-free portable LED uplighter; and Glow-Up strip, a battery-operated LED batten for stage applications. These LED products have been “really very successful because we succeeded in bringing real innovation to product categories that were apparently already mature,” says commercial director Pio Nahum, the Clay Paky veteran who rejoined the company at the start of 2009. He adds, “Clay Paky feels that LED is now suitable for stage lighting.”

Complementing that broad product success, Nahum has been busy driving the reinforcement of the company’s international distribution network. Key appointments in that time have included A.C.T Lighting in the United States in September 2010 and Ambersphere Solutions in the UK in September 2011. In May 2012, A.C.T scored a coup for Clay Paky with the appointment of George Masek to head its moving light sales in North America. In the same month, Clay Paky announced new distribution partners RMB Light & Sounds in the Philippines and DWR Distribution in South Africa.

The combination of highly salable products and strengthened sales channels has meant a further boost to Clay Paky’s fortunes: In 2012, the company saw double the revenues of

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Ben Saltzman (A.C.T), Francesco Romagnoli (Clay Paky), Bob Gordon (A.C.T), and Pio Nahum (Clay Paky)



Clay Paky Sharpy

2010. And this rapid growth has been easily absorbed, thanks to the horizontally integrated manufacturing

model traditional in Italy. In this model, specialization is key. Clay Paky, as a designer and manufacturer of intelligent show lighting equipment, does exactly that, while all the associated specialisms—metal stamping, injection molding, PCB population, and stepper motor manufacture, to name a few, are outsourced to specialists in their respective fields. While roughly 150 people are employed at Clay Paky in Bergamo, another 300 workers produce specialist components from a string of suppliers across northern Italy. With strict quality control processes in place to ensure the components meet precise design and quality criteria, it just remains for Clay Paky to assemble, test, and ship the products. In this



Clay Paky Sharpy Wash 330

way, much of the required expansion in output has been gratefully absorbed by suppliers, and Clay Paky has enjoyed this doubling of revenues with minimal increase in overheads. “Clay Paky is a very profitable company,” Nahum says.

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Once, distribution was perhaps primarily a stockholding exercise. Today, a professional level of backup and support is a far more valuable service than same-day delivery. “And we can help them with that,” Nahum says. “We have developed a system where

we can be very quick in delivery and fill that gap. But there is no substitute for that direct support of the local market, of having the right people in the territory.”

“We are promoting the culture of light,” Nahum explains. “We are not trying to make our products less expensive; we are trying to add value. For people to understand the added value, they have to understand lighting culture.”

One of Clay Paky’s main achievements, Nahum says, has been to find the right distribution in the vital US market. At the time of writing, Bob Gordon’s A.C.T Lighting had sold more than 6,000 Sharpys in its territory and had just been confirmed as exclusive distributor for the US and Canada. A.C.T also offers the premium lighting control brand of MA Lighting in its distribution portfolio—an arrangement at Lightpower in Germany has proved to be a mutually beneficial one through the years. Now the two brands also sit together at Ambersphere Solutions in the UK, run by Glyn O’Donoghue. Just 16 months into Ambersphere’s existence, sales of both brands to the UK market are strong.

Like many manufacturers, Clay Paky battles with Chinese copying. While the company vigorously protects its intellectual property and fights the copiers through the available legal routes, the only sure way to keep a step ahead of them is through innovation and speed to market, Nahum says: “Branding in our industry is very important—visibility, awareness. More than an image thing, it’s a method of speed in the business; speed to market is key today. You need your customers to become aware of what you are offering immediately—you can’t wait. If you wait, somebody will copy you or catch up with you or offer something similar. You have a short time to be successful.”

Consider the speed of the Sharpy’s market visibility as an example.

Marketing is Clay Paky’s next biggest expenditure after R&D. Most recently, it has organized conferences

in which leading lighting designers have been keynote speakers. Patrick Woodroffe participated last year; Luc Lafortune is next. “We are promoting the culture of light,” Nahum explains. “We are not trying to make our products less expensive; we are trying to add value. For people to understand the added value, they have to understand lighting culture.”

In addition to its product development and sales and marketing strategies, Nahum identifies another factor in Clay Paky’s success. “We have been very lucky,” he says. “We were lucky that some competitors moved into LED technology at a time when LED couldn’t do everything, so there was room left for developing fixtures which significantly improved on existing technology—which we did, and we did well.” He adds, “We were also lucky that a company like A.C.T Lighting became available to distribute our product when it did ... that was our luck, not our ability.”

Maybe that’s true from one point of view, but Clay Paky’s ability to design and manufacture market-leading products surely played its part in A.C.T’s availability, as it did in the establishment of Ambersphere. And still very much responsible for steering that ability is the company’s founder and president, the man Nahum calls their visionary entrepreneur—Pasquale “Paky” Quadri.

Expect to see more from Clay Paky, and its local partners, in 2013. 📶