



**mdj2**  
**Celebrating**  
**20 years**  
Supporting  
our clients

# **Paying it forward** **after 20 years in retail,** **trade, and hospitality**

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Four timeless truths  
that still deliver,  
two decades on.



The background of the entire image is a dark blue, textured surface. Overlaid on this is a series of concentric circles in a lighter blue-grey color. The circles are of varying thicknesses and are centered on the page. The overall effect is a sense of depth and focus towards the center.

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A photograph of a person standing in a queue in a supermarket aisle. The person is wearing dark trousers and is positioned next to a shopping trolley. The floor is made of light-colored square tiles. The background shows other trolleys and the structure of the supermarket aisle.

# From aisle queues to AI what's changed, and what has stayed remarkably the same

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The queue at **Tesco** snaked down the frozen aisle, trolleys bulging. Near the back, a parent bribed squabbling kids with **Tangfastics**, sure to be long gone before they reached the checkout. It was 2005. Britain was still finding its rhythm after 9/11 and 7/7. Yet amid the aftershock of those horrors, retail, trade, and hospitality pulsed with ambition.

- ***Don't Cha*** by the ***Pussycat Dolls*** was playing on in-store radio.
- ***Woolworths*** still graced the high street.
- ***Aldi*** and ***Lidl*** were still seen as fringe discounters.
- The last of the ***Safeway*** stores were disappearing beneath new ***Morrisons*** branding.
- The ***iPhone*** was two years away, so eyes still gazed more at shelves than screens.

It was against this backdrop that **Neil Munz-Jones** left behind a corporate career to found consultancy, **mdj2**, which this month celebrates its 20th year.

Digital transformation, the rise of AI, evolving expectations around inclusion, and a sharpened focus on sustainability have all reshaped the landscape. But perhaps what's most remarkable, since mdj2's journey began, is how many of the principles behind meaningful results remain unchanged. So, to mark its milestone birthday, Neil and the mdj2 team are sharing four truths that have stood the test of time and still deliver today.



**Timeless truth #1**

# ***Really* put customers first**



**Nothing matters more than understanding and delivering for your most valuable customers. It might sound obvious, but many businesses lose sight of this.**

“Even big, successful businesses drift,” says Neil.

He points to Asda, which recently announced its ambition to grow George into ‘the largest clothing retailer by volume in the UK’. As George’s Managing Director,

Liz Evans put it, “...We’re getting back to understanding our customers”.

“That public declaration of customer rediscovery says a lot,” Neil reflects. “It shows how even well-established businesses can lose focus on who matters most.”

You need to know who your most profitable customers are, what they need, and what you’re uniquely positioned to offer. That doesn’t stay still.

“Customers change over time,” says Marie Anderson, insights expert and regular mdj2 partner.

## Timeless truth #1 continued...



“It’s easy to get stuck in an outdated view of who your core customers are, or what they want from you. Markets shift and customer expectations rise. Are you adapting to these changes?” says Marie.

“Insights always beat assumptions, adds Andy Newman, director at mdj2. “Most businesses are only instinctively right about their customers around 60% of the time. There’s almost always something in customer insight that’ll surprise them.”

But even when you do know your core customer, it’s easy to get blown off course.

“When a business comes under competitive pressure, it can become reactive. It’s easy to chase sales and trends, follow competitors, and lose sight of core proposition,” says Andy.

Shiny new object syndrome is real. Racing after the next ‘big’ thing often leads to activity that distracts from the bigger picture.

“Just look at all the coverage on AI,” says Neil. “It deserves significant boardroom

time, yes, but it’s an enabler, not a principle.”

At this year’s Global DIY Summit in Lisbon, Neil was encouraged to hear Paul Martin remind delegates that AI is a tool, not a destination. But the fact it needed saying speaks volumes.

“Of course, AI and tech are critical parts of the mix, but the focus needs to be on how they help: analysing data, strengthening your proposition, and, critically, deepening customer understanding and relationships. Everything should start with the customer, AI included,” says John Alexander, who has worked with mdj2 since 2019.

Customer first isn’t new and certainly predated mdj2. But over two decades the team has seen time and again that a customer first mindset still gives the best competitive advantage.

“Done well,” says Neil, “a customer first approach saves a business time, effort, and money, by keeping its focus exactly where it matters most”

## Three questions about **customers** it’s still worth reflecting on today:

- Do we really know **who** our core customers are and **what they want** from us now?
- Will they **notice any changes** we’re making, and will they see them as **improvements**?
- Are we reinforcing what makes the experience **meaningful** for our priority customers?



