

**The GO International UK Balloon and
Party Industry Report 2015-2025
Ten years of growth, saturation and
the fight for a professional future**

GO International UK Industry Insight 2015-2025

FOREWORD – by George Oustayiannis, Managing Director, GO International

When I started in this industry almost four decades ago, balloons were a small, simple part of the celebration world. There were no social media “reels”, no influencers, no side hustles. There were a handful of manufacturers, a handful of wholesalers and a lot of small independent shops that understood the value of service and long-term relationships.

Over the years I have watched balloons move from an afterthought to a main event. I have seen amazing creativity, real craftsmanship and some outstanding businesses built around what we do.

I have also watched the other side.

I have seen good companies disappear. I have watched the race to the bottom on price. I have seen people treat this industry as something they can extract a quick living from without any thought about standards, safety or the future. I have had conversations with owners who are exhausted, talented and questioning whether it is worth carrying on.

This report is not written by a consultancy that will move on to the next sector tomorrow. It is written by a wholesaler that has lived every high and low of this trade for decades. It draws on our own data and experience, but it is not about GO International alone. It is about all of us.

I have had the privilege of chairing a national trade association, mentoring businesses of all sizes and working with manufacturers across the world. I have seen what happens when we pull together and take responsibility. I have seen what happens when we do not.

During Covid, the businesses that followed clear guidance, invested in professionalism and stayed close to trusted suppliers did well. Many of them did far better than they ever expected. That was not luck. It was the result of years of laying solid foundations, then making good decisions in a crisis.

The temptation now is to pretend that Covid levels of demand were normal and that if we just push a bit harder, we can get back there. That is not how it works. The UK is a mature, saturated market. We cannot keep piling in more wholesalers, more decorators, more online sellers and more cheap imports and expect everyone to thrive.

This report is not here to complain. It is here to tell the truth as we see it and to offer a choice.

We can either carry on eating today and worry about tomorrow later, or we can start acting like an industry that deserves respect. That means manufacturers thinking carefully about who they partner with. It means wholesalers deciding whether they are real trade partners or just box shifters. It means decorators and retailers charging properly for skilled work. It means trade bodies stepping up and working together.

I am proud of what GO International has achieved and of the role we have played in supporting professionals across the UK and beyond. I am also honest enough to say that our appetite for chasing growth at any cost has reduced. I am more interested in helping build a future worth having than in pushing for numbers that do not make sense in a broken model.

If you are reading this as a manufacturer, a wholesaler, a retailer, a decorator or a trade representative, my ask is simple. Read this report with an open mind. Pick out the parts that relate to you. Then decide what you are prepared to do differently.

We do not control everything. But we do control how we show up, who we work with and what we are prepared to accept.

The future of the UK balloon and party industry is not written yet. The question is whether we want to write it together, or leave it to chance.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Between 2015 and 2025, the UK balloon and party industry has lived through one of the most volatile decades in its history. What looked like steady, healthy growth through the mid-2010s turned into an unprecedented Covid era surge, as at-home celebrations, drive-by events and doorstep deliveries created record demand almost overnight.

Many in the supply chain, from manufacturers and wholesalers to retailers and decorators, treated that surge as the new normal and built their expectations, forecasts and investments around it. It was not the new normal. Covid was the peak of the current growth curve.

As the market has normalised, the underlying weaknesses of the UK model have been exposed. We are now seeing a steady pattern of wholesalers, decorators and retailers either quietly quitting, shrinking to survive, or failing altogether. At the same time, disciplined operators that followed correct guidance, worked with compliant suppliers and invested in training have held their ground, but often with a far lower appetite for chasing growth in an industry that too often shows little respect for standards or long term sustainability.

The UK remains one of the largest and most mature balloon and party markets in the world and is widely recognised as the leading market in Europe. Yet maturity has brought saturation. There are now simply too many players chasing the same customers, often with little differentiation, poor pricing discipline and very different levels of professionalism.

During Covid, many businesses that took the correct route and followed responsible advice did extremely well. At GO International we saw, first hand, that when retailers and decorators listened, invested in skills and focused on quality and compliance, they did not just survive, they thrived. That period proved a simple point. Professionalism and good guidance are not a luxury, they are a survival tool.

Today, a very different set of forces is reshaping the UK market:

- A wholesale model in which it is common for a manufacturer to appoint twenty to thirty “wholesalers” in the UK, something that would be unthinkable in many European markets. This removes any real sense of partnership, respect or premium standing. If anyone and everyone has the product, the product is no longer special.
- Traditional bricks and mortar card and gift shops that used to be the backbone of balloon and party sales are closing or reducing ranges.
- Card Factory has become the number one volume seller of balloons in the UK by combining positioning, convenience and aggressive pricing, even though its in store offering is largely limited to simple “balloon on a ribbon” solutions.
- Home workers and side hustlers have flooded into the industry, yet the vast majority of new entrants do not make it to a full year of trading. The barriers to entry are low, but the professional and business skills required to succeed are high.

- Some online retailers have executed extremely well in the “balloon in a box” sector, but they succeed through systems, consistency and marketing, not shortcuts.
- Unlicensed, untested and questionable quality imports from platforms such as Temu and Shein are now widely accepted by parts of the market. This harms responsible manufacturers and wholesalers, confuses consumers and opens the door to potential safety and environmental issues.
- The Covid period also triggered a wave of social media influencers who discovered balloons, drawing manufacturers’ attention towards follower counts and away from depth of skill and professionalism, a lesson many brands are only now beginning to fully absorb.

Overlaying all of this is a culture problem. Too much of the industry is now driven by an “eat now, to hell with tomorrow” mentality. Short term discounting, selling to anyone at almost any price, copying designs and racing to the bottom might create a quick win for some, but it damages the reputation and perceived value of what we do as an industry.

