

"Stand out from the crowd" says Newman as he unlocks drivers behind sector's investment boom

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Andy Newman from retail consultants mdj2 highlighted the ongoing need to "stand out from the crowd" in a presentation that unlocked the drivers behind the energy in today's garden centre sector which lies in sharp contrast to the "soul searching" on the high street.



Garden Retail Summit: Andy Newman, mdj2

"The mood in retail generally is fairly subdued and investment plans are pretty cautious. Amongst the concerns on the minds of many CEO's are the impacts of

online, excess space and of course Brexit", Newman told the summit.

"There are a few exceptions, like some of value-retailers e.g. The Range, Lidl & Aldi, who are still pursuing store openings, but a number of major retailers including Next, John Lewis and M&S, are being openly cautious about the way forward and are doing quite a bit of soul-searching."

Newman then asked the audience "Has there ever been more energy and investment in the garden centre sector?"

"In the last 18 months, 5 of the top 6 chains have appointed new leaders and together they oversee £625m turnover and nearly 250 centres.

"With these new appointments come fresh levels of enthusiasm and drive to improve these businesses.

"It's not only the chains that are active though - there are some great stories over the last couple of years of independent centres making bold investments such as Bents in Glazebury, Garsons in Esher, or Green Pastures near Norwich."

"The consistent theme from these centres is that they 'stand out from the crowd' and are achieving great financial growth as a result. These centres are not just good - they are great, they are not just ok - they are fantastic. They are creating an experience where customers enjoy spending their time."

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"It's becoming clear that stores increasingly have to offer something special. The web is a really functional way to shop but it rarely creates an enjoyable shopping experience, and certainly isn't somewhere you can spend time with friends or family.

"That said online services such as click & collect have now become a way of life and garden centres must do more to cater for customers who want to shop in this way."

On customer service Newman said: "We can all reel out the cliches about how important great service is, but it has never been truer, and the honest truth is that in many businesses service is good but it's not great. When so much investment is being made on improving physical centres, it's equally important to invest in your teams."

Newman then encouraged independent centres who are considering making major investment to talk to other non-competitive owners to learn from their experiences. "One of the great aspects of the garden centre sector is the willingness of retailers to work together and share their experiences - that's pretty rare."

To close, he said: "The garden centre sector is in great shape going into 2017, and there are some ambitious plans in progress from most of the major chains and several independents - it's great to see."

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