2016 was a record year for marine electronics specialists Actisense and 2017 looks like it will top that, with unit sales up and a predicted 20% increase turnover, says company founder and CEO Phil Whitehurst. Buoyed in part by growing confidence among OEMs, the real engine for growth however is the aftermarket which makes up majority of its business: “People are upgrading their electronics on board,” Whitehurst told IBI. “Interconnectivity and getting data around the boat is very much the trend. We offer good service, excellent standards of product, so people buy our kit and they keep coming back for more,” he maintains. Critical to the company’s growth was getting on the NMEA bandwagon early, says Whitehurst. “NMEA 2000 works with everyone’s kit, which makes it more competitive for the manufacturers, but allows more options for the end user.”

Cables and connectors, like the NGW-1, are one of its biggest successes. “If someone has an older autopilot on board they want to keep – they just need to put in one of our connectors, such as the NGW-1, and keep the older kit working.” The business revealed its latest such product – a NMEA 0183 Combiner/Multiplexer, at METSTRADE in November. Known as the ‘NDC-5’ the new product provides installers with a highly flexible platform that can be used to solve multiple NMEA 0183 interconnectivity headaches.

Last month, its NGT-1, a NMEA 2000 to PC interface, which first came to market in 2012, picked up the National Marine Electronics Association (NMEA) Product of Excellence Award in the NMEA 2000 sensor category for a second year in a row. It was the third consecutive year that Actisense has achieved this accolade with successes in the same category in 2015 for their EMU-1 too.

Actisense supplies all parts of the market, from 26ft up to superyachts. “We’re seeing particular growth among small boat with 3-4 instruments onboard – networking on really small boats is increasingly popular.” It has also just launched its new PRO range of NMEA 0183 intelligent buffers for commercial applications.

The business is adding distributors in Europe, but rather than a blanket approach prefers partners that specialise – for instance it has three in the Netherlands - one focusing on the superyacht sector, one commercial, and one leisure boats: “We find getting depth in right places is working for us.” The US market is currently showing the strongest growth.

Actisense was launched by Whitehurst, a former chief engineer at Echopilot, back in 2001, and the business today employs 19 staff. With ‘connectivity’ becoming increasingly important, and the ‘plug-and-play’ nature of the next generation of marine electronics broadening their aftermarket appeal, Whitehurst envisages an exciting future for a business: “Connected boats are the future; monitoring and tracking systems on boards. Eventually they’ll be able to tell you when it’s good to sail – they’ll be monitoring the tides, wind and water levels, analysing the weather forecasts. Apps will get to know you and come up with suggestions. It will be your personal assistant to your hobby.”