European manufacturers including Gemar, Sempertex Europe, Folat and Reithmüller, Party Deco and others see strong growth potential in Europe and often group the UK within those forecasts. There is certainly room for selective growth and for better business, but our belief is that many of the UK projections are over optimistic. The typical pattern has always been that growth starts in the USA, flows to the UK and then moves into mainland Europe. The UK is now at or past the top of that curve, while many European territories are still climbing.

Trade representation has not kept pace with the scale of the challenge. NABAS has remained a body run by members for members, with a volunteer committee doing all they can and using subscriptions to promote the association and its members. BAPIA, operating as a director owned, profit making business, has had the luxury of more time and budget for promotion and brand building, but less visible impact when it comes to protection and industry wide action. EBPC continues to lobby and has done an acceptable job in that narrow field, but lobbying alone is no longer enough.

The industry now needs protection and a unified voice. Without that, the UK risks drifting into permanent decline as a confusing, low margin market that serious manufacturers and professionals will find less and less attractive.

This report sets out:

- How the UK reached its Covid peak and why that level of demand was never sustainable.
- Why the current model of “sell to all, sometimes at any price” is failing.
- How oversaturation, cheap imports, the influencer wave and the erosion of professionalism are affecting every part of the chain.
- Why European optimism about the UK needs to be balanced with realism about saturation.
- What manufacturers, wholesalers, decorators, retailers and trade bodies can do now to

protect the future, rebuild value and create a more sustainable, professional UK balloon and party industry.

GO International's own foundations are as solid as they could reasonably be after four decades. The question is not whether established, well run businesses can survive. The question is whether the industry wants to build a future that rewards those who do things properly, or whether it is content to keep eating today and worry about tomorrow when it is too late.

1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

Purpose of this report

The purpose of this report is to provide a clear, honest and professional overview of the UK balloon and party industry between 2015 and 2025.

It is written for everyone who has a genuine stake in the sector. That includes:

- Global and European manufacturers and brand owners.
- UK and European wholesalers and distributors.
- Retailers of all sizes, from independents to national chains.
- Professional balloon decorators and event stylists.
- Trade associations, lobby groups and educators.

The intention is not to name and shame individual companies. It is to describe, as accurately as possible, the structural strengths and weaknesses of the UK market, the key events that have shaped it, and the choices we now face.

The report is published by GO International, one of the UK's longest established balloon and party wholesalers, using almost forty years of trading knowledge combined with data from the last decade and ongoing work with hundreds of businesses through The Balloon Academy and other mentoring roles.

Scope

The report focuses on:

- The UK balloon and party market as a whole, rather than any single product type.
- The ten year period from 2015 to 2025, with particular attention to the Covid years and the post-Covid adjustment.
- The relationships between manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers, decorators and consumers.
- The impact of regulation, imports, online platforms and trade associations on market health and professionalism.

While some comparisons are made with Europe and the United States, this is a UK centred report. The international view is used mainly to provide context and to explain why expectations and realities sometimes diverge.

Methodology

The findings in this report are based on four main sources:

Internal trend data

GO International has supplied high level, anonymised data covering the period 2015 to 2025. This includes:

- Indexed annual turnover figures.
- Category level trends in latex, foil, bubbles, partyware and accessories.
- Changes in average order value and customer mix.
- Account level activity indicators that distinguish between long term professional customers and short lived, low spend accounts.

Detailed numbers are not published, but the direction of travel and the relative changes are used throughout to illustrate market movements.

First hand experience at every level of the chain

Over almost four decades, GO International and its directors have:

- Acted as a key UK wholesaler and training resource.
- Served as chair of a national trade association.
- Mentored and supported hundreds of independent retailers and decorators.
- Worked closely with UK, European and global manufacturers.

This experience provides context and insight that sits behind the data and helps explain why certain patterns have emerged.

Interviews and informal feedback

To complement internal data and personal experience, the report draws on:

- Conversations with professional decorators and retailers, both long established and newer entrants.
- Input from manufacturers and distributors active in the UK and European markets.
- Feedback from other wholesalers and industry stakeholders.

Where individuals have not given permission to be named, their input is used in anonymised form and presented as case examples or aggregated observations.

Publicly available data and market information

The report also uses public information including:

- Market research and trade analysis on global and European party and balloon markets.
- Company announcements, administrations and restructurings.
- Government and regulatory guidance where relevant.

These external sources are not intended to replace industry knowledge, but to confirm and frame the trends seen in practice.

Limitations

This is an industry report, not an academic study. As such:

- It does not claim to present every possible data point or every perspective.
- It focuses on the professional and commercial parts of the market, not on occasional consumer behaviour.
- It reflects the reality as seen by those who have been deeply involved in the sector for many years, rather than by outside observers.

Where opinions are given, they are clearly identified as such. Where data is used, it is presented in a way that respects commercial sensitivity while still being useful for decision making.

3. THE UK MARKET 2015–2025: FROM GROWTH TO SATURATION

From steady growth to fragile foundations

At the start of this period, the UK balloon and party industry was in a broadly positive place. Through the mid-2010s, the market experienced steady growth driven by:

- A strong culture of celebration and gifting.
- The continued popularity of milestone birthdays and events.
- Increasing awareness of balloons as décor, not just a low-value add-on.
- The early stages of professional balloon décor and organic styling.

Retailers and decorators began to invest more in skills and training. Manufacturers developed a wider variety of shapes, finishes and licensed designs. Wholesalers expanded assortments and held deeper stock. Online and social media marketing opened new routes for independents to reach customers.

On the surface, this looked like a straightforward growth story. Underneath, however, the foundations were already showing signs of strain. Competition was increasing, margins were tightening and the first signs of a “sell it to everyone” mentality were starting to appear.

2015–2019: Growth with early warning signs

Between 2015 and 2019 the UK market benefitted from:

- Increased consumer spending on celebrations and events.
- A boom in social media sharing of balloon displays.
- Growth in hen parties, baby showers and gender reveals.
- More decorators entering the market, many from home.

