

Adrian Thomas

“People try and make the game so complicated...it isn’t complicated. The simpler you can make the process the more profitable it is.” Says Adrian Thomas, independent retail consultant, and he should know. With over 30 years experience of buying and merchandising in retail, Adrian is more than qualified to comment on how to make a retail business successful.

From his first ever job as a stock controller for GUS Mail Order Division to heading a team of buying and sourcing at Littlewoods, Adrian always had in the back of his mind that “the ideal thing is to generate as much profit as you can for the business.” So as chances to demonstrate his abilities arose, Adrian snapped them up because just like friend and colleague Felicity Wade he states, “It’s about understanding the business and being opportunistic.”

When you meet Adrian, you get the sense that not only is he driven by opportunities but also relishes the challenge of turning a business around. He has worked for some of the biggest retailers on the high street, Argos, BHS and Littlewoods to name just a few and has been responsible for improving their business systems. Whether through increased margins or cash profit, the pragmatic and hard-working retail revolutionary likes to see his achievements on paper and in terms of concrete results.

From 2005 to 2007, he created opportunities in the “add on sales” area at Littlewoods by putting together a professional team to work on the mail order introductory sales, advertorials and what are called the one-off offers – a combination of products always on offer for telephone customers tailored to their needs by looking at their previous purchases. His implementations and professionalization of this part of the business increased their profits. By offering additional products to customers who ordered over the telephone was mutually beneficial for both the manufacturers and Littlewoods because as he says it was “– a great way of generating additional sales and for manufacturers to get rid of end-of-line products.”

And throughout his career, Adrian has always been a firm believer of working together with manufacturers, designers, buyers and suppliers. When he was at BHS during the ‘90s, he was one of the pioneering forces behind the corporate sourcing strategy and worked with key suppliers to improve the business. Indeed, he feels that the work and implementation of a supply strategy at Mothercare 8 years ago is one of the reasons for their success today. “You need to grow your suppliers with you and make them as green as you want. Like marriage you have your ups and your downs but if you’re committed to each other you see it through and those people that see it through are the ones that usually succeed.”

In the same way, design and sourcing should work hand in glove because you need to buy the right product and sell it at the highest intake margin in order to make cash profit but you’ve got to also make sure you’ve sourced the products from the right places. As Adrian says “The more risk attached to it the closer you need to buy it from because you need to be able to react instantly to it.”

So how do you know that it’s the best product? “Instinct, gut reaction, call it what you want” replies Adrian. Some people spread their risk but a good buyer will, he says, “look at the range of products and say, I’m going to buy 100 of these 3, I’m going to buy 500 of those 2 and a 1000 of that one. You’ve got

to have confidence in your choice. The trick is to be right 80% of the time, you're never going to be 100% right but the 20% means you've generated enough cash profit with your 80%." He also offers a word of advice, "if you've got a good buyer and they can pick the right product don't promote them because I've seen so many good buyers promoted to buying managers and head of buying and they're actually no good at managing people, they are good at picking product and as head of buying they're arguing with their buyers all the time. If you've got a good buyer it doesn't matter how much you pay them keep them as a buyer. Good buyers are hard to find."

According to Adrian, buying is not all about product. A buyer needs to be process driven and have a commercial eye so they can put ranges together and price cost. However to be successful, you need to be able to work as part of a team because as Adrian rightly states, "not every person has the right skill set" and so you work with your design team and merchandisers to drive the business forward.

And in his experience, the processes have not actually changed that much over the years. The technicalities may have altered and the degree of sourcing has moved further east but buying has remained the same really since the Victorian ages. Of course, environmental factors have as Adrian agrees made an impact to a percentage of people. He adds with caution, however, that, "at the moment with the recession it's still about the price. I think what will happen is that as we come out of the recession that will take over again and hopefully organic products will become more popular again and volumes will increase as people start to take them onboard."

So when it comes to buying and sourcing in retail, what's the key to success retail? Focus on the main aim of creating cash profit, work together with buyers, designers, suppliers and manufacturers, put an agreed system in place and perhaps have someone with a wealth of experience like Adrian Thomas as a guide.

Favourite publications: Drapers weekly

Favourite Book: Tai-Pan by James Clavell

Favourite Designer: Felicity Wade

Most prized possession: Christopher Ward watch

Favourite weekend activity: Hill Walking

Favourite travel destination: San Francisco, Florence and Hong Kong

Biggest indulgence: buying shirts, walking followed by a glass of red **win**

Listen to: A mixture of the old with Kasabian, Coldplay, Rolling Stones and Bruce Springsteen

Strictly Come Dancing or X Factor: Neither