

Interview with Trevor Culpin – Marketing Manager TradePoint

Robert Bain – Research-live.com

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As B&Q looks to expand its TradePoint business, marketing manager Trevor Culpin has been getting to know customers by meeting them face to face. Robert Bain spoke to him about this direct approach to research.

“I’ll take you to the shed,” says Trevor Culpin as *Research* arrives to interview him at the Southampton offices of DIY retailer B&Q.

‘The shed’ isn’t just a quirky name for a meeting room, it’s an actual shed – albeit one with a heater and enough space to sit around a table. Culpin clearly enjoys staying in touch with what his business is all about – he’s the marketing manager for B&Q TradePoint, which was launched in 2009 to provide building supplies to trade customers. After a successful test with dedicated stores at a handful of existing B&Q branches, there are now 124 TradePoints across the UK, with the strapline “trade brands, trade prices, trade only”.

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The company is now planning new stores specialising in fitted kitchens and bathrooms, and Culpin has just finished doing some research – but there wasn’t a sliding scale or two-way mirror in sight. “The notion was to actually get the customers involved in physically planning what went into the store, what it looked like and how it was orientated,” says Culpin. The participants were professional kitchen fitters and other tradesmen, recruited in B&Q stores and competitors’ car parks.

The venue for the research was a TradePoint store – or at least it will be. “It was literally a warehouse with a concrete slab in it and nothing else,” says Culpin. “We sat round a table and with pieces of tape we marked out the floor, then we walked around and worked out where the walls would be, where the checkouts might go, we talked about the stockroom and the way it would be organised, and about how parking spaces would be reserved just for trade.”

This sort of research has generated ideas for TradePoint that Culpin believes wouldn't have come about otherwise. When they started out designing stores, they realised that the best way to reassure trade customers that the items they needed were in stock was to let them see for themselves – by doing away with the wall separating the stockroom from the rest of the store. “That hadn't been in our thinking,” says Culpin. “And actually we've saved money on the build by not having to put the walls in.

“Another suggestion that came out was that we really needed a covered canopy area, which on rainy days would allow them to load their vans without any risk that water would get into appliances and so on. These are really quite nuts and bolts things, which you just wouldn't have got if you were in a research room.”

Getting the kitchen fitters to come to the building itself and work together with the TradePoint team, provided “a level of engagement that I don't think you would get with most other forms of research,” says Culpin. “They all wanted to make the exercise as good and as complete as they possibly could.”

First contact Culpin explains how this approach to research developed. “When we were first testing what tradesmen thought about the TradePoint concept, we did a group in a viewing facility up in Stockport. At the end the facilitator asked whether anyone would like to come in and ask a question, so three of us went and sat in with the group. We thought the facilitator was going to stay, but she left and came to sit on the other side of the glass. In that closing 15 minutes, more seemed to come out than in the preceding hour and a half, because we were seen by the tradesmen as the people who could actually make things happen. That led to more of a two-way exchange going on – we'd ask a question, they'd ask a question, we'd give an answer, they'd give an answer. We thought, maybe we're on to something here.



“The next time, we did it in a store. We started off around a table, still with a bit of a division – eight tradesmen at one end, with a facilitator, and four of us guys at the other. But we did a store walk as part of the exercise, and it was only then that they started to ask us questions, as well as we asking them. Why is it laid out on the shelf like this? Why haven't you thought of doing it this way? The sort of questions that they were asking were quite different to the ones we'd scripted to ask at the beginning of the group, and I don't think any of that would have happened if we hadn't done it that way – it was the store walk that broke the barrier down.

“So the next time we set out from the start with everybody in the room together, working together, there being almost a free exchange of questions and answers, with the mediator. The practical experience of working on a solution came out with some powerful results.”

“We also followed it up with what we call 'trade mate' days where we buddy up with one of the tradesmen from the sessions and just spend a day with them. So if the day starts in a store with them placing an order, we talk through it with them. If they've got to go and pick something up, we'll help load the van. If they're doing a job, we'll pass the tools over.”

The idea for an online system for customers to manage their account came

out of a day that Culpin spent shadowing an electrician who was struggling with his admin. The research participants can learn from the process too – Culpin’s criticism of this man’s shoebox-based invoice system spurred him to make changes. “By the time I went to see him again, he’d actually got his wife to build a whole new accounting system for him. It was amazing. I guess his accountant was finally happy.”

Big opportunity The UK’s trade building supplies market is worth tens of billions, but there’s very little in the way of data on customers, which is why Culpin is keen to get up close and personal with them. “The work that we’ve been doing has been very much about improving understanding of the perception of our proposition, how to tweak it, how to communicate it.”

Culpin recognises that you can’t do all your research this way, but he values the kind of techniques that give you this level of personal understanding. You might not get a quantitative estimate of your market share, but what you do always get is a straight answer, he says, and that gives you a good sense of what you’re doing right and wrong.

Having the groups properly moderated is also crucial. TradePoint has been working with research agency 100%Cotton, which encourages its clients to meet customers face to face. “I think if we tried to do it ourselves, we would lose that element of neutrality that needs to sit in the middle,” says Culpin. “There were a few points when one or two of my colleagues were asked to be a little quieter and let the trade guys say a little bit more. That’s very much where I see the role for the agency.”

Face to face There’s another motive behind the approach too: getting the company’s key decision makers to get close to their customers. It’s not always easy persuading senior managers to come to a research session (or to spend a whole day shadowing a kitchen fitter) but Culpin says it pays off. “Having the decision maker physically in the room when the quote comes out is just so much more powerful than seeing it on a PowerPoint slide,” he says. “You can recall the guy uttering those words.”

And if the decision maker was there in the room, the problem of getting them to pay attention to the debrief disappears, because “if there’s a big problem it gets sorted even before the debrief”.

So far Culpin has managed to get the head of sales, the head of commercial and several of B&Q’s regional directors to meet customers in these sessions. “We’d still like to work our way through the divisional directors, and I have a

promise from the CEO Euan Sutherland that he's going to take part one of these days as well," he says.

"The biggest thing for me is the empathy that you get with these guys. They were really proud that they'd made a contribution, and there's a relationship that's different to the normal customer relationship you get.

"It's quite a simple thing, talking and listening," he says. "But not everyone does it, do they?"

The customer connection

The connection that Culpin feels he gets with customers by spending time with them has led to useful insights about how they think, how they shop and what they need. "We're literally sitting talking with our customers, getting to feel what they feel and getting an emotional connection as well as a numerical or empirical one," says Culpin. "After you've done that sort of thing for as long as I've done it, you certainly understand the challenges that they're facing."

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One insight that has emerged from the work is an understanding of the different types of store visits that trade customers make. "There's the need they have right now, that's got to be quick because time's money – they've got to get in, they've got to get out. But then they also want, on some days, a slightly more relaxed environment, where they can sit, talk about design, talk about a job that's coming, actually engage with someone who they respect, who knows what they're talking about, and where they can chill a little bit. There was a recognition that the two visits were very different, and I just don't think you get that level of feedback with the kind of survey where you're just ticking boxes and counting numbers."

TradePoint's delivery service was also shaped by feedback from the research. It had planned to offer next-day delivery as standard, but the message from research participants made them shift their focus from timing to reliability and order checking. Culpin says: "They were saying, we only need it to be between two weeks and four weeks, but we absolutely need to know that everything's there, and should I have made a mistake with my order, or there be something faulty, I can get replacements and spares very quickly – that's where the next day bit comes in."