At the same time, a number of warning signs were becoming harder to ignore:

- The number of wholesalers and “distributors” appointed in the UK grew sharply. In some cases manufacturers were appointing twenty to thirty wholesalers in a single country.
- Price competition intensified. Online discounting and clearance strategies began to condition customers to expect lower prices and constant offers.
- The first wave of “side hustle” decorators appeared, often with little training and very thin pricing.
- Traditional card and gift shops started to feel pressure from discounters and changing high street footfall.

For well established, well run businesses, these years were still largely positive. For weaker or highly leveraged companies, the cracks were already visible.

2020–2021: Covid and the artificial peak

Covid created the most extreme and unusual trading conditions the industry had ever seen. Overnight, the rules changed.

Traditional parties, events and gatherings were restricted or cancelled, yet the human need to celebrate did not disappear. It moved. People turned to:

- At-home celebrations inside their household bubbles.
- Drive-by events and front garden displays.
- Doorstep balloon deliveries and “balloon in a box” surprises.
- Window displays and community decorations.

During this period:

- Professional businesses that followed correct guidance on safety, compliance and delivery performed extremely well.
- Suppliers who maintained stock, communicated clearly and adapted quickly to the new environment became lifelines for their customers.
- GO International worked closely with retailers and decorators, providing guidance, training and product support. Those who listened and implemented the advice not only survived, they often experienced record months.

At the same time, the barriers to entry appeared to drop even further. Many people entered the market during Covid, seeing balloons as a fast route to income. Quite a number did not appreciate that the conditions were extraordinary, not normal.

For manufacturers and some investors, Covid trading figures were interpreted as the new baseline. Forecasts and expectations were built on peak numbers. In reality, Covid was a spike created by a one-off set of restrictions and behaviours. It was the top of the curve, not the beginning of a new one.

2022–2025: Normalisation and reckoning

As restrictions eased and society opened up, demand shifted again.

Some of the Covid behaviour remained. Balloon in a box deliveries and at-home décor did not disappear. However:

- Consumers had more choice again, including travel, hospitality, leisure and experiences.
- Household budgets came under pressure from inflation, energy costs and general economic uncertainty.
- The emotional urgency that drove “any excuse to celebrate at home” eased.

The result was a more normal, and in many categories lower, level of demand compared with the Covid peak.

In this environment, the structural weaknesses of the UK model became very clear:

- Wholesalers who had expanded stock and infrastructure to chase Covid-level demand found themselves carrying heavy costs in a flatter market.
- Retailers who had believed Covid turnover was permanent struggled as sales reverted to more typical levels.
- New decorators and home workers who entered during the boom discovered that outside Covid, low prices and lack of business skills do not support a sustainable income.

From 2022 onwards, a pattern emerged:

- Some wholesalers closed, merged or significantly reduced activity.
- A steady stream of decorators and small retailers either quietly disappeared or publicly announced closure.
- Established independents who had been in business for many years began to question the viability of continuing, not because there was no demand, but because the quality of the market and the level of respect for professional work had eroded.

At the same time, strong businesses with disciplined financial management, solid stock control and a focus on training and professionalism remained standing. GO International's own foundations, built over four decades, have remained as solid as could reasonably be expected given the environment.

What changed was not the ability to grow, but the appetite to chase growth at any cost in an industry where too many players showed little regard for the future. The "eat now, to hell with tomorrow" mentality seen in parts of the market made many experienced operators rethink how far they wanted to stretch themselves.

A mature, saturated and uneven market

By 2025, the UK balloon and party market can be fairly described as:

- Mature – the basic concept of balloons and party products is widely understood and has reached most consumer segments.
- Saturated – there are more retailers, decorators and wholesalers than the market can comfortably support at current standards and price levels.
- Uneven – a mix of highly professional, compliant businesses operating alongside untrained, unregulated and sometimes unsafe operators, all competing for the same customers.

The industry has not collapsed. There is still genuine opportunity and room for growth for those who differentiate, price correctly and deliver real value. However, the easy growth phase is over. The combination of oversupply, margin pressure and inconsistent standards now threatens the long term health of the market unless deliberate action is taken.

4. CHANNEL PRESSURES AND THE “SELL TO EVERYONE” MODEL

Traditional retail under strain

Traditional card and gift shops were once the backbone of balloon and party sales in the UK. Many of these businesses:

- Offered helium filled balloons as an add-on to cards and gifts.
- Built strong relationships with local communities.
- Provided a visible, accessible point of contact for celebrations.

Over the past decade, this channel has come under sustained pressure:

- Rising rents and business rates.
- Reduced footfall on many high streets.
- Competition from discounters, supermarkets and online retailers.
- Higher operating costs and staff challenges.

As a result, a significant number of independent card and gift shops have closed, downsized or removed balloon and party ranges. Those that remain often face difficult choices about how much stock to hold and how far to invest in skills and equipment.

The rise of Card Factory and the power of scale

Card Factory has become the number one volume seller of balloons in the UK. It has achieved this through:

- Prime retail locations with high footfall.
- A clear proposition built on convenience and low price.
- Efficient supply chains and centralised buying.
- A simple in store balloon offering focused on single balloons on ribbons and straightforward add-ons.

Card Factory does not position itself as a specialist balloon décor provider. Its success demonstrates the power of scale, simplicity and price in the eyes of many consumers. For the independent retailer or decorator, this creates a challenging comparison. Customers see “balloons” at one price in a well-known chain, then struggle to understand why bespoke décor and professional installs command a much higher price.

Without education and clear positioning, the independent is repeatedly forced into a defensive conversation about price instead of a proactive conversation about value.

Home workers, side hustles and early exits

Over the last decade, and especially during Covid, the number of home based balloon businesses has increased dramatically. Social media has made it simple to:

- Showcase work online.
- Take enquiries through direct messages.
- Launch a business with minimal upfront investment.

This has brought genuine opportunity for many, particularly those who have approached it as a serious venture, invested in training and respected professional standards.

