

Blagdon, Somerset



Twenty years ago Blagdon, a village of about 1,200 people on the edge of the Mendip Hills in North Somerset, had a post office, a newsagent, a butcher, a general store, a petrol station, two part-time bank branches and a branch of an estate agent. Today there is just the butcher's shop and the general stores, but in that period, Blagdon Stores has been transformed and, short of selling unleaded petrol, seems to have filled the gaps admirably!

The key change to the business happened seven years ago, when Graham and Johanna Brown bought Blagdon Stores, which by then included the post office.

They had recognised the potential of the site, on a main A-road and with reasonable parking, although at the time the business was somewhat run down. Like so many village stores, it had been run for many years by enthusiastic amateurs. By contrast, Graham had spent all his working life from the age of fifteen in a variety of retailers. At the time of the takeover, he was working as a commercial manager at Bristol Airport. This put considerable pressure on Johanna, who was running the shop from day to day, but it did mean there was an external salary coming in. This enabled them to invest heavily in revamping the premises, with most of the profits from the first two years being immediately reinvested in the business. With new shelving, flooring, lighting, refrigeration and counter, not much of the old sales area remained. A new Londis fascia provided a positive external image to passing drivers and encouraged them to stop; today passing trade makes up no less than 40% of total business.

Graham's previous retail experience showed through in this whole refit process. The high central fixture that used to run the length of the sales area was replaced with a lower gondola, with a break. This transformed the ambience of the shop, making it much lighter and more attractive. The downside was a significant reduction in available shelf footage. Replacing chest freezers with upright models did provide some extra space for shelving. It was a courageous decision, although it was soon vindicated by the increased turnover that resulted. This highlights the importance of getting right the balance between circulation space for customers and the area occupied by fittings. But plans don't always run smoothly – soon after the refit, the newsagents shop in the village was put on the market. After much heart-searching – one of the attractions of buying the Blagdon shop had been not having to handle newspapers - Graham and Johanna decided that this was too good an opportunity to miss. Hence valuable wall run has been found to accommodate newspapers and magazines. The consequent upheavals meant a lot of work, but in the long term they have made the Stores a much stronger business. By this time, Graham had left his job and now both of them were involved in the business full-time; sales had grown beyond the point where one person could handle the workload.



Today the shop is a highly successful business. The sales area is far from ideal, with three separate spaces showing the building's domestic origins, but somehow Graham has managed to fit 3,500 stocked items in without it appearing overcrowded. Turnover has more than doubled during the time the Browns have operated the shop. Partly this is a result of taking on the news agency business, but much is due to the impact of a professional retail approach. Some village shops seem not to change from one year to the next. This is not true in Blagdon. Graham is continually trying to move forward. He uses EPOS data extensively to evaluate results and is not afraid to drop lines that do not justify their shelf space. Conversely, he is quick to build on successes. His ranging policy is to stock a basic and a more upmarket alternative for key products, whilst trials of more upmarket lines such as anchovies or olives often prove surprisingly successful and they become stock items. Product from the bake-off bread oven is a real hit with customers, be they workmen buying a hot pie for lunch or dads buying breakfast croissants with their paper at the weekend. The off licence section is another success, now contributing no less than 17% of turnover. This includes a remarkable range of beers (including those from a number of local breweries) and a strong wine selection, much of it chilled and including a good display of Londis special offers. Graham is continually trying to keep

the shop interesting through new lines or new displays for events such as Valentine's Day or Halloween. He believes his valuable time is far better spent managing the business in this way than making regular visits to a cash and carry – he is a strong supporter of having stock delivered, even at the cost of a paying a delivery charge.

Another plank in the shop's success is its strong customer service. Both Graham and Johanna are very much part of the village community and have a strong relationship with their customers. The shop is open from 7a.m. to 8p.m., with only slightly shorter hours at weekends and hence they have to rely on their staff members. They place great emphasis on instilling their customer service values in all staff, a mix of valued long service employees and students working just a few hours a week. As a result, the shop is a very friendly place to visit. The Brown's decision a few years ago to move the post office out of its separated fortress location and into a combination unit adjacent to the main shop counter has enabled them to offer post office services for extended hours, a service much appreciated by customers and reflected in the turnover achieved.

Like the proprietors of most village stores, Graham finds fresh produce to be a real problem area. Despite getting deliveries from both Londis and a local wholesaler, it is difficult to keep stock fresh even in a chiller so wastage is inevitably an issue. A larger display and emphasis on fruit and vegetables could enable him to reach "critical mass" in terms of sales, but lack of space and the long-term investment that would be needed mean this is not a development priority.

The key message from the success of Blagdon Stores is that a professional approach to the many aspects of shop keeping pays off in increased turnover and customer satisfaction. An ever-evolving range well-displayed, good service, long opening hours, pleasant ambiance, using the benefits of symbol group membership well and a willingness to continually fine tune the offer using EpoS data has created a really vibrant shop, despite the far-from-ideal premises it occupies. Each of these factors in isolation might have failed to work or even added to costs; taken together they produce an outcome greater than their individual importance. Certainly the people of Blagdon know how fortunate they are to have this valuable resource at the heart of their community.