

BUSINESS PROFILE

Selling knowledge

Hubert Nowak arrived in London speaking almost no English and knew nothing about decorating. Five years later, he helps run Leyland's Putney Branch, where weak demand, rising costs and online competition are testing his belief that a specialist retailer sells more than the product on its shelves.

By Zygimantas Mascinskas

In 2021, Hubert Nowak knew almost nothing about paint. He had little retail experience, spoke barely any English and struggled through the bureaucracy of finding work in Britain during lockdown.

A friend already working at Leyland SDM eventually helped him on to Britain's most known home décor shop floor. "I had no knowledge," he says. "I didn't speak English at all."

Five years later, Nowak is a deputy manager of the company's Putney branch, where the pressures facing an ordinary London paint shop reflect some of those confronting British retail more broadly – weaker demand, rising costs, intense competition and customers increasingly able to shop or seek advice online.

Leyland's parent, the FTSE 250-listed Grafton Group, described trading conditions in Great Britain as challenging in its latest half-year report. Average daily like-for-like revenue across its British businesses, Leyland included, fell 5.1 per cent in the first half of 2026, which the group attributed to weak construction activity and subdued consumer confidence.

At Putney, Nowak says the store is about £97,000 behind its budget for the financial year. Targets, he says, have become increasingly difficult to hit since the pandemic.

Costs are the most visible part of the squeeze. Prices rise roughly every six months, he says, and one specialist exterior paint he handles has gone from £68 to £99. He links the increases partly to the cost of importing paints and the ingredients used to make them since Brexit. The Department for Business and Trade recorded a 5.7 per cent rise in the price index for construction material used in repair and maintenance in the year to June.

Customers rarely see the increases coming. Someone who has not decorated for a decade, Nowak says, can arrive with an outdated idea of what paint should cost and be shocked by the bill.

Matthew Eade, a regular customer involved in residential renovations, has watched material prices "go up massively over the past two years". He says the increase is passed to the company buying the homes he renovates and ultimately to its customers.

Yet Eade still returns to Putney for Nowak's advice. "I only come back to this store because of their customer service," he says. "Hubi [Hubert Nowak] always helps me to find the right colour for the walls."

Nowak explains why a colour mixed to order costs more than a tin taken straight from the shelf, or why a more expensive trade formulation may ultimately offer better value. His pitch is arithmetic rather than sentiment: a cheaper retail paint may need four coats where a trade product needs two. "Time is money," he says.

That need to explain is central to how Nowak thinks about the business. Competition on Upper Richmond Road is dense: Screwfix, Toolstation, Brewers and a Dulux Decorator Centre are all nearby. His answer to them is simple. "They don't sell the knowledge," he says.

The point is not that Leyland sells products its competitors cannot. It is that Nowak believes specialist advice can keep customers from choosing the wrong one. He recalls one customer who ignored his recommendation and instead asked Open Ai's ChatGPT what product she should use. She later returned, he says, to tell him the advice had been wrong and that the job now needed putting right.

He is not anti-technology: AI can provide information and help with management, he says, but lacks practical experience. He doubts it can replace the conversation at the counter. Self-checkouts may arrive, but colour mixing and specialist advice still require a person.

Online sales accounted for 24.7 per cent of retail sales in Great Britain in July, according to the Office for National Statistics, although the figure covers all retail and says little about the way trade paint specifically is bought.

Nowak's role extends well beyond advising customers. He supports the store manager, allocates work, monitors performance indicators, adjusts stock levels and adapts head-office merchandising plans to branch whose layout does not always accommodate them. For trade customers, he raises invoices, arranges deliveries and can negotiate on volume.

Managing people is the part of the job he seems least convinced he has finished learning. Different personalities require different handling, he says, and "common sense is not that common". His answer is to rely on emotional intelligence, avoid micromanaging and be strict when necessary. He is completing a team leader apprenticeship.

Joshua, a team member who asked for his surname to be withheld, describes Nowak's management style as direct. "He's honest," he says. "When something's wrong, he'll tell you." He also sees another side behind the scenes - Nowak helps colleagues with tasks and makes them laugh.

Joshua remembers a customer seeking an order worth about £13,000 that the branch could not fill from stock. Nowak took the customer's number, contacted the supplier and arranged the order. It is a practical example of his argument- knowledge matters, but so does taking responsibility for a sale.

Trade customers are the part of the business Nowak has spent longest fighting for. Until recently, he says, Leyland offered them little: a customer spending £2,000 might receive a 5 per cent discount while competitors offered much more aggressive terms.

When asked about company's innovative strategies, Nowak opened about the pressure encouragement he has put on top management to introduce a trade account card, which overall improved sales at his store significantly. However, he is more sceptical about another part of the company's strategy. Leyland has 36 stores across central London, and Nowak thinks opening branches too close together risks splitting the same customers between them. Putney has free parking, which many Leyland stores do not, he says, and that matters to trade buyers collecting bulky orders.

Regardless to a rapid career development at Leyland, Nowak is candid that he does not want to remain in builders' merchanting forever. He does not yet know what comes next. There is an irony in that. After years advising other people how to decorate, he has barely done his own home, twice, he estimates, since moving to Britain. The lesson is likely to outlast the job. Price may get customers through the door, in Nowak's view, expertise and friendliness still give those customers reasons to come back.