However, there is a hard reality behind the headline growth in numbers:

- The vast majority of new entrants do not reach a full year of trading.
- Many underprice from the outset, treating early jobs as “pocket money” rather than as the foundation of a sustainable business.
- Compliance, insurance and safety are often overlooked in the rush to take orders.
- When the first busy season ends, or when personal circumstances change, a large proportion simply stop trading.

From the outside, it can look as though the industry is booming because there are so many new pages and brands appearing. In practice, many are short lived. This constant churn adds noise and confusion to the market without building long term capacity or professionalism.

Online specialists and the balloon in a box model

Alongside traditional retail and home workers, a number of online businesses have excelled in specific niches, particularly the balloon in a box model.

These companies tend to succeed because they:

- Focus on a tightly defined product and service.
- Invest heavily in systems, fulfilment and customer service.
- Optimise websites and digital advertising.
- Treat the business as a serious e-commerce operation, not a hobby.

They are not immune to the same pressures of cost, competition and seasonality, but their discipline and process driven approach has allowed them to build strong repeat customer bases.

For the wider industry, they demonstrate that there is still room for growth when the model is clear, the pricing is structured and the execution is professional.

The “sell to everyone” wholesale strategy

One of the most damaging patterns in the UK market has been the strategy, deliberate or otherwise, of selling to almost anyone who asks.

In practice this has meant that:

- Manufacturers have appointed large numbers of “wholesalers” within the UK, sometimes twenty to thirty per brand.
- There is little or no meaningful exclusivity, tiering or territory discipline.
- Wholesalers are frequently competing directly with each other on identical product ranges, often on price alone.
- Some wholesalers sell directly to end consumers, blurring the line between trade and retail.

This model may create an illusion of rapid expansion in the short term. In reality it:

- Undermines respect between manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers.
- Erodes margin as companies undercut one another to keep volume.
- Encourages a quick fix, clearance driven mentality rather than strategic planning.
- Weakens the perceived value and status of the brands involved.

In contrast, many European markets operate with fewer, more clearly defined wholesale partners. These partners are able to invest in stock, training, marketing and support precisely because they have a recognised role and a reasonable expectation of return.

Cheap imports, platforms and the race to the bottom

The emergence of platforms such as Temu and Shein has added a new layer of complexity and risk:

- Consumers now see balloons and party products offered at extremely low prices.
- Many of these products are of untested, unlicensed or questionable quality.
- Compliance with UK and European standards is often uncertain or absent.

This environment:

- Puts pressure on professional suppliers who invest in compliance, testing and quality.
- Confuses customers who struggle to understand the difference between reputable and unofficial products.
- Encourages a mindset where the cheapest option is treated as the default, regardless of consequences.

When this is combined with a wholesale model that already encourages oversupply and discounting, the result is a race to the bottom that harms everyone who is trying to build a serious, sustainable business.

Consequences for respect, professionalism and appetite for growth

The combined effect of these channel pressures is more than a financial issue. It is a question of respect and motivation.

For established wholesalers and retailers who have:

- Invested for years in stock, systems and people.
- Complied with safety and environmental requirements.
- Supported training, trade associations and industry initiatives.

it can be disheartening to watch:

- Products treated as disposable commodities.
- Untrained operators undercutting professional work.
- Manufacturers chasing short term volume by selling to anyone who asks.

Foundations at GO International remain strong. The systems, relationships and experience built over decades are in place. The question, now, is not whether it is possible to grow, but whether it is wise to chase growth in an environment where too many are focused on grabbing what they can today and leaving tomorrow's problems for someone else.

If the UK industry wants to move beyond this "eat now, to hell with tomorrow" mentality, manufacturers will need to rethink distribution strategies, and the market will need to show greater respect for professionalism, partnership and long term value.

5. PROFESSIONALISM, PRICING AND THE EROSION OF VALUE

What professionalism should mean in this industry

The balloon and party industry is often seen from the outside as light hearted and fun. Inside the trade, we know it is a serious business that combines:

- Product knowledge and technical skill
- Safety and compliance
- Design and creativity
- Business planning, finance and marketing

True professionalism in this context is not just about producing work that looks good on social media. It covers:

- Working with tested, compliant products from reputable suppliers
- Understanding inflation, gas, load limits, fixings and risk assessments
- Respecting intellectual property and avoiding direct copying
- Pricing in a way that covers time, materials, overheads and profit
- Communicating clearly and honestly with customers
- Operating with appropriate insurance and policies

When these standards are applied, the result is a business that can be trusted by customers, insurers, venues, manufacturers and regulators. It also creates the conditions for long term success.

The pricing trap

One of the most damaging patterns in the current UK market is the way pricing has been treated.

Too often:

- New entrants look at the final price on a competitor's website or social media post and assume that is the number they must match or beat.
- Labour is treated as an afterthought, or not costed at all.
- Time spent on design, preparation, travel, installation and clear down is ignored.
- Overheads such as training, insurance, storage, vehicles and marketing are forgotten.

This leads to a situation where:

- Jobs are won at prices that do not cover the true cost of delivering them.
- Businesses feel busy, but the bank balance does not move.
- When costs rise, there is no room to absorb increases in gas, transport, rent or wages.
- Owners feel they are working constantly for very little return.

At scale, this becomes an industry level problem. If enough businesses underprice, the market learns to expect more for less. Professional operators who insist on covering their

costs and earning a profit are made to look expensive, even when they are simply charging what is required to stay in business.

Discount culture and the short-term fix

The wholesale and retail parts of the chain are caught in their own version of this trap.

Common behaviours include:

- Constant discount codes and flash sales that train customers to wait for offers.
- Clearing stock at or below cost to keep cash moving, then restocking similar items and repeating the cycle.
- Undercutting competitors on headline prices while hoping to recover margin elsewhere.
- Selling into the same local market as trade customers at near retail prices.

Each of these moves can make sense in isolation. Together, they create a culture where:

- List prices lose credibility.
- Stock planning becomes reactive rather than strategic.
- Customers see the product as a commodity and question any attempt to raise prices.
- Long term brand value is traded for short term turnover.

