

Gray Matter

Making your store stand out is critically important to achieving success in photographic retail, says Gray Levett, of the one-of-a-kind camera shop Gray's of Westminster

- Interview and portraits, Damien Demolder



I don't think Gray has got the nice Fortnum and Mason Tea-For-One tea set out just for my benefit. I suspect anyone who sits at his leather-topped desk, in front of the glowing open fire in his book-lined office and asks for tea gets to use this elegant fine china cup/pot all-in-one too. It really is rather beautiful.

While Gray was making the tea I took the opportunity to visit the smallest room in the

shop: a facility shared by customers and staff alike – stylish antique porcelain, set against warm wood tones, real soap, a nicely framed mirror and a clean, dry towel hanging behind the door in this fragrant space. Beyond the curtain on my way out there's an elderly gentleman enjoying some talking therapy in the second hand department. His young lady listener looks both interested and engaged as he recounts

his Nikons-past, and ambles via by-roads and winding alleyways towards the inevitable growth of his collection this morning. I'm guessing that he only half-wants to buy something, and will only do so to have an excuse to be there. The cost of a low-serial number Nikon F and a return train ticket is a small price to have a genuinely attendant and charming ear for half an hour or so. It feels a nice place to be.

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A sense of heritage

I've been in a lot of camera shops in my time, and recently not just as a customer, and most aren't quite like this. The men in the main store wear suits and ties, say 'hello' and 'can I help you?' when I walked in. The cabinets are filled not only with new bodies and lenses, but with their close and distant ancestors, still in remarkable health - dazzling in chromes, glossy blacks and even 24k gold. Just like every camera store, each of the exhibits has a name, and here you can also discover the story behind each piece, no matter how much older than the teller it is. I'm really not in need of anything to add to my randomly gathered assortment of equipment, but feel immediately that it will be a miracle if I manage to leave without buying something.

The store feels as though it has been here since the birth of photography. It is easy to imagine we might catch the whiff of spilled collodion from the floorboards and find dusty boxes of magnesium powder in the corner of a basement store. The fact is though, the business is still less than thirty years old, and the sense of its heritage is no more than an unspoken suggestion. An illusion.

Upstairs in the office we chat about Gray's new coat of arms. It looks very grand, but what does a camera shop want with a sheet of painted velum?

'It sets us apart' says Gray 'and reflects the atmosphere of our old fashioned business. And it has got us noticed.' It has – the story has been all over the photographic press. While some in the UK might think having a coat of arms a teeny bit pretentious, Gray



says it has a different impact on customers overseas. 'In Dubai, for example, they hold royalty in high esteem, and love any association with the Queen.' Gray explains that the coat of arms, along with the store's motto 'Lead in Order to Serve', sums up what Gray's is all about.

Service centre

'I think you have to have a vision and an ideal of what the perfect camera shop would be like. You have to ask yourself where you would like to go to buy a camera, and how you would like to be treated. When I'm interviewing for new staff I want to know if they enjoy helping people, and if they like the sense of a job well done. To some those are alien concepts. I would rather have someone bright who likes

people, than someone who just knows about photography. Service is the most important part of our business, above the fact that we sell cameras. To provide a high level of service of course we need to know all about cameras, so that we can impart the information our customers like to receive - we couldn't produce that service without love for what we sell.

We visit other camera shops to see what they offer, but also other places where you get great service to see what we can learn – like The Goring Hotel.

Good service is no great secret; it is often just modern good manners and concentrating on looking after people. Many camera shops do have well-mannered staff with passion. It is the management's fault if they don't. And to



keep good staff you have to treat them well. One of my team has been with us for twenty years. Long standing members of staff are people who know what they are doing.

I don't think the coat of arms has changed the way Nikon views us, but our relationship with Nikon has been growing over the years. The Nikon UK team was kind enough to attend the presentation of the coat of arms, and Nikon Japan sent a gift of the coat of arms set in a crystal trophy. The Japanese have an idea that England is a mixture of The Avengers and The Tower of London, and the coat of arms fits into that rather well.

