



Embargoed until 1st October 2012

Hertfordshire funeral directors claim East of England 'Business of the Year' prize at the Chamber Awards 2012

A 300 year-old funeral directors has secured a prestigious achievement for Hertfordshire after it was announced as the Chamber Awards 2012's Business of the Year for the East of England (sponsored by Westfield Health).

Austin's, which employs 41 people across its business, made it a double celebration with its Managing Director Claire Austin beating off competition from across the region to be named as Entrepreneur of the Year.

Judges were impressed with the company's ability to grow turnover by 98% over the last decade and its ambitious growth plans that will see the relocation of all its branches to retail locations with open and elegant frontages.

The independent funeral directors, who are members of Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce, have also introduced a strong corporate identity that is visible and recognised in the local community.

There were three other winners from Hertfordshire with Ashbourne Insurance Group, Holiday Inn and Mirage Health Centre securing the Commitment to People Development (sponsored by Acua Limited), Sustainability and Achievement in International Business Awards respectively (sponsored by DHL Express).

President of the British Chambers of Commerce Martyn Pellew said: "There has never been a more important time for businesses to showcase the amazing work they are doing on a day-to-day basis.

"The Chamber Awards is a perfect platform for them to do just that and receive the recognition and profile they deserve for helping move the economy forward and create employment, often in local areas."

The British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) Chamber Awards 2012 is committed to finding the best businesses in Britain through a series of regional heats followed by a National Final, due to be held at London's Guildhall on November 29th.

Now in its 9th year, the competition is one of the showcase events for the 'Business is Good for Britain' campaign that highlights the role of business as a positive force for the UK recovery and the success of local communities and individuals.

Austin's is the leading independent funeral directors in Hertfordshire, arranging 1200 funerals across its eight branches each year. It also owns and operates Harwood Park Crematorium in Stevenage, which carried out over 2,200 cremations in the last twelve months.

The company has focused on ensuring it offers a level of service that sets it apart from its national competitors.

It has used client feedback and a mystery shopper review to introduce a number of innovations for the sector, including the free Little Green Book, 24/7 availability and the development of a bespoke pre-paid funeral plan.

Hertfordshire Winners

Ashbourne Insurance (Commitment to People Development) – The family-run independent high street broker offers a one-stop service, from personal and complex commercial insurances to 24-hour claims advisory support.

It has developed the 'Ashbourne Way', which focuses on continuous staff training, retention of employees and the development of high performance managers.

Last year, the firm spent approximately £20,000 on training and over 1,000 hours on staff development, including classroom training and on-the-job training with mentors.

'People power' has played a major role in Ashbourne Insurance defying the online competition to grow turnover to nearly £1.2m last year.

Holiday Inn Stevenage (Sustainability Award) – Located in the heart of Stevenage Town Centre, the hotel has 140 guestrooms and conference and events facilities for up to 400 delegates.

In 2011, Holiday Inn Stevenage embraced the low carbon agenda, creating a green working party and electing an Energy Champion that would help the business achieve its aim of securing a 'silver' status in the Green Tourism Business Award.

By empowering all of its 65 staff, the company was able to develop a 'Green Screen' noticeboard and a host of forums that were responsible for the introduction of the Responsible Visitor Charter, recycling cartridges in support of Guide Dogs for the Blind and the conversion of 65% of public areas to LED lighting.

The results have been impressive, with Holiday Inn Stevenage reducing its carbon footprint and going one better by actually securing the 'Gold' status.

Mirage Health Group (Achievement in International Business) – Mirage Health Group specialises in the provision of ear care products that allow clinicians to carry out safe and effective ear care in accordance with medical guidelines.

The range is centred on the 'Propulse Ear Irrigator', which has been the irrigator of choice for health care professionals in the UK for over 10 years. Complementary accessories have been designed and launched including disposable tips, carry case, head lamp, cleaning tablets and cape.

Based at its facility in Welywn Garden City, the innovative company works with end users (i.e. practice nurses and hospitals) and medical distributors, with expansion coming from its growing international reputation.

Mirage, which employs 9 people, currently serves 16 different countries and has seen exports increase to £265,000 in the last financial year.

National Finals

Other East of England winners, include:

- Pure Resource Solutions (Marketing Campaign of the Year)
- Qton Solutions (Most Promising New Business)
- Sepura (Excellence in Innovation)
- Warnerbus (Excellence in Customer Service)

All eight companies will now represent the East of England in their respective categories in the Grand Final, with the chance to win £25,000 and the title of 'Outstanding Business Achievement', courtesy of the RBS Group.

Martyn concluded: "A record number of firms have taken part this year, all determined to prove that 'Business is Good for Britain!'"

The Chamber Awards 2012 is supported by the RBS Group, BT Business, Dell, DHL Express, Westfield Health and Acua Limited.

For further information or to book your place at the National Awards Final, visit **www.chamberawards.co.uk**

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Notes to Editors

The British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) is the national voice of local business.

The BCC sits at the heart of a powerful nationwide network of Accredited Chambers of Commerce, serving over **100,000 businesses** across the UK, which **employ over five million people**.

For more information visit: **www.britishchambers.org.uk**