This is the commercial expression of the “eat now, to hell with tomorrow” mentality. It may generate a burst of activity. It does not build sustainable profit or respect for the trade.

The impact on perceived value

When professionalism and pricing are eroded, the perceived value of what we offer falls.

From the customer’s perspective:

- A balloon is a balloon, regardless of whether it is installed safely, designed thoughtfully and sourced from a reputable supplier.
- A £10 bunch from a discount chain, a home worker and a trained professional look similar at a glance.
- A complex install, with significant planning and risk management, is judged against a memory of a cheap bunch bought in a supermarket.

Unless we explain and demonstrate the difference, we cannot expect the customer to understand it.

This is why unskilled operators using cheap, untested products affect everybody. They do not only risk their own reputation. They create the illusion that professional level work and safe products should cost the same as a hastily made bunch in a living room with no insurance and counterfeit foil.

Professionalism as a competitive advantage, not a burden

It is important to recognise that professionalism is not just an obligation. It can also be one of the strongest competitive advantages in a crowded, confused market.

Decorators and retailers who:

- Invest in recognised training and ongoing learning
- Work with trusted wholesalers and manufacturers
- Price confidently and explain the value they provide
- Show up consistently, on time and as promised

are more likely to:

- Attract better quality customers
- Secure repeat business and referrals
- Win venue recommendations and collaborations
- Survive difficult trading periods without burning out

Wholesalers who:

- Vet who they sell to
- Support education and mentoring
- Maintain high standards of compliance and traceability

are more likely to build long term partnerships with manufacturers and professional customers.

The challenge, and the opportunity, is for the industry to move away from trying to be everything to everyone and towards building a culture where doing things properly is recognised and rewarded.

The influencer wave: visibility without foundations

From around 2020 onwards, particularly during and after the Covid period, the balloon world experienced a sharp rise in social media influencers who “discovered” balloons.

A pattern emerged:

- Individuals, often with strong personalities and good content skills, built fast growing followings on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and YouTube
- Their work focused on eye catching installs and trends rather than on fundamentals such as safety, pricing, structure and long term business planning
- Manufacturers and suppliers started to pay close attention to follower counts, likes and views when deciding who to support, promote or give product to

On the positive side, this wave of influencers:

- Raised general awareness of balloons as décor
- Introduced new people to the idea of starting a balloon business
- Generated aspirational imagery that helped sell the concept of balloons for larger events

However, there have been significant downsides that the industry is now living with.

Many of the highest profile influencers:

- Had limited real world experience of running sustainable businesses
- Underpriced or gave work away in order to create content or maintain engagement
- Presented complex installs without context about cost, time, safety or the skills required to execute them
- Encouraged copying, trend chasing and a focus on “wow” at any cost

As a result, thousands of smaller businesses were watching and thinking:

- “If they can do that at that price, I must be too expensive”
- “If I am not working for exposure, I am missing out”
- “If I cannot create that level of spectacle, I am not good enough”

The gap between online image and offline reality widened. Followers saw glamorous content, but did not see the unpaid hours, the lack of profit, the missing insurance, the unpaid tax or the eventual burnout.

Manufacturers and the follower trap

During this period, many manufacturers fell into their own version of the influencer trap.

It became increasingly common to see:

- Brand ambassador programmes where selection was driven more by follower numbers than by skill, professionalism or business maturity
- Decisions about who to back based on social media reach rather than on training ability, technical knowledge or reputation among professional peers
- Large allocations of time, product and budget given to a small number of high profile influencers, while long standing professional educators and trainers sometimes received less attention

Again, the intention was understandable. Manufacturers wanted visibility, content and reach. Influencers could appear to deliver all three in a very short time.

Over the last few years, a quieter lesson has emerged:

- High follower counts do not always translate into sustainable trade sales
- Engagement does not always come from the customers who actually buy and use product week in, week out
- When an influencer lacks depth, professionalism or business grounding, the relationship can create reputational risk for the brand and confusion for the market

Many manufacturers are now beginning to recognise that while influencers and content creators have a place, they are not a substitute for:

- Solid, well trained professional customers
- Experienced educators who understand both product and business
- Strong wholesale partners who support day to day trade

The industry is starting to feel the hangover from a period where visibility was sometimes valued more highly than substance.

A more balanced approach to influence

The lesson from the influencer wave is not that social media or ambassadors are bad. It is that influence needs to be rooted in reality.

A healthier model for manufacturers and brands would be to:

- Select ambassadors and partners based on a blend of criteria: skill, professionalism, teaching ability, business track record and reputation, as well as audience reach
- Support educators who can explain not only how to create a design, but how to price it, sell it and deliver it safely and profitably
- Highlight case studies from professional decorators and retailers who have built sustainable, long term businesses, not only those who generate the most dramatic content
- Treat content as a tool to support professionals, not as a replacement for them

For wholesalers and trade bodies, the opportunity is to:

- Showcase real world professionals who are doing the work properly
- Provide platforms for voices that combine creativity with business sense
- Help newer entrants understand the difference between inspiration and instruction

Influencers will continue to exist in every sector. The question for the UK balloon and party industry is whether we allow follower counts to dictate strategy, or whether we use social media wisely, anchored in the professionalism and long term thinking that will keep this industry alive.

6. TRADE BODIES AND REPRESENTATION – NABAS, BAPIA, EBPC

Why representation matters now more than ever

In a period where:

- Unlicensed imports are increasingly visible
- Regulations on safety and environment continue to develop
- Public perception of balloons and plastics is under scrutiny
- Many businesses are financially fragile

the need for strong, credible trade representation is obvious.

No single wholesaler, retailer or decorator can fight every regulatory battle or defend the industry's reputation alone. That is the role trade bodies and collective organisations are meant to play.

In the UK, three names are central to this discussion: NABAS, BAPIA and EBPC. Each has strengths. Each has limitations. Understanding their different roles helps explain why, despite their efforts, the industry still lacks the unified voice it needs.

