

# Retail's modern-day Troubleshooter?



In the 1990s, one of my favourite programmes was John Harvey-Jones's *Troubleshooter*, in which he gave out ideas, enthusiasm and hope to failing manufacturing businesses.

He didn't always succeed in turning around those companies, but he always filled you with enthusiasm for manufacturing. We have long waited for a programme to do the same for retailing; showing the fun and excitement of working in businesses that face their customers every day.

So when the BBC showed *Mary Queen of Shops* as a modern-day Troubleshooter for retailing, this should at last have been a chance to show audiences what retailing is all about and how fascinating it is.

Mary Portas announces that this is not just a TV show, but actually a mission to save local shops from the inexorable rise of the sprawling multiple chains. She then visits a 'failing' shop, criticises it and declares her conviction of what needs to be changed, usually to the horror of the owner. It all makes for very entertaining TV.

Lack of experience in bakery, hairdressing or DIY is no hindrance to Ms Portas, whose CV in retail is apparently in window-dressing and design for Harrods and Topshop.

She brooks no disagreement from either staff or owners, imposing her own will, from renaming a shop (amusingly a local neighbourhood hardware store changed from Lightwater Homecare to The Fix-it Factory)



**Does her fashion background equip Mary Portas to advise DIY independents?**

**“AND THEN IT STRUCK ME. THIS PROGRAMME ISN'T ABOUT RETAILING AT ALL. IT'S ABOUT MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCY”**

to new interior layouts and fluorescent staff uniforms.

The programme revisits three weeks later and, almost invariably, all is well. In the hardware store the 'post implementation' review was actually, the owner told me, only four days after the relaunch.

He claims that he lost £10,000 trade following the makeover and almost everything is back now to how it was before. The sad thing is that to me, visiting his store, it is clear that most of his problems are not design items, but absolute retailing basics: wide but too shallow ranging, no range authority, poor merchandising, gaps on shelves and poor staff training.

Some of these Ms Portas did mention, but it's pot luck – sometimes she's right, sometimes not. She remonstrates with staff that they don't listen to customers, but she doesn't seem to listen to anyone; not stopping to consult about which ideas are good ones and which aren't. The staff may be right or wrong – probably both – but, after she's gone, it's the staff who run the store.

And then it struck me. This programme isn't about retailing at all. It's about management consultancy. Harvey-Jones, who had a low opinion of consultants, would have adored this programme.

It's all about how not to motivate and work with clients. How not to handle change. How not to make lasting change. It should be compulsory viewing not at B&Q, but on consultancy induction courses. Perhaps the next series could be renamed *Mary Curse of Consultants?*