



Different approach to retail paying dividends for Garin

THE LANDSCAPE OF THE RETAIL WORLD HAS CHANGED DRAMATICALLY OVER THE PAST FEW DECADES, ESPECIALLY WITH THE UNSTOPPABLE RISE OF THE ONLINE SECTOR. BUT ONE MIDLANDS-BASED SHADING COMPANY HAS COME UP WITH ITS OWN UNIQUE ANSWER TO THESE CHALLENGES. AIDAN GOLDSTRAW PAYS A VISIT TO INTERIOR CHOICE.

It's not often I'm wrong-footed when I park up for a professional visit to a shading business. Apply the handbrake, get the photo gear out of the boot and crack on.

Driving past the bog-standard industrial estate on the outskirts of Lichfield, I'd clocked the company's name on the side of the building no problem. But the way in isn't as immediately clear.

A quick phone call later and all is revealed. Garin Offer, the boss of Interior Choice, suddenly appears like the bloke out of Mr Benn and invites me to follow him into a service lift.

It turns out that the Interior Choice showroom began life as an office – and Garin's invitation for me to book an appointment suddenly makes sense.

"It's a unique location," Garin agrees. "When I took on our storage here, I asked the owners what they were going to be doing

with the office. It was just at the start of the pandemic, and they scratched their heads and said: 'We're not sure.' So, I asked if we could turn this into a studio and they agreed."

Not that the unusual showroom lacks for anything. "We've got just under 24,000 options in here now and we cover curtains, blinds, awnings, shutters, wallpapers and paints. We do the lot, and we're close to the city centre too."

Booked appointments is at the heart of the company's concept.

"Quite a lot of retailers are struggling with turning on the lights and seeing people walking through the doors only occasionally. Town centres are also becoming very expensive.

"So, we looked at a concept that might work better for us. We've got seven-day access here and we've even had people in at 11pm when they've got the kids to sleep. So,

appointment-only works well, and we spent quite a lot of time and money getting this right."

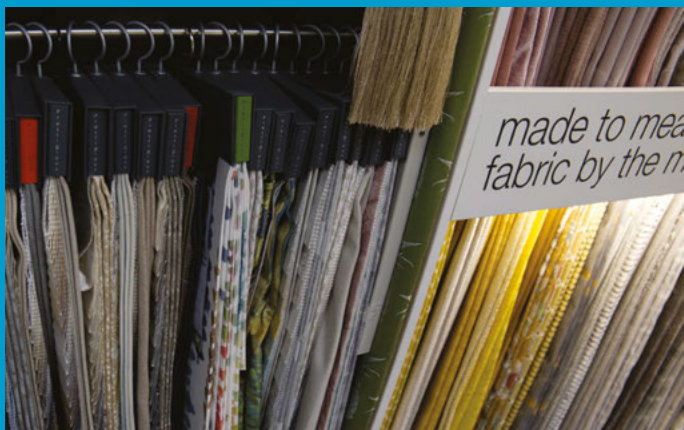
And it's not just the domestic customers who are discovering the benefits of Interior Choice's approach.

"We've really upped our commercial side this year because we can professionally fit and even measure out of hours, which is a big thing for a lot of businesses."

Prior to this venture, Garin had notched up 35 years as a consultant and sales director in the shading business, mainly on the fabric side of things.

"But one day, about four years ago, I was chatting with my wife and she said: 'It'd really be nice to see more of you – why are you travelling around the country all the time?' That question hit home a bit, and we came up with the concept of Interior Choice."

Having come up with the concept, it was



important to Garin that it was delivered with panache, given his own years of experience.

“I wanted to set it up properly. I found there were quite a lot of stores which were just setting up around a single concept, or going down one particular avenue. We wanted to make sure we offered everything.”

One of the advantages of appointments only, I suggest to Garin, is that it filters out a lot of the ‘tyre-kickers’ which are the bane of a blind retailer’s life.

“Absolutely. I think people that want the products we offer, and will actually make an appointment, have spent the time and done their research. We’re not here just to sell a pack of curtain hooks, although we can do that of course.

“But in general, the concept is that people come in and it may take them three or four visits to get what they want. There’s no pressure from our side – we want to make

sure they get the product that’s right for their job.”

Things have certainly come a long way since that casual inquiry about office space...

“When we started out, we literally had probably about handful of samples of curtains and a few blind books. Now we are dealing with over 40 different blind, hardware and fabric manufacturers.”