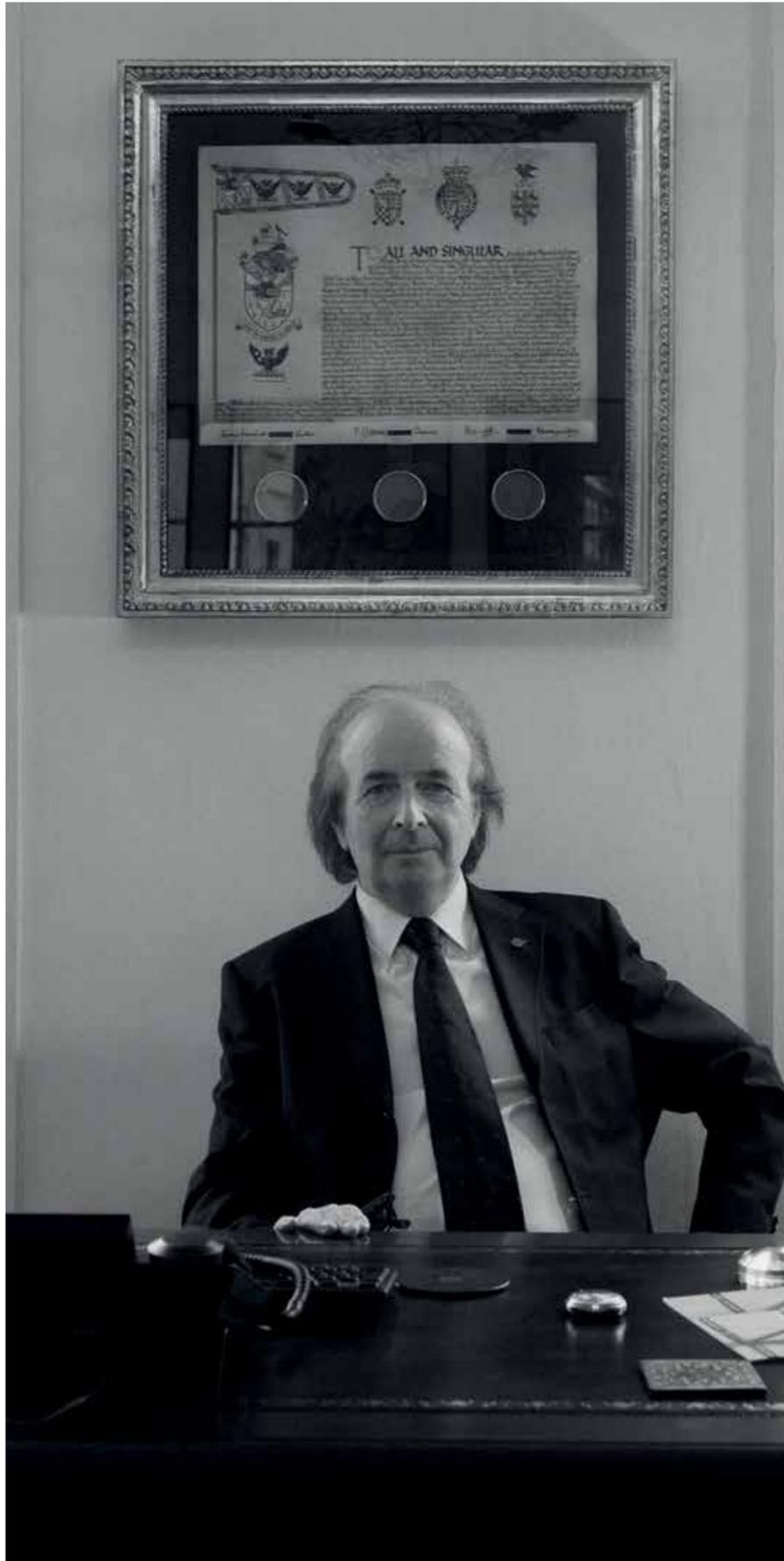
It helps us to be drawn to their attention. Ushida-san, the president of Nikon is coming to visit the store this month.

I want Gray's to be viewed as an institution – an establishment that represents a philosophy – a place that is well run and is a good example of what a camera shop could be. The word 'institution' suggests knowledge, credibility, longevity.

The customers you attract

When a customer walks out of the shop or puts down the phone we might never see them again, and we want to be able to build a relationship with them, to ensure they come back. That's why we started Nikon Owner magazine. We can show off new Nikon products, show the customers how to use them and it provides a platform for us to show their work. We have a technical help line for when they get stuck with a menu, masterclasses to teach them the skills they need and an incredible network of volunteers who run regional meetings for Nikon Owner subscribers.

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"I think businesses can choose the customers they want to have, by the service they provide and how they present that service"

they provide and how they present that service. Many retailers think buying stock and displaying it in the window is enough, but 'build it and they will come' doesn't work. Our shop is located out of the way, and off the beaten track, so people come to our shop because they want to or they deal with us by mail order. You have to know what the customer wants, and you have to ask yourself if you would want to come into your own shop and be served by your staff. Customers put a lot of trust in camera shop staff, and the gifts and notes of appreciation the Gray's staff receive at Christmas show how much customers value the service that we offer.' As I write, a customer has sent the store a cake

with the coat of arms made in icing on its top! Gray's is a camera-enthusiast's spa resort, where photographers come to be pampered in calm surroundings while indulging their fancies. And at some time during their stay they buy something, and sometimes something a little more than they intended. What is for sale, and those who might buy it, are loved and revered and treated with the respect they are due. I'm no retail expert, but I can see why photographers shop here, why they spend more than they intended and why they come back to do the same again and again. And I wish more photo retailers would adopt this approach.