NABAS – a body run by members for members

NABAS has a long history as an association run by members for members. Key characteristics include:

- A volunteer committee structure
- Member subscriptions used primarily to fund promotion of the association and its members
- A focus on training, codes of conduct and best practice guidance
- Events, networking and community support

Strengths of this model:

- Decisions are made by people who work directly in the industry
- There is a genuine sense of community and shared ownership
- Training and standards have been developed with practical experience in mind

Limitations:

- Volunteer committees have limited time and resources
- Professional lobbying and large-scale public campaigns require funding and specialist skills that are difficult to sustain
- Response times and capacity can be stretched in periods of intense change or crisis

NABAS has, over the years, done a great deal with the resources available. It has provided guidance, supported training and helped many businesses develop. However, the scale of

the challenges the industry now faces often exceeds what a volunteer led structure can realistically deliver.

BAPIA – a director owned, profit making model

BAPIA operates on a different basis. It is owned by a director and run as a profit making business, with membership fees contributing to:

- Promotion of the BAPIA brand
- Marketing and visibility activities
- Member benefits, insurance packages and offers

Strengths of this model:

- A dedicated owner can focus full time on growing and promoting the organisation
- Commercial incentives can drive innovation in services and marketing
- The brand has become widely recognised among decorators and retailers

Limitations:

- The focus on promotion and profile building has not always translated into visible, industry level intervention on critical issues
- When an organisation is owned and directed by a small number of individuals, there can be questions about accountability and priorities
- Profit driven objectives can risk overshadowing the slower, more complex work of protection, standards and lobbying

BAPIA has undoubtedly contributed to raising the profile of professional decorators and has offered useful benefits to members. The question is whether, as an industry, we have enough evidence of coordinated action on the structural threats we now face.

EBPC – focused lobbying and technical work

The European Balloon and Party Council (EBPC) has a more technical and lobbying focused role. Its work has included:

- Engagement with regulators on safety and environmental questions
- Input into standards and compliance frameworks
- Position papers and responses to policy proposals that affect balloons and party products

Strengths:

- A clearer mandate to speak on regulatory and technical issues
- Experience in dealing with European level institutions
- A track record of engagement on topics such as balloon releases and environmental concerns

Limitations:

- Limited visibility among many smaller businesses
- A focus on lobbying and standards that may not translate directly into day-to-day support for decorators and independent retailers
- Dependence on funding and engagement from a relatively small group of larger industry players

EBPC performs an important role in defending the industry on specific issues, but it is only one part of the wider representation picture.

Fragmentation and the missing unified voice

Taken together, NABAS, BAPIA and EBPC form a patchwork of support and representation. The problem is that:

- Their mandates overlap but are not fully aligned
- Communication between them and with the wider industry is not always coordinated
- There is no single, clearly recognised voice that speaks for the UK balloon and party sector as a whole

As a result:

- Government departments, regulators and media outlets may receive mixed messages or may not know who to consult
- Manufacturers and large retailers can find it difficult to engage in a structured way with “the industry”
- Smaller businesses are often unaware of who is doing what on their behalf

In quieter times, this fragmentation can be tolerated. In the current environment, it has become a risk.

What an effective, modern industry voice would need to look like

Without prescribing a specific organisational model, it is possible to sketch the features that a more effective, modern industry voice would need:

- Clear mandate

A defined role to represent the UK balloon and party industry on key issues, with agreed priorities.

- Shared governance

Involvement from manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers, decorators and educators, with transparent decision making and accountability.

- Professional resources

Paid staff or contracted specialists for lobbying, communications, data analysis and member support.

- Evidence based approach

Regular collection and publication of industry data to inform discussions with regulators, media and members.

- Unified messaging

The ability to speak with one clear voice on critical topics such as safety, environment, imports and regulation.

This does not necessarily mean starting again from scratch. It could mean better coordination and alignment between existing bodies, or a structured collaboration that plays to each organisation's strengths while avoiding duplication.

The cost of doing nothing

If the industry fails to address the representation gap, the likely outcomes include:

- Regulatory changes made without full understanding of the industry's realities
- Continued growth of unlicensed and unsafe imports filling the silence
- Reputational damage that affects all serious operators, regardless of how well they run their businesses
- Further erosion of confidence among manufacturers and professional investors in the UK market

By contrast, a stronger, unified voice would give manufacturers, wholesalers, decorators and retailers greater confidence that their efforts to operate professionally are supported at an industry level.

7. MANUFACTURERS, EUROPE AND THE UK REALITY

How the UK used to be viewed

For many years, the UK was seen by manufacturers and brand owners as:

- One of the most advanced balloon and party markets outside the USA
- A key trend-setter for Europe
- A reliable test bed for new products, formats and licences
- A market with strong wholesalers and a dense network of card shops, party stores and decorators

That perception did not disappear overnight. Even as traditional retail came under pressure and the market started to mature, many manufacturers continued to view the UK through the lens of what it had been, rather than what it was becoming.

The Covid distortion in forecasting

Covid trading added an extra layer of distortion:

- Sales spikes in the UK during lockdowns and restrictions looked impressive in isolation
- Some manufacturers treated those peaks as evidence of a new, higher baseline
- Forecasts and expansion plans were drawn up assuming that this new level of demand would either hold or keep rising

In reality:

- Covid behaviour represented an exceptional, temporary surge in at-home celebrations and deliveries
- Once people were able to spend on travel, hospitality and wider experiences again, their budgets and attention shifted
- The UK reverted to a more normal, and in many categories lower, level of demand

Where manufacturers adjusted their expectations quickly, relationships have largely stayed healthy. Where expectations remained locked to Covid-era thinking, tension has grown between targets on spreadsheets and what is actually happening on the ground.

European optimism and the UK plateau

Across mainland Europe, many markets are still in a growth phase:

- Increased adoption of balloon décor and party styling
- More retailers and decorators adding balloon services
- Expanding middle-class spending power in some territories
- Later adoption of trends that the USA and UK experienced earlier

It is understandable that manufacturers such as Gemar, Sempertex Europe, Folat/Reithmüller, Party Deco and others see strong potential in Europe as a whole.

