

The many shades of Gray

We've been 'exclusively Nikon' since 1992. Prior to setting up Grays I spent five years in Hollywood working as a photographer and writer, followed by a spell as a promoter for an indie record label. A former boss of mine, Peter Walnes, had been running a second hand mail order business out of a semi detached house in Dorset and making a lot of money doing it. He was doing things differently; everything was perfectly described and he'd adopted the American system of grading that was rigidly adhered to. Plus you could try something for 14 days before buying. He suggested I do the same. So I set up 'shop' in my sister's flat in London in 1985 with a budget of £100 and no stock. My desk was an old door propped up on two filing cabinets.

These humble beginnings continued for two years until I picked up *Amateur Photographer* one day and realised from the adverts that there was nothing to differentiate us from anybody else, save our ads were smaller. The lack of unique selling point concerned me until I had a 'Road to Damascus' moment chancing upon a shop selling nothing but Christmas ornaments all year; yet it was packed and clearly very successful. This inspired me to specialise. I'd always had a love of Nikon. It was the brand that as a young photographer I couldn't afford but always wanted. So I thought: 'what if I went Nikon only?' I approached Nikon UK and they thought it was a great idea.

There was heart as well as head involved in my decision. A lot of times people can sell things to me on emotion. To sell something with passion you have to believe that it is the best, and I've always felt that about Nikon. I studied the history of the company extensively and visited a lot of photographic shops as research. I realised they were missing the level of service you might get in a jewellers where they'll invite you to sit down. That's why we have nice desk and carpets and chairs and never bothered with film and processing because you could get that elsewhere.

Initially our concept wasn't met with a lot of enthusiasm by many

How has a small Nikon-only shop in a quiet London backstreet lasted a quarter of a Century, weathered recession and continued to win customer service awards year on year? Gray Levett of Grays of Westminster shares secrets for prolonged success



people in the trade, who thought I was insane and would be out of business in six months. But although it's had its share of blood, sweat and tears over the years, it was the best move I could have made.

Passport to Pimlico

When I found our premises in Pimlico, it was very run down. It was a barber's for 100 years that Winston Churchill frequented. Although we're in a quiet location, the intention was always to be a destination address rather than relying on passing trade. I could neither afford nor see the point of being on the high street. We're very much still in a secondary retail location but we've put a tremendous amount of work into the building over a very long lease and have just taken on another floor.

Our tagline is 'we provide the kind of service of which legends are made'. It was inspired by a letter one of our customers wrote to *AP* that said as much, much to my surprise. So always look after people to the nth degree, deliver what you promise, give them a level of service beyond what they'd normally expect and if anything goes wrong take care of it. My 'thing' has always been: 'The answer's yes, now what's the question?' I think it's

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Ring the bell and enter the Grays of Westminster website, designed to match the look and feel of the physical place.

a privilege to look after people well. We still do mail order, which is 70% of the business. And we sell as much second hand as we do new: it's 50:50. Our current best sellers are the Nikon D800 and D600. Most photographic retailers wail about paper-thin margins, so we have a large second hand business. We regularly go to Japan - our buyer Toni Kowal has visited in excess of 300 times - and buy half a ton of used gear each visit. The collecting market seems to have picked up again. People are interested in rarities. We were very successful in selling a made-to-order 6mm f/2.8, an extraordinary lens

that's 220°, for £100,000. It would have cost £2,000 back in the 1970s.

Second hand FX pro lenses do extremely well: the 70-200mm f/2.8, 300mm f/2.8, 14-24mm and 24-70mm plus micro Nikkor lenses. We've sold manual lenses to the film world and the late Stanley Kubrick was a regular customer. He used Nikon for a long time, had a fairly extensive outfit, and was very generous to me.

I put our longevity down to the fact that you build up a following if you give a good service and look after people. If they can rely on you they'll come back. Word of mouth has always worked very well for us, which is why we're now on Twitter. We identify things that people want. If someone's in trouble we can deal with it and operate in a way that a chain can't because we can make a decision on the spot.

People do expect us to have new Nikon stock first - and we always try to have everything. If we don't,

it just means that Nikon themselves are out. If it's a new product and it's highly desirable then Nikon does its best to ration stock and give everyone a fair crack. To provide a community feel we also have the quarterly Nikon Owner Magazine (www.nikonownermagazine.com). A subscription provides customers with an extra year's warranty on equipment bought from us. We also have our 'Gazette' which goes out twice a year to a database of 42,000 customers.

I think everyone's been affected by the economic downturn. It's been challenging and we've just had to be constantly vigilant and not stop vital promotional activity. We always have a DPS in *Amateur Photographer* and in *Digital SLR Photography*, a full page in *Black & White Photography*, the *Nikon Historical Society Journal*, *Photographica* magazine, plus a small 'Wanted for Cash' in the *BJP*. And those continue to perform really well. We've seen extra business the

past four months because of Jessops and don't expect to be affected by the loss of Focus because we never exhibited; it wasn't our market.

I think Nikon users are loyal to the brand and that helps us. I've still got customers from the 1970s. When I set up Grays I didn't automatically go for the pro market, I went for those who could afford pro equipment; not just doctors and lawyers but people who are passionate about their photography, who when they do buy always want the best.

I believe the three reasons we attract customers are: we probably have the widest range of new and second hand Nikon in the world. We also offer a unique warranty system of two years for new, a year for second hand, and we'll treat you in a civilised way and look after you as best we can. And I think with companies it's when things go wrong that it really shows if they care. We consider it a privilege to give a first class service.

Discover more and take a virtual shop tour of Grays at www.graysofwestminster.co.uk

Visit Grays at 40 Churton St, Pimlico, London SW1V 2LP or call 020 7828 4925