

Grays of Westminster

BPI visits one of UK's most unique photographic retailers and finds that it's not just a pretty façade. Report by Roger Payne

If you've never been to Grays of Westminster, I'd urge you to visit. Nestling in a row of shops in Churton Street, Pimlico, crossing the doorstep is like taking a step back in time. Equipment is housed in spotless glass cabinets, immaculately presented sales staff conduct their business at period desks while an elegant clock chimes every half hour. It's an Aladdin's Cave, with more modest dimensions than the images on these pages may suggest.

Yet behind the wooden panels and the polished brass is a business that is a true retailing phenomenon. And as I chat to owner Gray Levett, it quickly becomes clear that it's not just the exterior of the shop that's steeped in tradition. Many of his retailing methods are based on lessons he learned in the 1960s.

BPI: Tell me about your background in retail?

Gray Levett: In the late 1960s I was interested in rock music. I wanted to photograph the bands of the time, but the equipment I had wasn't good enough so I thought the best way for a student to get better equipment was to work in a camera shop and get a staff discount. I got a job at Hartle Photographic in Bournemouth.

The boss, Neville Hartle, was a strict disciplinarian. He'd come in and ask questions like 'What is a focal plane shutter?' If we didn't know what it was, or what it did, he'd expect you to find out. Every day it was the same.

The staff also had to be smartly dressed, everything had to be spotless and customers had to be really well looked after. It was rather like being in the army.

When I left and moved to London, the knowledge he'd given me was of great benefit - he'd made me competent.

How did your career develop from there?

I worked in the head office of London Camera Exchange and then went back to Bournemouth and took a job at Leslie Miller Photographic with Peter Walnes and Robert White. This gave me a good grounding in the pro retail side.

Leslie Miller's didn't have counters; the body traffic wasn't high so people would come in and sit at a desk, which I thought was a much more agreeable way of doing business. If you're spending a lot of money, why should you stand there next to the person that's dropping off a roll of film?

A number of changes in my

personal life saw me first return back to London - where I worked in Fox Talbot - then to Scotland and then I spent five years in America before my sister suggested I came back to the UK for a visit.

When I returned, I went back to see Peter Walnes again and he encouraged me to stay in the UK and work for him.

I didn't have any money so my sister let me set up in her house in Pimlico. Peter extended me a line of credit and I took out some tiny adverts in the back of Amateur Photographer.

I just listed some stuff that I knew Peter had in stock. Even then it was all about the service - giving people exactly what they wanted in an agreed timescale.

How and why did you make the leap to having a shop?

I realised what I really needed to give us credibility was a shop. This place had been a hairdressers for over 100 years, and had been empty for a while, but that meant we got it at a good price, although we had to do it up ourselves.

When we moved in, we still did all models but every time I looked at AP, everyone just looked the same; long lists of equipment, with everyone doing Canon, Nikon,



Minolta, Pentax etc. There was nothing to differentiate us.

Then one day I was in the Docklands where there was a row of shops, most of which were empty, apart from one - the Christmas shop. It was a blisteringly hot day in the middle of July and it was full of people buying Christmas decorations. I made a beeline for it. It was one of those Road to Damascus moments and I made the decision to specialise.

I decided to go with Nikon as they were the cameras that I'd always wanted but could never afford. Everyone I knew in the trade that I spoke to about it said I was mad. They told me it would never work and I'd go bankrupt.

Despite these comments, you still thought it was the right idea?

Their views were understandable because no-one had tried it before. But it wasn't about selling an SLR to everyone who came in, it was more about being able to help customers who wanted a -4 eyepiece correction lens for their Nikkormat. I wanted to be able to say 'How many would you like?' If you wanted every lens, every filter, every single accessory, I

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wanted to be able to supply that.

Getting all this stock was a very gradual process. Occasionally other camera stores would phone me up with a load of old Nikon lens hoods or accessories that were of no use to them and would invite me to make them an offer.

We were also buying secondhand; we'd only buy items that were either mint or extremely close. If a camera came in without the eyepiece, D-rings or the foam in the box, we'd add all those things so it looked like new when someone bought it. Plus we'd do a 15-day approval so people could return it for a full refund if they didn't like it, along with a one-year warranty. That would give them a confidence.

Do you have many people bringing items back?

Very rarely. The criminal population in the UK represents just two percent of the total population, but they create a big effect on everyone else and it's a bit like that in retail. The majority of the time, we're very blessed.

Why did you choose these particular premises?



Because they were local, but also because they had the right look. I wondered why certain retailers had been around for many years – Purdeys, Fortnum and Masons etc. What they all have in common is that they're friendly, professional and they look after people – they're not just there for the quick buck.

How many customers do you serve now?

