

# KNOWING YOUR CUSTOMERS CRUCIAL TO HIGH STREET SUCCESS SAYS RESEARCH SPECIALISTS PROTEL FIELDWORK

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With High Street retailers contemplating store closures and seeking rent reductions as they struggle to move their businesses forward, it is clearer than ever that knowing your customers is absolutely vital for success.

Stalwarts such as House of Fraser, New Look and Marks & Spencer are among those undergoing shake-ups as they try to recover from disappointing sales and attract the right customers to make their businesses vibrant.

Marks & Spencer is considering closing up to 14 stores, New Look up to 60, and the House of Fraser has approached landlords for rent reductions after a poor Christmas trading period with sales down, both in-store and online, compared with the previous year.

Concentrating on delivering what the customer wants is going to be key to their forward planning – Marks & Spencer has restructured its marketing team and has appointed a data science company to enhance its understanding of customers holding loyalty cards.

Meanwhile New Look, amid speculation that its recent approach of offering edgier designs and raising prices had turned customers off, is “going back to basics”. In the words of newly-appointed executive chairman, Alistair George, it will ‘focus on ensuring that we buy into the right trends with the right product .... and provide customers with great value’.

“Knowing your customers is absolutely vital, whether you are running a corner shop or one of Britain’s best-loved high Street brands” said Annita Small, MD of Protel Fieldwork (<http://protelfieldwork.co.uk>), who has been conducting fieldwork research for more than 20 years.

“Understanding your customers, finding out what they want, how their tastes are changing and how much they are prepared to pay, is at the heart of every business. You never want to lose sight of that maxim, simple though it sounds.

“It is telling that John Lewis, a company which has always kept close to its customers, was one of the winners on the High Street at Christmas, increasing gross sales in its 49 stores, while many other well-known names had quite the opposite experience.

“John Lewis do a lot of market research. They engage with customers and their customer service is exceptional. If you return something, for example, they engage and question you about why you are returning it in some detail.

“They learn a lot from listening to customers and that’s where a lot of valuable insight can be gained. What is right with a product? What is wrong with the product? What might you buy instead? It’s a hallmark of their interest in customers which extends throughout their business.

“In the current climate in which retailers are facing immense pressures, conducting good market research to truly understand your customers and potential customers is essential.”

Protel Fieldwork has been helping some of Britain's – and Europe's – biggest brands to better understand their markets since 1999. Based in Coventry, it has a nationwide reach and can call upon a pool of 800 field researchers across the whole of mainland UK to conduct interviews.

Expert at finding "hard-to-reach" demographics, Protel has a reputation for getting things done, on time and within budget, winning it an enviable client list. As well as conducting quantitative research, either face-to-face or from its CATI telephone unit, Protel can carry out qualitative research. One example was setting up a public mock-up of a sweet shop to gauge people's reactions to a new range of chocolate bars.

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Editor's Note: For further information contact Celeste Clarke at Century PR on 024 76 228881 or email [celeste@centurypr.co.uk](mailto:celeste@centurypr.co.uk).