The challenge is when the UK is bundled into this optimism without enough distinction:

- The UK has already experienced its big adoption wave
- It has already ridden the social media boom and the Covid spike
- It is already saturated with retailers, decorators and wholesalers

From a UK perspective, it is more accurate to say:

- There is room for better business and selective growth
- There is not room for endless new entrants all selling the same products in the same way, at lower and lower prices

The cost of over-distribution in the UK

One of the clearest examples of misalignment between manufacturer strategy and market reality is the way distribution has been handled in the UK.

It is now common to see:

- Brands appointing twenty to thirty “wholesalers” in the UK alone
- Minimal differentiation in role, territory, service level or specialisation
- No meaningful exclusivity or commitment from either side

This approach has predictable consequences:

- Wholesalers treat the product as another line in a crowded warehouse, not as a strategic brand to build
- Price becomes the primary, sometimes only, lever for winning business
- Serious wholesalers who invest in stock, training and marketing are undercut by those who cherry pick the easiest lines or sell more casually
- Retailers and decorators see the same product available from multiple sources and shop purely on price

In contrast, many European territories operate with:

- Fewer, more clearly defined wholesale partners
- Tighter expectations about service, stock and support
- Greater respect and loyalty between brand and distributor

If manufacturers want the UK to perform like their more buoyant European markets, they need to align their distribution behaviour with that goal.

The influencer hangover

The post-2020 influencer wave has also played a part in distorting manufacturer strategy.

For a period, there was a strong tendency to:

- Select ambassadors based heavily on follower counts and perceived online influence
- Launch products and campaigns around individuals whose depth of experience or business grounding was unproven
- Confuse visibility with commercial impact

Manufacturers are now seeing that:

- Not all high-profile influencers convert into solid, repeat trade sales
- Some of the loudest voices have struggled to sustain their own businesses long term
- Over-reliance on a small number of personalities can create brand risk if those individuals behave unprofessionally or burn out

Many are learning, sometimes the hard way, that popularity on social media is not the same as credibility with professional customers.

A more balanced approach is starting to emerge, where:

- Proven educators, long standing professionals and well-run wholesalers are again recognised as key partners
- Influencers and content creators are used as part of the mix, not the centre of the strategy
- Genuine business results and long term relationships are given more weight than short term hype

A realistic view of the UK for manufacturers

For manufacturers and brand owners, a realistic assessment of the UK should acknowledge that:

- The UK remains an important, influential market
- It is mature and saturated, not a greenfield growth territory
- Share can be won, but mostly by displacement rather than pure expansion
- Over-distribution and unstructured discounting damage the brand and the market
- There is more value in fewer, deeper, well-governed partnerships than in signing every wholesaler that asks

The UK is still worth serious attention. It is not a place for casual experiments, follower-chasing or “sell to everyone” distribution. Manufacturers who recognise this and align themselves with professional partners will continue to find opportunity here. Those who treat the UK as a quick volume play risk burning out both the market and their reputation.

8. SCENARIO OUTLOOK FOR THE NEXT 3–5 YEARS

Scenario 1 – Carry on as we are

In this scenario, little changes:

- Manufacturers continue to over-distribute and chase volume
- Wholesalers compete aggressively on price while selling into the same pool of customers
- Influencer-led marketing remains disconnected from long term professional needs
- Trade bodies remain fragmented and under-resourced
- Unlicensed imports continue to gain share via platforms

Likely outcomes:

- Ongoing churn of decorators and small retailers, with many lasting less than a year
- Gradual reduction in the number of serious wholesalers as margins erode
- Growing frustration among professional operators who feel undercut, unsupported and undervalued
- Manufacturers gradually refocus investment on other territories they see as simpler and more promising
- The UK retains volume, but loses standing as a respected, professionally led market

This is the default path if no deliberate action is taken. It is a slow grind rather than a dramatic collapse, but it ends with a weaker, more fragile industry.

Scenario 2 – Professional reset

In this scenario, a significant number of players intentionally change how they operate:

- Manufacturers rationalise their UK wholesale networks, focusing on fewer, stronger partners with clear expectations
- Wholesalers recommit to training, compliance and genuine trade support rather than chasing every possible sale
- Decorators and retailers invest more in business education, pricing, positioning and customer experience
- The industry as a whole becomes less tolerant of unsafe, untested and unlicensed products

Likely outcomes:

- Fewer but stronger wholesalers, better aligned with manufacturers
- A slower inflow of new entrants, but a higher survival rate among those who take the business seriously
- More consistent, confident pricing from professional decorators and retailers
- Better differentiation between “cheap and cheerful” and “professional and accountable” in the customer’s mind
- A market that grows modestly in volume but significantly in quality and profitability

This scenario will not emerge by accident. It requires manufacturers, wholesalers, educators and trade bodies to pull in the same direction.

Scenario 3 – Coordinated leadership and unified voice

This is an extension of Scenario 2, with a stronger layer of industry representation:

- NABAS, BAPIA, EBPC and key industry stakeholders collaborate more closely or form clearer alliances
- Shared data and insight are gathered and published regularly
- The sector speaks with one coherent voice on key issues such as environmental impact, imports and regulation
- Clear, practical standards and guidelines are developed and communicated widely

Likely outcomes:

- Better-informed regulatory decisions that take account of the realities of the industry
- Improved public perception of balloons and party products as responsibly managed items
- Clearer differentiation between compliant, professional operators and those who are not
- Increased confidence among manufacturers and investors that the UK is a market worth backing for the long term

This scenario is the most ambitious, but also the most protective of the industry's future.

Which path is most likely?

If nothing changes, Scenario 1 is the default.

Elements of Scenario 2 are already visible in pockets of the market: professional decorators raising prices and tightening standards, manufacturers reviewing wholesale lists, wholesalers focusing more on service and training.

