

The changing face of the High Street

Fairfield Displays celebrates 30 years of continuous success in the retail display marketplace and we mark the changes it has seen.

In 1979 the high street was a very different prospect for the shopfitter and signmaker. Instead of the ubiquitous chain stores that greet the modern shopper with bland repetition the late 70's provided a plethora of independents. Just about every high street was graced with a butcher, a CTN (confectioner, tobacconist and newsagent), a hardware store and a baker, with the addition perhaps of a Body Shop and a thriving Woolworth's. Remember those?

Shoe shops, estate agents and china shops were family owned, so the supplier had to make contact with all of them instead of one central purchasing manager. It meant a little bit more work for the supplier but the rewards were greater because there was not so much discount for bulk purchases.

This was the fruitful period three decades ago that saw the launch of Fairfield Displays when Janice and Geoff Fairfield took advantage of the very latest communication technology – the fax – to supply instant quotes to interested customers. Remember this was a time before mobile phones became commonplace and the only people using



An early Fairfield display

the Internet were scientists and some of the military (in fact the only type of 'Google' available then was an encyclopaedia and the only people 'on line' were fishermen).

Display-savvy shop owners needed to employ a whole range of suppliers: signwriters, screen-printers and litho-printers as well as shopfitters and window dressers, it was a different world indeed.

The young Fairfields had been living in France but were now ready to come back to the UK. Geoff was an accountant and Janice had worked in PR. Janice's earlier background was in retail, growing up in a thriving family business with



Hardly changed, the Fairfields in the 21st Century



Embracing the digital

several retail stores, then as part of her PR training she had had to learn state-of-the-art printing techniques, which in those days involved 'hot lead' and 'galleys' because 30 years ago digital just meant 'of the finger'.

Taking the business to the customer

What Janice and Geoff wanted to do was start their own business and thanks to Janice's family insight into all things retail they saw an opportunity to supply stylish yet cost-effective glass displays.

Through mutual friends the couple had got an introduction to a French company called Corona Glass Display Products, and an investment of £2000.00 got them the sole distribution rights for the UK. The Fairfield's ability to speak fluent French was essential (Geoff also speaks German) and the



Fairfield introduced the cable and rod system to the UK



Always stylish



How the High Street looked in the 1970s



Lighting as art

moved away from the eye-blistering excesses of psychedelia.

The Fairfield's innate sense of taste came to the fore as they showed customers how they could present their goods in an ever more exciting yet subtle way, something they have maintained to



Shrewsbury opening. Mark Gosen & Geoff Fairfield

the present day. Plus they were the only company that insisted on the use of toughened glass for safety reasons. Neither of them wanted to be responsible for the injuries that might be inflicted in an accident involving ordinary glass.

At first Geoff was still working full time as an accountant and Janice was doing PR part-time. Fairfield Displays had been launched with no capital and no loans but they still had a mortgage

pair's previous immersion in big business had taught them how to run a company using a successful model, they knew how to 'think big'.

They had to learn how to sell. Even though Janice had been helping out behind a shop counter since the age of 12, she had only been



Janice and Geoff have always maintained a 'Big Business' concept when it comes to promoting their business

involved in dealing with incoming enquiries. Now the Fairfield's had to learn how to take the business to the customer. The Corona product was a range of glass cubes on which merchandise could be displayed clearly and without distractions; shopfitting was becoming more minimalist and less visually striking as décor



MP Michael Mates opens the current Fairfield showroom



New showroom in Shrewsbury opened in 2000

to pay – Janice's job paid for business postage.

Their early activities were a practical demonstration on how to run an apparent 'big business' with minimal overheads, no staff, and the only premises being a back bedroom. Janice used her marketing skills to produce effective advertising campaigns and press releases,



Striking displays keep Fairfield at the forefront



Minimalist yet tough

responded to enquiries in a professional manner (they employed an answering service to enhance the illusion of a bigger company) and watched the business grow. By 1980 there was enough in the account to pay Janice to go full time, and 1981 saw Geoff visiting customers in a regular basis. During this year, even though Janice was pregnant with their daughter Debbie, she was still booking Geoff up to five sales appointments a day and keeping busy on the phones, plus she retained her PR role. This was the year that Fairfield brought the first cable display system to the UK, and when it was introduced to the estate agency



Invisible displays from the 1990s

marketplace business really took off.

In every high street

In the late 80s, thanks to the government scrapping MIRAS tax relief on mortgages and the resultant slump in house sales, there was an estate agency collapse that was almost a precursor of the current lamentable situation, so Fairfield's had to take its products in different directions and began targeting signmakers and shopfitters.