Another big change, around two years

“We found the supply chain that we wanted, and developed our fitters, and it’s been a good transition for us.”

ago, was Interior Choice’s expansion into shutters.

“If I’m honest, I didn’t really want to get into shutters initially. I saw it as a harder concept. But actually, the reality is, it’s about getting the right companies on board, which is predominantly through going to the British Blind & Shutter Show.

“We found the supply chain that we wanted and it’s been a good transition for us.

“We’ve taken on Luxaflex and become an Inspiration Dealer, and developed home automation and garden awnings and outdoor products. It’s evolved dramatically and been a great success for us as well.”

Of course, it’s not only the retail landscape which has changed radically in recent years, but the perception of shading products themselves too.

“People are, naturally, becoming more



interested in how shading can reduce energy bills and keep spaces cool in the warmer weather, and we've done a lot of work with both Luxaflex and the BBSA looking at products specific for that."

Talking of the BBSA, Garin is enthusiastic about his company's relationship with the trade association.

"We became members pretty early on with the help of Lee Farthing (BBSA membership development manager) who was our contact for that. He came in, spoke with us and saw what we wanted to do."

One of the cornerstones for becoming a member was Garin's deep commitment to child safety.

"We've seen out there that there are still companies not getting it right.

"One of the things that annoys me the most is when I go in to a new build and they say: 'Oh, we've got the blinds – we got them on a website.' And there are all the little red tags hanging on the blinds because the child safety features haven't been fitted.

"And then, even though we didn't supply the blinds, we'll say: 'Can we just fit these

for you? Because this is how it should be done.'

"We also offer free child safety inspections where we go out to someone's house or a business. We've been to quite a lot of schools and business and advised them: 'That blind was probably fitted correctly for the time, but there are better options available now.'

And nowadays, of course, there are so many more alternatives.

"We do a phenomenal number of Roman blinds, which of course have the safety devices on them, but we also do a lot of automated products too.

Automation is one of the best child safety

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devices you can have and the push around that has all been helped by the BBSA."

Automation in general has been big news for Interior Choice. "It's all about the knowledge, and obviously we get a lot of stuff from the BBSA that we can use with the customers; point of sale, videos and things like that. And that helps the consumer make a decision."

With such a big catalogue of products and services on offer, I wonder how easy Garin finds it to keep on top of it all?

"It's a challenge. The trade is changing, especially around curtain fabrics and blinds. The interior trends are quicker than fashion – when I used to sell fabrics you'd be following fashion trends.

"Even wallpapers are coming back in now, with the big feature walls in people's homes, and we offer paints from Little Greene, DG Sanderson and more.

"So, it's key for us to think: 'What are we missing? Where will the next trends be and where will these come from?'"

"But equally, it's about doing things properly. For example, we're now doing

ON THE GROUND: INTERIOR CHOICE



some very nice numbers with shutters because we've got confidence in the product we're offering.

"We've found there are certain products coming to the market now which are a bit DIY-ish. That's not our market. We want to put things up that their owners are going to enjoy for a long time."

Despite his faith in the power of selling face-to-face, Garin is by no means averse to leveraging the power of online media.

"We're big on socials – we're on Facebook, Instagram and more recently TikTok, though if I'm honest when it comes to the latter, I think my 15-year-old daughter understands it better than I do!"

The web also proved a lifeline for a company which arrived on the scene around the same time as the pandemic.

"We'd got this lovely new showroom we'd created, and we couldn't get anybody in here. So, one of the key things was blitzing

the marketplace with our social media. And while people were sat in their gardens drinking their gin and tonics, we were delivering pattern books to their door. That is what got us through it.

"I think every business needs to have an online presence and not be scared of it. Effectively, all you're basically doing is giving potential customers a chance to find out about your company 24 hours a day."

As to the future?

"Above all, we've got a great team here and we enjoy the business and have a great growing reputation."

"I think the key thing is not to run before we can walk. The model we have is working but there's been many long days and lots of investment. We are looking at probably bring in one or two apprentices in the next year to 18 months, purely so we can train them in the way we want to do things and to work alongside our developing team.

"Long term, a bigger store is obviously on the cards, depending on how the economy's doing. We have looked at town centre locations. The problem is they're costly, with parking, additional business rates and everything else.

"The current appointment-only system works for us, because we're not tied to one place. We can see customers here, but we can also go out, visit, measure and fit – we're flexible.

"Above all, we've got a great team here and we enjoy the business and have a great growing reputation."