Whether the UK can move meaningfully towards Scenario 2 or 3 depends on:

- Manufacturers being willing to sacrifice some short-term volume for long term stability
- Wholesalers and retailers being brave enough to move away from constant discounting
- Trade bodies being prepared to collaborate, clarify roles and invest in shared goals
- Individuals across the sector deciding that the future of the industry matters as much as the next order

The opportunity is there. The risk is that, without coordination, good intentions remain scattered and the default scenario wins by inertia.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CALL TO ACTION

The future of the UK balloon and party industry is not fixed. The following recommendations are practical steps each group can take now to move the market towards a healthier, more sustainable path.

For manufacturers and brand owners

Rationalise UK distribution

- Reduce the number of wholesalers you appoint in the UK
- Define clear roles, expectations and support levels for those you retain
- Prioritise partners who invest in stock, training, compliance and customer service

Balance influencer and professional input

- Choose ambassadors based on professionalism, teaching ability and business grounding, not only follower counts
- Invest in educators who can support your trade customers in pricing, positioning and safe use of product
- Use content strategically to support professionals, not to bypass them

Set realistic UK expectations

- Separate UK forecasts from broader European optimism
- Recognise the UK as mature and saturated, not a high growth frontier
- Focus on share, quality and brand value rather than chasing volume at any cost

For wholesalers and distributors

Clarify your position

- Decide whether you are a true trade partner or simply a box mover
- Build your proposition around service, knowledge and support, not only price

Stop racing to the bottom

- Use discounting carefully and strategically, not as a permanent state
- Align pricing with the value you provide and the costs you carry
- Avoid undermining your own trade customers by competing with them for the same end consumer business

Invest in your customers

- Support training and education on product, pricing and business skills
- Share honest guidance about what is working and what is not in the market
- Work with customers who show commitment to professionalism and growth

For decorators and retailers

Price for profit and sustainability

- Factor in all costs, including labour, time, overheads and tax
- Stop apologising for charging properly for skilled work and safe installations
- Communicate the value you provide rather than competing solely on price

Invest in skills and foundations

- Undertake recognised training, both creative and business focused
- Ensure you are compliant with safety, insurance and local requirements
- Treat your business as a business, not as an occasional side project

Choose suppliers wisely

- Work with wholesalers and manufacturers who will still be here in five years
- Avoid grey market imports and untested products that may harm your reputation
- Support those who support the wider industry, not only those who are cheapest

For trade bodies and industry organisations

Clarify mandates and collaborate

- Define what each organisation is responsible for and where overlap exists
- Explore formal collaboration or shared initiatives where it benefits members
- Present a unified front on key issues such as regulation, environment and imports

Prioritise protection and standards

- Allocate more resource to tackling structural threats and less to surface-level promotion
- Develop and communicate practical standards that members can realistically follow
- Collect and share data that helps the industry make informed decisions

Engage across the chain

- Ensure manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers and decorators all have a voice
- Listen actively to feedback from professionals at every level, not just the loudest voices online
- Be transparent about wins, challenges and areas where help is needed

For the industry as a whole

Value professionalism over shortcuts

- Celebrate those who run sustainable, ethical, compliant businesses
- Be honest about the damage caused by unsafe practices, counterfeit products and chronic underpricing

Think beyond today

- Make decisions with a three to five year horizon, not only the next season
- Remember that the reputation of balloons and party products is shared; what one part of the market does affects all of us

Choose a direction

- Decide if the UK balloon and party industry wants to be known for cheap, disposable volume or for professional, creative, safe and valued work
- Act accordingly, at every level of the chain

The future is not guaranteed, but it is still very much in our hands.

CLOSING STATEMENT – GO International’s position and commitment

The picture in this report is challenging, but not hopeless.

The UK balloon and party industry is still full of talented, hardworking people. There are manufacturers who care deeply about product quality and safety. There are wholesalers who know their customers by name and solve problems every day. There are decorators and retailers who create extraordinary work and run solid businesses. There are trainers, mentors and educators giving real value.

What is missing is alignment.

At GO International, our foundations are strong. We have weathered multiple economic cycles, industry shifts and the most volatile period our sector has ever seen. We intend to remain here as a stable partner for serious professionals.

We are not interested in being everything to everyone. We are not interested in selling to anyone at any price. We are not interested in short term wins that damage the future of the industry we have spent most of our lives helping to build.

Here is what we are prepared to do.

- We will continue to work with manufacturers that respect the UK market, value professional distribution and are willing to think long term.
- We will continue to support decorators and retailers who treat their businesses seriously, invest in skills and price for sustainability, not for likes.
- We will continue to champion tested, compliant products and to push back, wherever we can, against the spread of unlicensed and unsafe imports.
- We will continue to invest in training, mentoring and honest communication, even when that honesty is uncomfortable.

At the same time, we are clear about what we expect in return.

From manufacturers, we expect a more realistic view of the UK. Fewer wholesalers, clearer partnerships and less focus on follower counts and short term hype. From wholesalers, we expect a move away from the race to the bottom and towards genuine trade support. From decorators and retailers, we expect a commitment to professionalism, compliance and fair pricing. From trade bodies, we expect clarity of purpose, collaboration and visible action on the issues that threaten all of us.

GO International cannot change the industry alone. No single company, however experienced, can do that. What we can do is lead by example, speak plainly and choose our partners carefully.

If you read this report and recognise that something needs to change, then talk to us. Talk to your suppliers, your customers, your trade bodies and your peers. Make decisions that you will still be proud of in five years, not just ones that fill a gap this month.

Balloons and party products bring joy. That is why most of us started in this field in the first place. It would be a tragedy to let short term thinking, poor practice and a lack of respect for the craft turn that joy into a memory of what used to be.

We believe the UK can remain one of the most important and respected balloon and party markets in the world. We also believe that will only happen if enough of us decide that professionalism, partnership and long-term thinking matter more than another cheap fix.

At GO International, that is the future we are choosing to work towards. The invitation is open to anyone in this industry who wants to do the same.