Gibson still enjoying the rub of the green

Paradigm’s chief executive takes a colourful approach to branding the software business

JOHN Gibson, the chief executive of upstream software company Paradigm, has brought some colour to the oil industry — both figuratively and literally.

Paradigm workers wearing vibrant green shirts are now a well-known sight at trade shows, and even the boss and board members get dressed up.

“Green had always been the brand colour for Paradigm,” says Gibson. “I decided on the shirts because I wanted people to see us. It’s had a great psychological effect. It’s all about making us visible.”

Seeing a lot of green has been a blessing for Gibson, who married his wife Elizabeth on St Patrick’s Day in 1979.

“When I see green I know I need to buy a present. I never forget an anniversary,” he says.

The 50-year-old former boss of Halliburton Energy Services joined Paradigm in 2005 and admits to being “outspoken and opinionated” on industry issues.

The latest view he espouses is that the sector needs to become “unconflicted”, with less vertical integration of services, which he claims lead to lower efficiency and higher costs for producers and consumers alike.

Paradigm — which now has almost 1000 employees in more than 20 countries — is the latest step for Gibson in a career that started in the 1980s with Gulf Oil, which was later acquired by Chevron and where Gibson stayed before moving to Landmark Graphics.

When Landmark was acquired by Halliburton in 1996, he carried on moving up the ladder, eventually becoming chief executive of Halliburton Energy Services in 2002, where he stayed two years.

“After I left Halliburton I made a list of everything I wanted to do and top of the list was Paradigm. I flew up to New York and spoke to some people to see if they would let me have some money. They said yes and then I started calling to see if I could purchase the company,” Gibson says.

Gibson then sat down for talks with Paradigm chairman Saul Fox and investors Fox Paine.

Saul Fox was not interested in Gibson’s approach to buy the company, but Gibson says: “He wanted to do with the company what I wanted to do with it, so we worked out an agreement.”

Gibson then pumped in about $2 million of his own cash to become a significant shareholder. He charts his interest in technology back to watching the first moon landings in 1969. Gibson was born in Huntsville, Alabama, the original home of NASA, where his father was based in the military.

He says: “I loved the space programme. It was adventure and technology, everything you want as a boy. It was the most exciting moment for me and I’ve always had that curiosity for science, technology and learning.”

“I’m enthusiastic, very curious and love learning. I read all sorts of things — fiction and poetry, as well as science.”

After a short stint at an agricultural college in Georgia, he joined the US Army for three years before moving on to study at Auburn University, where he gained a bachelor’s degree, and then he earned a masters in geology at the University of Houston.

However, he was forced to abandon plans for a PhD when his daughter became ill, and providing for his family became paramount.

“It was then I joined the oil industry. It was the only way to pay the bills. That is maybe my only regret — not finishing my PhD. If I had, I would probably be at college teaching now, and not running companies,” he says.

Gibson, a committed Christian who is on the national board of the charity Kickstart and several professional and educational bodies, says: “Life is exciting, even in the tough times. I enjoy people and trying to make life better for others. My faith is very important to me. I do a lot of church work.”

Learning is so important to Gibson that he says his role in helping to reduce student membership fees for professional bodies, such as at the Society of Petroleum Engineers and the Society of Exploration Geophysicists, is his biggest achievement.

“That’s probably more important than a lot of my business accomplishments,” he says.

Gibson outwardly appears to be a typical American Southernerner, but he warns against making easy assumptions.

“I was born in Alabama but didn’t live there very long. We moved a lot — tens of times — when I was a small child. I’m nomadic by nature.

“I suppose I’m an enigma in that I’m as Southern as you can get, but my life is spent all over the globe. If you stereotyped me through my accent you’d be a little bit off.”

Last year, Gibson spent seven months on the road, but his ranch in Texas is where he relaxes, and his family is never far from his thoughts — particularly his four grandchildren, to son John, 23, a pianist, and daughter Lawsona, 26, a landscape architect.

When he is at home, Gibson breeds English Shire horses and Mediterranean donkeys, as well as keeping ducks, geese and tending to his 14-acre fish pond.

“Oh… and he even owns a Zebra.”

“The way you keep excited about life is to keep learning something new… and I’m always doing that,” he adds.