It was only selling in the UK, yet it was a measure of success that Fairfield's can claim to have one of its systems in every high street in the country, and in many cases the cable display supplied back then is still in use today. Steel and glass won't corrode, so why change something that works and still looks fresh? The only thing that will date in a Fairfield display is the graphic it contains, but even so, Janice told us, in the early days the concept was quite hard to get across. She said: "Before Fairfield, the only common ceiling mounted display had been a light fitting, and people were actually worried that the ceiling might be pulled down by the cable system's



weight! But we kept selling the benefits of what we called 'invisible displays' and the concept eventually caught on very well indeed."

For Geoff and Janice to build their management practice based on the best technology available meant sourcing an early model computer, which probably set them back about £4000.00 at the time and only had the capacity of a pocket calculator, but which also meant that they could compile an effective database for mailings. The phone started to ring in earnest.



This practice of investing in and embracing the latest technology for a solid return has continued to underpin the Fairfield's success story. It has had a website since the mid-1990s, and it has also maintained its 'big company' policy, thinking 'business' rather than 'job'. Geoff became the captain of the company using his unblinkered entrepreneurial skills to seize opportunities and steer them through a safe passage to success.

Acting more as a leader than a simple hands-on manager, he used his hard-earned business skills to maximise returns and strengthen the foundations for growth. At first, Fairfield was supplying directly to a vast range of retailers but that eventually changed to its current position as trade supplier. However its direct sales history means that it is able to bring a profound level of real trade experience to the table when advising customers. It also means that when Geoff starts looking at new designs for displays he is able to do so from a position of honest understanding for the end users needs.

Of course as business grew so did the demand for space. In 1981 the back bedroom was exchanged for a premises in Farnborough, and



then in 1990 the whole thing moved to its current address in Fleet, Hampshire. This was the first time that Fairfield Displays actually had warehousing, and the six staff on the books at the time of the move soon proved too few. The new building had once been a tractor factory and it needed a great deal of refurbishment and redesign before it could be used. The area at the back still had its original stable cobbles which had been laid to protect the area from horses hoofs, but the team embraced the challenge and designed the perfect warehousing and offices for their needs.

New times, new challenges

1993 saw Fairfield become a manufacturer in its own right, developing its own range of cable & rod systems. Now it could move out of the UK market and start exporting globally and in fact this was how Fairfield started a trend that has established the UK as the largest manufacturer/specifier of cable & rod systems in the world, of which Fairfield is still the market leader.

Low voltage lighting technology for display systems had been introduced as early as the 1980s, however in 1995 Geoff patented his revolutionary slim profile, edge-lit display technique using fluorescent tubes. Called XtraLite it is still a popular product and has a proud place in the Fairfield demonstration room. 1995 was also the year that the company opened its Holland-based showroom, followed in 1996 by a



showroom in Shrewsbury and the expansion of the Fleet building. In 1997 showrooms and offices were opened in the USA, and these have recently moved to larger premises just outside Philadelphia. In 1998 a new German facility was opened and then in 2000 the Shrewsbury team had to expand its premises to cover its increased business in the North of Britain. This continuous expansion has been given a chance settle down during the new millennium, so now in 2009 we see Fairfield Displays and Lighting as a truly global player with 70 staff worldwide of which 60 per cent have enjoyed more than five years service with the company and 33 per cent more than 10 years. Steve Barnett one of the original staff is still with Fairfield and can claim to be the world expert

in cable & rod systems – after all he has been installing more of them for longer than anyone else. Janice challenges anyone out there to deny this.

New times bring new challenges and a company has to be flexible if it wants to survive. So how has Fairfield responded to the changes wrought by the development of digital technology? Janice told us:

"The speed and simplicity of printing has evolved so much that POS displays are more sophisticated and need to change on a regular basis. Our systems reflect this, but then we have provided easy-access pockets for some time, Geoff designed the first easy-access pocket back in the mid-80s, which replaced the need to sandwich two pieces of acrylic together with clamps. The new pocket now made it possible to change a poster without the need to touch the clamp and this opened up a huge market place. Our cable concept has been widely accepted now, so we can



be proud that something we introduced to the market has become so popular." She continued: "A lot of our product development has been through Geoff but now we have also got an in-house designer, and one result of this is our new 'Balance' customisable display, a truly modern solution which is both elegant and practical, and combines the latest digital technology with digital printed graphics.

"We have continued our policy of continuous design and product innovation, which may be a more difficult process than just looking for whatever is out there in the overseas markets but is also more rewarding in the long run. We also work with our customers to help develop their business skills using seminars and training modules, and due to the fact that a lot of shopfitters went the way of the independent retailer we find that we are concentrating more on the sign and graphics professional. Fairfield Displays and Lighting has already proved that it can survive change. Now we want to build on our legacy for an even brighter future."

For a better idea of Fairfield's latest range go to the website: www.fairfielddisplays.co.uk or telephone: 0845 166 5201