## Timeless truth #2

# **Focus** is a deliberate strategy



**Effective strategy depends on clarity and the discipline to say no. That clarity makes it easier to focus. It gives leaders the confidence to make bold choices, to say no to the wrong things, and evolve while staying true to their purpose. In other words, focus is a deliberate strategy.**

“You can’t delight everyone all the time. Strategy is about prioritising: customer segments, proposition choices and channels. It starts with knowing who your core customer is, then staying focused so that decision-making around your proposition becomes easier. Evolution and reinvention are both important, as long as the changes serve your core,” says Neil.

Steve Goodburn, a director at mdj2 since its early days, points to Screwfix as one of the UK’s strongest examples of strategic clarity.

“They’re clear on who their customer is, and they’ve designed their business to get products to them efficiently and effectively. The service offer is brilliantly consistent. If they say I can pick something up in two

minutes, it’s there when I arrive. Most retailers can’t make that promise. Screwfix has stuck to its fundamental principles since it opened its first bricks and mortar store 20 years ago, and it has evolved steadily without compromising them.”

Screwfix isn’t alone. Other retailers show a similar commitment to staying focused. Take Aldi and Lidl. Both have deliberately said no to e-commerce, home delivery, and click and collect. With total focus on stores, Aldi has more than tripled its UK footprint since 2005, while Lidl’s has doubled – each now hovering around 1,000 stores.

Their choices have led to improved quality perception and efficiencies. They’ve moved from challenger brands to British staples, now holding a combined 19% market share.



## Timeless truth #2 continued...



Back in 2005, commentators referred to the 'Big Four'. That's no longer accurate. Today it's more credible to talk about the Big Six, with Aldi having overtaken Morrisons to claim the number four spot, and Lidl now challenging them for fifth.

Beyond the grocers, there's been other strong examples of strategic clarity and evolution.

Blue Diamond Garden Centres have preserved and strengthened their identity as garden experts while successfully evolving their formats into go-to destinations with impressive restaurants and more. They are now the UK's #1 garden centre operator by turnover.

Next made an early shift to digital, maintaining strong brand continuity while expanding its online platform with well-aligned third-party brands, like Laura Ashley, REISS, and Boden.

"One thing I've noticed across all these retailers is that when leadership is stable, clarity of proposition holds over time," says Neil.

- John Mewett, CEO of Screwfix, spent a decade as Marketing and eCommerce Director before taking the top role in 2018.
- Giles Hurley, (Aldi UK) and Ryan McDonnell, (Lidl UK) both joined their brands in the millennium, and have led them for the last seven and three years respectively.
- Alan Roper has been Managing Director of Blue Diamond Group for 26 years.
- Simon Wolfson of Next started as a Sales Assistant in 1991 and has led as CEO since 2001.

"This suggests it is easier for a brand to lose focus when there are frequent changes of leadership," says Neil.

## Three questions on clarity it's still worth reflecting on today:

- What are we **famous for** and are we **protecting it**?
- Are we making **bold choices**, or diluting our impact trying to do too much?
- What do we need to **say no to**? Saying no can be a positive choice.



## Timeless truth #3

# ***Execution*** is what separates the good from ***the great***



**A great strategy is only as good as its execution.**

“We are big believers in the old adage that it’s better to have a good strategy well-executed than a great strategy averagely executed,” says Neil.

The two are, of course, inextricably linked. It’s far easier to execute a strategy when it’s clear and focused. The retailers mentioned in Truth #2 (Screwfix, Aldi, Lidl, Next) owe much of their success to their clarity, paired with disciplined and repeatable execution across their business models and infrastructure.

A couple of practices stand out that underpin great execution, both rooted in a customer-first approach: category management and a ‘lean’ approach to efficiency.

“When clients turn to us for help with category management, they’re usually focused on optimising ranges and space productivity. But for us it’s a broader mindset. It begins by stepping into the customer’s shoes, then taking a holistic view of how all categories contribute to the business,” says Neil.

This approach to category management extends beyond commercial teams. It brings key departments together to break down functional silos, prioritise the right activity, and align teams around a shared proposition. The result is a more joined-up customer experience.

And with customer expectations rising every year, businesses can’t stand still.



## Timeless truth #3 continued...



Improving efficiency must be part of great execution, freeing up funds for improvement initiatives.

But cost reduction needs to be done thoughtfully.

“A relentless drive to cut costs often backfires. You can’t just keep trimming budgets.

Eventually, you cut the wrong things. A customer-centric view of productivity focuses on the difference between what is waste and which activities truly add value,” says Steve.

“Often, the best ideas for improving efficiency come from colleagues closest to the customer. Shop floor, front of house, customer-facing team members. They know where the waste is, and they often

know what needs to change. The trick is listening,” adds Steve.

