

# Mums who do things differently



MANUFACTURING TO ORDER Emily Humphrys and Alison White of CRB

ONE of the region's most successful life science companies – winning a Highly Commended for Outstanding Growth in last year's hotly contested Business for Life Awards – is owned and run by two working mothers.

Cambridge Research Biochemicals (CRB), which synthesises peptides – fragments of proteins – for medical research, was successfully acquired by Emily Humphrys and Alison White in a management buy-out 10 years ago. Celebrating its 30th birthday next month, Billingham-based CRB is the world's second-oldest peptide manufacturer with customers including the top 10 giants of the international pharmaceutical world as well as world-renowned research institutes.

So why are CRB's products in such demand? Proteins control every process essential for human life. Discovering more about how they work, and help the body fight disease and infection, is crucial for furthering medical research, drug discovery and health care provision. Manufacturing peptides 'to order' by chemical synthesis, and generating their subsequent antibody, is a highly cost-effective and much quicker way for scientists to work than using naturally-occurring proteins.

Part of the secret of their success, believes commercial director Humphrys, is that, unusually in their world, she and operations director White are scientists with commercial backgrounds. "We started out in a blue-chip organisation – ICI, as it was then known – where we learned many business and marketing skills. CRB was then spun out as an established business from the organisation, so we haven't had to endure the early growing pains of an academic spin-out."

Their other key weapon, believes Humphrys, is that they take a progressive, customer-orientated approach to their products. "Our customers work in highly specialised areas. So they need tailor-made research tools, whether that's in peptide design, synthesis, modification or labelling, or antibody production. We don't do 'off-the-shelf' products. Everything we produce is custom-made."

Set up in 1980, by leading peptide research scientists from the Medical Research Council, the original Cambridge-based company moved north in 1989, when bought by the then ICI, before the management buy-out in 2000 and a move to Belasis Hall Technology Park in Billingham. As a result of a £100k investment

last year, one-third funded by One North East, CRB now has an expanded and more diverse peptide synthesis operation.

Another example of CRB's sharp commercial instinct is their decision to share their skills and expertise with small, specialist biochemical businesses and research institutes who have the talent and knowledge but may lack the know-how and contacts to market their products and services. "CRB can offer specialised direct selling and entry to top accounts, especially in the UK market, to otherwise unknown micro-sized technical enterprises," explains Humphrys. "We have the experience; they have the novelty."

These strategic partnerships are not just confined to the UK. In the last three years, for example, CRB has teamed up with South Korea-based Panagene to distribute Peptide Nucleic Acid (PNAs), and with Cyanagen of Italy to distribute Chromis dyes. They also collaborate with Cambridge's world-renowned Babraham Bioscience Technologies to provide Monoclonal Antibody production.

Last year, CRB was invited to become a partner in the European Union's BIOSCENT project, part of a pan-European programme of innovative research and development. CRB's contribution towards BIOSCENT, which is involved in the development of biodegradable heart patches, is to design and produce peptides for 'scaffolds' to promote heart function recovery.

More recently, this month, CRB won the contract to supply custom peptides and antibodies to the UK's leading group of Research Councils (RCUK Shared Services Centre Ltd) which includes the Medical Research Council and Cancer Research UK. They have also been awarded a CASE award from the Biotechnology & Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) in conjunction with Durham University's chemistry department.

How important is the fact the company is run by women? "We run our business differently," believes Humphrys. "As well as being committed to high standards, we genuinely care for our customers and staff alike. We want customers' businesses to succeed and we want our staff to feel valued. We're prepared to be very flexible to ensure both." Last November, Humphrys and White were recognised by the prestigious North East Woman Entrepreneur of the Year Awards, winning the Innovation through Technology category.

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INNOVATION THROUGH TECHNOLOGY CRB is a successful life science company