

Shop Talk

July's Home & Gift, Harrogate was the venue for a recent retail 'brainstorming' session, with Greats winners – past and present – putting their cards on the table regarding the ups and downs of the high street and their current concerns.

But first, PG&H asked this year's 'round tablers', do they agree with retail guru Mary Portas' statement that it's giving customers a great retail 'experience', rather than the products themselves, that will be the key to future retail success.

Mary Portas has recently been quoted as saying that tomorrow's retailing will be much less about product, and far more about giving customers a retail 'experience'. What's your view?

Sonya Haandrikman: "Creating a great retail experience is vital to ensure customers enjoy their visit to our store and want to return. But good customer service and unique products at a fair price remain equally essential."

Tanya Haandrikman: "Customers have so many choices in where to buy their product nowadays, so standing out from the crowd through creating a unique shopping 'experience' goes along way to ensuring that they think of us first!"

Steve Mackie: "Giving customers a 'retail experience' is first and foremost about offering unforgettable product. Then, by all means, add Ms Portas' unforgettable window dressing."

Mike Adams: "I don't agree with Mary Portas. I believe that great retail is about product, service, well-trained staff and the ambience of the shop. And it's about the basics, like keeping the shelves clean and fully stocked. Years ago, products had a 12-18 month



lifespan. Now, it's six months if you're lucky, so constantly sourcing new and different products is more important now than it has ever been."

Alison Bartram: "Product definitely comes first, although creating an experience is important. We have a small 'love' room, where people can go in to try on jewellery,

The Round Tablers

(in alphabetical order)

- Mike Adams, managing director, Temptation Gifts, Amersham, Berkhamsted and Beaconsfield
- Alison Bartram, owner, Heart Gallery, Hebden Bridge
- Paul Bartram, owner, Heart Gallery Interiors, Hebden Bridge
- Heidi Ferguson, owner, I Do Gifts, Kilmarnock
- Sonya and Tanya Haandrikman, co-owners, Celebrations, Carlisle
- Steve Mackie, owner, The Gilded Cage, Falkirk
- Sue Marks, editor, Progressive Gifts & Home (chair)

Above: From left to right (back row) Heidi Ferguson; Steve Mackie; Sue Marks; Mike Adams; Sonya Haandrikman; (front row) Paul Bartram; Alison Bartram; Tanya Haandrikman.

textiles and our ethical clothing range. (It's called the 'love' room, because there is a 'love' sign hanging over the door). It's very much a part of the shopping experience and our customers 'love' it."

How has business been so far this year?

Mike Adams: "Since January, we've seen a real tightening of the market, with May our best month by comparison to last year. Temptation is up so far this year, but mainly because we have more square footage, and because our web operation is trading hugely ahead of last year. Like for like high street sales are slightly down in line with stores like M&S and John Lewis. People are being more cautious."

Steve Mackie: "So far, 2008 has been a much better year than I expected but it is the next four months that really matter."

Heidi Ferguson: "We are up considerably."

Alison Bartram: "This is my second year, and by comparison to last year we are up. January to March was really good, but footfall is definitely down this year."

Paul Bartram: "We opened Heart Gallery Interiors last October, and have done better than we imagined. We're at the high end of the market, and the type of customers we attract are not those affected by the credit crunch."

Sonya Haandrikman: "We are up on last year and remain confident that the trend will hold for the second half of the year. The different product sectors we offer seem to have balanced each other out, and footfall remains consistent."