

# Upholding family values

Starting out originally as a small store selling British-manufactured furniture and carpet in Ash Vale, Surrey, family-run retailer Vale Furnishers expanded by opening a second showroom – in Farnham – earlier this year. MD Mark Chandler gives Victoria Noakes further insight into the retailer’s history and what it stands for today ...

Vale Furnishers started its life in 1960 when Mark’s grandparents, Roy and Violet Chandler, founded a furniture business in a newly-built parade in Ash Vale, selling goods mainly sourced from British suppliers. At the age of 16, Mark’s father Alan joined the company to help run the store, and business started to expand as his eye for retail shone through. Shortly after this, Roy and Violet bought the shop next door – doubling the size of the showroom – and after a few years, went on to convert the flats above.

30 years later, Vale moved across the road into a purpose-built showroom, where its head office and Ash Vale showroom remain to this day. In 2009, the retailer saw further growth by opening up a whole new floor – displaying some of the finest European brands in an attempt to diversify its furniture offering. This took the store to an impressive 36,000ft<sup>2</sup> spread over four floors.

“As with most family-run businesses, I started working for Vale Furnishers pushing a broom around the warehouse on a Saturday. My full-time role within the business was as a buyer and merchandiser in 1999, and then I took over from my father as managing director in 2011,” explains Mark.

Although Vale has grown substantially over the years, maintaining the welcoming feel of a small store is central to the retailer’s philosophy. It is this personal service which keeps its customers returning again and again, with nearly 80% of Vale’s business coming from recommendation and re-orders.

Emphasis is put on the extensive training which is given to each member of its sales team – to ensure they possess a superior level of product knowledge and can offer invaluable advice to every customer. What is more, Vale’s staff are not commission based, which allows for further concentration on providing the best service possible.

“We’re proud to say that our family values have stayed the same over the years – we run the business the way my grandparents did, by concentrating on serving the local area. We’re not interested in selling nationwide, which means that those who buy from us really get a first-class experience. Our aim is to provide customers with an inviting and friendly atmosphere, where the focus is on their needs, and top quality service and product.”



*Vintage collection*



*Mark Chandler*

In April, Vale opened its second showroom – located in Farnham – which added another 20,000ft<sup>2</sup> of contemporary and eclectic furniture onto the retailer’s already-vast offering, creating 10 new jobs in the local area. Vale has embraced the new building by investing in a unique walkway which links the two on-site showrooms, creating a striking effect. The purpose of the Farnham store is to broaden Vale’s customer base to a younger, more style-conscious demographic.

“We mainly target the middle to upper end of the market – our Ash Vale store has generally always catered for the 55-plus customer – but our new premises has now allowed us to widen our reach. It’s been really nice to see familiar faces – loyal Ash Vale customers – visiting the Farnham store and wanting to try something different in their homes,” Mark says.

Vale Furnishers prides itself on the diversity of its product range – not only providing its customers with a choice of major brands including Stressless, G Plan, Parker Knoll and Ercol, but also some of the most iconic European manufacturer names, such as Calligaris, Porada, Cattelan Italia and Venjakob. Although Vale stocks a >>>



Casual Living collection



wide variety of brands, the retailer also puts a lot of focus on its own debranded offering, which is divided into four collections – Vintage, Casual Living, Eclectic and Contemporary.

“With our extensive offering, we aim to cater to different tastes, ages and budgets – which, with two ample showrooms only four miles apart, we are capable of doing – but what really sets us apart is our debranded collections, which allow us to retain our customers. At the moment, the industry is so diverse – everyone has different tastes which are constantly changing,” reflects Mark.

“Our Eclectic collection has proven to be a great success – these

are marketed as one-off pieces designed with the current interior trends in mind. The nature of the collection has encouraged both our existing and prospective customers to engage with our social media channels, which is a really positive thing.”

Clearly, maintaining a balance between holding onto ingrained family-like principles and history and being open to evolution is something that Vale is adept at, and this has no doubt been a great contributor to its success today. Mark emphasises the importance of the “great team” behind the retailer, with some of the sales team having been a part of it for nearly 40 years. “That experience really resonates with customers,” Mark states.

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Eclectic collection



Looking to the future, Vale's long-term goal is to continue to develop its two stores – in particular Farnham. In addition, the retailer is planning to boost its online presence by appointing an in-house designer, keeping in mind that “retail businesses should never underestimate the continual need to evolve.”

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“This is especially true for independents,” Mark continues. “Retailers seem to get distracted by what is happening on a national scale with potential competitors, and not focus on their own business. The large chains are always going to exist, but the independent retailers need to remember that they have the upper hand. We have the ability to adapt to market changes quicker, and need to do so in order to survive.”

W [valefurnishers.co.uk](http://valefurnishers.co.uk)



Venjakob and Sits models on display