



THE LONG ROAD TO BECOMING A RETAILER

After a long career working in the wholesale and symbol sectors, Colin Smith has now survived his first six months as a local retailer, having teamed up with David Sands and Graham Benson to open a brand new 4,000 sq ft store in Musselburgh.

BY KEVIN SCOTT

It's not every day you walk into a shop and find yourself facing what is most likely the biggest pumpkin in Scotland. It's the sort of experience that stops you in your tracks. This thing is huge – and it's surrounded by a dozen fairly large pumpkins that look ordinary next to this behemoth.

Colin Smith has only been a retailer for six months, but if his Halloween display is anything to go by, his years working in wholesale have given him the requisite knowledge to know how important it is to

engage with shoppers from the moment they enter the store, something the pumpkin was proving hugely successful at.

Said store is Pinkie Farm Convenience Store in Musselburgh, and how it came to be owned and managed by Colin is one of the more interesting stories to emerge in local retail this year. As Regional Manager at Bestway (Batleys), Colin has a long history working in wholesale – including periods with Bellevue and Costco, before moving to Batleys when it acquired Bellevue.

Like almost everyone working in local retail

(SLR included!) Colin had long held an ambition to become a retailer. The life-changing moment came one day when he was having a conversation with Lynne Todd and Billy Mackenzie, who owned the local farm shop, Pinkie Mains in Musselburgh.

Colin had been working with them throughout his 18 years in wholesale and knew that although the business was up for sale they'd rejected offers from multiples and were keen to sell to a family business, which piqued his curiosity, to say the least.

Colin's former boss, Graham Benson,

agreed to back him. The pair then recruited David Sands as a second partner and began discussions to acquire the store. Benson and Sands formed a holding company which owns the store and land, and Colin is Director of the business that operates the store. "They're my Dragons," says Colin, referring to the BBC show Dragon's Den. "I presented my business plan to them and here we are. Both Graham and David have provided incredible support, and continue to do so."

With the land the old shop stood on sold for a housing development, a brand new store was built from scratch close by, on land Lynn and Billy had kept for that very purpose.

"There was no option to keep the old store," says Colin from the office of the new build shop. "But there are obvious advantages to building a new store. I had an input with the architect and then worked on the layout of the shop floor with Vertex."

The result is a welcoming 4,500 sq ft store that fits its billing as an amalgamation of farm store and convenience store. From a covered entrance that hosts community activity, to the event-based in-store theatre at the front of the shop, there is a strong sense of community in place, something that was important to Colin from the off.

The store's farm shop heritage is evident with a decorative fresh section showcasing loose products housed in wooden boxes.

Opposite this is a huge bank of closed-door chillers running the length of the shop, and along most of the back wall. It perfectly encapsulates the traditional and modern ethos of retailing.

Throughout there are fantastic touches, from the bespoke vinyls directing customers to the sections, to strong off-trade and grocery sections all housed in wide aisles that provide an uncluttered shopping experience

One of the big challenges facing Colin was ensuring that the old Pinkies customers continued to use the store, while attracting a whole new group of shoppers. "It was an old 60s style shop so when we opened this new, modern building I had to ensure I was carrying the right range and right price to create a market for new customers without alienating regulars."

This was achieved by carefully considering the range in each section and executing in-house planograms – which Colin developed through referencing Nisa plans.

Opting to join Nisa was one of the first major decisions Colin had to make. Jointly branded as Pinkies Nisa Local, Colin says the relationship made perfect sense given the scale of the operation. "David knew all about Nisa, being an ex-member, and I obviously knew Bestway inside out and there was a certain degree of loyalty there, but with my business head on I knew we needed the depth

of range that Nisa provides. When it comes to fresh and chilled Nisa are at the top end, and it's a huge part of our offering."

Huge indeed. The fresh, chill and extensive food to go range combine to bring in 30% of sales. A huge number of local suppliers are used while a local fishmonger's trailer is permanently parked outside the front door. "It's about working within the community to improve the overall food offer," says Colin.

This is an ethos that Colin has put to good use on social media. The Facebook page for Pinkies is a lesson in online marketing. Before even opening the store had 1,000 likes and that has now risen considerably with Colin giving customers a voice in running their local store. He provided them with two options for a coffee machine, for example: Costa and local firm Brodies. The one with the most likes would be installed. As such, a Brodies coffee machine now takes pride of place next to a small seating area for food to go customers. "It's an important tool," says Colin. "We speak to customers, ask them what they want; it all helps."

When the shop opened, Colin worked closely with Lynne and Billy – who agreed to stay open until the day before the new store began trading with the new store taking stock over daily until the switch was complete. A week's hold up to this carefully planned exercise may seem disastrous, but such was



The biggest pumpkin in Scotland was the star of Colin's Halloween display.



Food to go is a major part of the store's offering.



A fishmonger van is a permanent fixture outside the store.



the scale of work involved in packing all those shelves, Colin welcomed it. "In the end it gave us an extra week to get the full Nisa range in and get the shop looking great."

Since then there's been no fundamental changes to the layout or range and sales are ahead of target. "When I look around I see a lot of people doing basket shops," explains Colin. "That's not how they shopped the old store. As a result we're seeing that huge 30% of sales in fresh and chilled and food to go, and grocery sales are high than we'd expected."

So almost six months after opening, is Colin enjoying life on the other side of the retail fence? He pauses before answering. "Yes. I am. It's long hours of course. I knew it would be, but it's taken longer to get everything working effectively. I'm enjoying being in charge of the business and my own destiny. Success will come but it's tough, no bones about it. All the retailers who told me how tough it would be were right. Success doesn't come easy though."

Very true. And that's why Colin is working as hard as ever to refine his offer, to encourage the community to get involved with events at the store, to roll out pumpkins bigger than beach balls.

As a modern convenience shop, Pinkies has a lot to offer and Colin is certainly on the road to success.