Prioritising effectiveness over pure cost-cutting has shaped many of mdj2’s most impactful projects. One recent example was with a UK leader in the hospitality sector with over 2,000 sites across the UK.

“They’ve built an enviable culture of entrepreneurial energy across their estate but were struggling with consistency. We helped standardise key aspects of execution, improving consistency for customers without dampening that entrepreneurial spirit,” Steve explains.

“The upshot is a leaner, more effective business. But without that focus on effectiveness, the substantial cost saving they made could easily have come at the expense of service, morale, or both.”

## Three questions about **execution** it’s still worth reflecting on today:

- Are our operating model and systems designed to **support the smooth execution** of our strategy?
- Do our teams understand and **buy into the strategy** and how their roles contribute?
- Are we encouraging our front-line teams to feed into **improving how we operate**?



**Timeless truth #4**

# ***Relationships*** **trump transactions**



**At their heart retail, trade, and hospitality are people businesses. That hasn't changed and it never will. Lasting success is built on trust — with customers, clients, colleagues, and suppliers.**

Even as digital acceleration continues to reshape the landscape, human connection matters more than ever.

"It's the relationship a customer has with your business that counts, and that's both on a functional and emotional level," says Andy.

"Whether that's in person, or online, it's all about the relationship. We've seen time and again, particularly in the trade, that customers just want to feel like they are valued. That you're trying to help. That's what builds trust and loyalty," adds Andy.

Relationships begin with clarity: knowing who your most important customers are, what they want from you, and how your offer stacks up. But that is not enough. Those people also need to feel something. They need to believe they're an important part of your story.

And it's not just your customers that need to feel an emotional connection with your business. Your colleagues matter too.



## Timeless truth #4 continued...

“There’s constant pressure to deliver rapid transformation. But skip over people and you skip the most essential part. Taking time to acknowledge where people are and the realities they work within is never wasted.

We often say, slow down to speed up, because that short-term time investment brings long-term results. No one thinks of themselves as ‘resistant to change’, despite what management may say about dinosaurs and blockers,” says Neil.

Culture still beats strategy when people aren’t emotionally bought in. Strategy not landing is something clients are often grappling with when they turn to mdj2.

“Every business needs to make space to pause, take a breath, and reconnect with its key stakeholders,” Andy explains.

“That includes regularly sharing where you’re going, why it matters, and how it fits into your view of the world. People need to hear their leaders say, ‘We believe in this vision’”.

What mdj2 has found, through their work with clients, is that when culture and values align, solutions land better. Change sticks. Execution sharpens. And trust builds.

That trust sits at the heart of mdj2’s twenty-year story, with over 90% of their work coming from repeat business or referral.

“We’ve always believed that behind every project are people, and people are what matter most,” says Neil.

“The phrase ‘to us it’s more than just another project’, is our strapline, but it also reflects how we work. We focus on long-term partnerships. They take time and trust to build, but they are worth the effort.”

To illustrate the investment building that trust can require, Neil shares an example:

“We worked with a client early in mdj2’s journey and completed several successful projects. Then he moved into a different sector and things went quiet. Still, we kept in touch. Ten years later, he reached out for support. I asked who else he was speaking to. ‘No one,’ he said. ‘I know you’re the right team for the job’. That’s the power of trusted relationships. You can’t buy that. It’s earned over time.”

In a world that often feels transactional, fast paced, and impersonal, people want genuine connection. They want to feel seen and cared about by brands, by teams, by leaders. Those who invest in building that connection benefit from it.

## Four questions about **building trusted relationships** it’s still worth reflecting on today:

- Are we building **emotional connection**, or just completing transactions?
- Do teams feel **connected to our vision**, or just briefed on it?
- Are we **investing in relationships** in the same way, for example, we invest in tech?
- Will our customers still be **choosing us first** in the years to come?





**Retail, trade, and hospitality  
are neither simple nor static,  
but these fundamentals still  
hold true and deliver success  
when you stay focused.**

**Truth #1: Really put customers first.**

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**Truth #2: Focus is a deliberate strategy.**

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**Truth #3: Execution is what separates the good from the great.**

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**Truth #4: Relationships trump transactions.**

Neil, Steve, Andy, John, and Marie are part of mdj2, a consultancy focused on driving growth, efficiency and change in retail, trade, and hospitality. This month, mdj2 turns twenty and this article was written to mark that milestone.

“It has been a privilege to work with so many fabulous humans (not just clients and colleagues!)” concludes mdj2 founder, Neil Munz-Jones. “We are proud of the work we’ve done and the relationships we’ve built. Here’s to the next twenty years of mdj2, and all the questions, answers, opportunities, challenges, and relationships still to come.”