We have slightly over 40,000 customers on our database and we

speaking to them through emails and the Grays of Westminster Gazette.

We apply something we call 'Exchange in abundance' (see panel on page 22). It's about giving far more than the person expected so that when a customer walks away they're thinking what a good service they received, that we were polite, friendly.

As after sales service, we always ring the customer up two days later to check they're happy. We note what they're using the item

for and we'll check that they have everything they need, and we'll make sure we send them a card when it's their birthday. As a result, between 30 and 40 percent of our business comes from existing customers recommending us, but word of mouth is very strong as well.

How do you make sure your staff realise your retail vision?

Lack of skill in a retail assistant isn't the fault of the staff member it's a shortcoming in the organisation. They're not giving the assistant the tools to be competent and that's a grave error.

We make sure that any people we employ want to help people, I wouldn't care if they were the most knowledgeable Nikon person in the world, but if they were self-important or they were not friendly, I wouldn't want them. I'd rather have someone who loves photography and wants to help people. You can do something with that – we can train them.

You have to care what's going on with the staff making sure that good work is being acknowledged. You reward people who produce and penalise those who don't – a lot of

our staff have been here for years, which is a good sign. Even people who have left stay in touch.

If you don't like people, working here would be a nightmare. In fact, working in retail would be a nightmare.

You do more than just run the shop, what other initiatives have you introduced to serve your customers?

Uri [Zakay, Gray's business partner] came up with the Nikon User magazine and website idea. It was a way of offering a glossy magazine that would give readers extra benefits that would enable them to keep a relationship with us.

We're coming up to our 11th year and it goes to over 100 countries. We have around 8000 subscribers and, on average, we have 300 new subscribers or renewals a month.

The Nikon User magazine is really an extra service - it's expensive to create with the quality of paper we use and the mailing out. I wanted it to be sufficiently different to any other magazine on the market, it benefits from the same single-mindedness as the shop.

Are you ever worried that someone will copy your idea for other camera brands?

I have big retailers from outside the

photographic market phoning up and asking to come and see my business as they want to see what retail could be like - I'm always shocked. It has been blood, sweat and tears there has been times when we've not known how we're going to overcome challenges. But you've got to take each day as a new unit of time.

We're a bit of retail theatre and people tell us how much they love coming in and seeing us. I know people in other countries who could buy their Nikon equipment cheaper at home, but they choose to come to me. I have a client in north America, for example, who has supported me for many years. I asked him recently why he did it and why he didn't just go to B&H, he said: 'When I'm at a dinner party and I take out my Nikon cameras I'm often asked where they came from and I say "I know this lovely little store in London and I know that I can ring them up and they'll have what I want it." I'm supporting a type of retail that's disappearing.'

Going forward retail has to be more about service than price.

• **Grays of Westminster is at 40 Churton Street, Pimlico, London SW1V 2LP. Phone 0207 828 4925. The nearest underground is Pimlico or Victoria. For more information, go to www.graysofwestminster.co.uk**



'Exchange in abundance'

Service is top of the Grays of Westminster agenda and, to help ensure that they deliver to their own exceptionally high standards, the company uses the 'Exchange in abundance rule'. Gray Levett explains how it works:

'There is a term in business called "fair exchange." We apply this to an activity engaged in servicing the public. We could isolate four conditions of exchange.

First consider a group that takes in money but does not deliver anything in exchange. This is called a rip-off. It is the exchange condition of criminal elements.

Second is the condition of partial exchange. The group takes in orders or money for goods and then delivers part of it or a corrupted version of what was ordered. This is called short-changing or "running into debt" in that more and more is owed, in service or goods, by the group.

The third condition is the exchange known, legally and in business practice, as "fair exchange." One takes in orders and money and delivers exactly what has been ordered. Most successful businesses and activities work on the basis of "fair exchange."

The fourth condition of exchange is not common but could be called "exchange in abundance." Here one does not give two for one or free service but gives something more valuable than money was received for.

The third condition of "fair exchange" gives one a rather level progress. It is considered honest, is socially acceptable and very legal under law. It does not, however, guarantee any expansion or improvement of a group or the lot of a person. It is barely comfortable.

The fourth condition is the preferred one. Produce in abundance and try to give better than expected quality. Deliver it and get paid for it, for sure, but deliver better than was ordered and more. Always try to deliver a better job than was ordered. Always try to write a better story than was expected, always try to-and delivery-a better result than was hoped for by the customer.

This fourth principle above is almost unknown in business or the arts. Yet it is the key to success and expansion. If a photographic dealer or a photographer (or in fact anyone) follows condition three they will get along. But if they follow condition four they will really flourish and prosper. And it is the only one which guarantees expansion.'

