

Article submitted by: **Blazes**

A day in the life a walk in retail franchisee

An example submitted by a leading franchisor

Getting up in the morning is nothing like as hard as it used to be... even though the alarm does go off at 7am. It immediately feels different when you know you're going to work for your own business. We can feel the adrenalin as soon as we open our eyes.

First things first and we start the day with a cup of tea, and then either my wife and co-franchisee Diane or myself takes our two border collies for a quick walk, although it is usually me. Then it's another cup of tea. Our three nearly grown-up daughters are also up at 7am, so as you can imagine, it's always a very busy household first thing in the morning.

At 7.45am we leave the house. Diane usually drives as I like to get ahead of myself and start making calls to various suppliers and installers as we are travelling the hour and a half from our house in Huddersfield to our Skipton showroom. Until I was made redundant at 48, I spent twelve high-powered years as a senior manager in financial services, and old habits die hard. I'm a project manager through and through and can't abide wasted time.

Diane was employed as a part time administrator since she went back to work after bringing up our four children, and I think it's still all a bit of a shock to her system. But we had been talking on and off for ten years about taking on a franchise and when fate intervened, it seemed like the perfect opportunity. With my financial background, I could see that anyone starting off on the track of self employment could do with all the help and support they could get, and I'd of course seen all the figures about franchised businesses being more likely to succeed.

We usually arrive, traffic permitting, at 9.15am and have barely 15 minutes before we open. This just about gives us time to open the post, check any messages and give the showroom a quick once over - a spot of light dusting, checking the price cards are all in place, illuminating the 20 odd gas and electric fires and ensuring the showroom looks pristine. We've learned quickly that first impressions really do count in this business.

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Before we know where we are, it's time to open the doors and often the customers are already chomping at the bit. Although usually the first arrivals of the day are the fitters, who come to collect materials, the relevant documentation and to review surveys. We talk about the installation specifications and the likely challenges and technical issues of the day.

Many years in management have proved to me that I am a people person and this business offers plenty of opportunity for using those skills. From talking to other Blazes franchisees, they seem to come from a huge variety of backgrounds and bring a wide variety of talents to their businesses. Some are technically minded people who start off with prior knowledge of fireplaces and installations, whilst others are more on the creative and design side, or pure sales people. The vast majority knew nothing about fireplaces before they started.

The phone is always really busy first thing, with customers checking on the progress of their orders and people making initial enquiries about what we stock and how quickly we can do an installation. In between advising, serving and just chatting to customers, we spend the day, reviewing surveys, confirming prices and orders with suppliers, receiving deliveries, logging orders and chasing them through with the appropriate suppliers. Head office provides us with an approved supplier list which is very helpful and not at all restrictive.

On quiet days, I may nip out and carry out some surveys at people's homes if they are nearby, leaving Diane to hold fort at the showroom. But we do cover an unusually large area for Blazes and many orders come from too far away to reach during the day, so I catch up on them after closing.

Something we've got into doing recently, at the advice of our regional licensee and ex-adman, Stuart Law, is proactively marketing ourselves to builders, interior designers and property developers. If we get wind of new housing on the market, we will take out our marketing packs and persuade the agents to put them in their showrooms or mail details out through the post. This is proving a very successful strategy.

We also have to coordinate weekly our advertising schedule, which is spread across radio and newspapers. Stuart helps us to put into practice quarterly marketing plans and his industry experience is invaluable because we have never done anything like this before. It's a bit trial and error at the moment, but we're getting there.

Stuart is really helpful - he spent a lot of time with us in the early days and now is only at the end of the phone whenever we need him. He even got us out of a tight spot recently when we couldn't find an installer for an important job.

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We've found head office hugely supportive and friendly as well. That was one of the main things that attracted us to the company - we thought everyone seemed so genuine and approachable and we have not been proved wrong in any way.

For lunch we will grab a sandwich from the shop opposite, usually at about 12.30pm, although it is not unusual that we don't get to eat them until 3.30pm! Because we have so recently started out and are running the business as a partnership, we made the decision not to take on any staff for the first year until we have a better idea of turnover, so we are both very busy at the moment.

We close up at 5.30pm and then often go and carry out surveys on the way home. I tend to focus on the technical aspects, with Diane offering advice on design and colour schemes.

Every month or so, we change round our displays, constantly adding new lines and this sometimes involves keeping a busy installer back after hours. So we have to put on our best smiles and offer up lots of tea and biscuits!

We don't get home until 8pm or 9pm and then usually all we are fit for is dinner, taking the dogs for another walk and then falling into bed.

At the moment, Sunday is our only day off and we make it a real family day, where we can talk about something other than work, and spend time with our daughters and dogs. If our girls wanted to start their own businesses I would encourage them to look into buying a franchise and one has already expressed an interest in working with Blazes. We have the opportunity to set up two more shops in Yorkshire, and if we do, it is likely she will take over running our current one.

We are looking forward to when we take on staff and can spend more time in the garden and catching up on odd jobs round the house. But I know I certainly don't miss big company politics and am much happier in myself. And Diane finds this new way of working very rewarding.

When we bump into people who we haven't seen in a while and they ask what we're doing they can't believe it. The common response is 'but you don't know anything about fireplaces'. Well we didn't and we've still got a lot to learn, but with the support we received and continue to benefit from, we both feel confident about the future. You can get stuck in a rut for the rest of your life, or you can bite the bullet and do what you've always wanted to do, and for us, there's no looking back. Running our own business is definitely the answer.

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