

“Quaint” sometimes just doesn’t do it!

During the years I have spent visiting village shops, there are a few words that crop up in conversations with the owners that set off alarm bells. And “quaint” is one that is near the top of my list.

It is usually claimed to be what strangers first say when they come through the door, as in, “What a quaint shop you have here”.

There is nothing wrong with a quaint shop – having a character very different from the multiples is actually a very good approach, but here is the rub. It has to be combined with what we know customers want from a food store; a clean and bright environment, wide aisles and a good range of products well displayed. They want local produce. They want friendly personal service and acceptable prices. So if you want customers to come back to a quaint shop, it has to balance its unique character with good standards.

Unfortunately, “quaint” is sometimes a coded way of saying that we do not want to or can’t invest enough money in the business, which is fair enough in its way. Sometimes it is part of a laudable desire to get away from the uniform look of the big supermarkets at all costs, although the trouble here is that “different” does not always mean “better”. A third reason is that often the shop’s best customers are the elderly, people who have lived in the village for decades and say they do not want change – although in my experience, once a refit is carried out,

they are amongst the first to appreciate the improvements. And if you do stick too long with just quaintness, younger people in particular will shop elsewhere in places that do meet their expectations.

There are some superb quaint shops that balance character and efficiency – some shopkeepers do it really well. The beams in the ceiling can make the sales area seem dark, but properly lit they become a real feature. Some stone-flagged floors can be a dull trip-hazard, but properly maintained they are a real joy. There is probably no place for old wooden non-adjustable shelving, but efficient, modern, easy-to-clean equivalents can be made to look just as right in a traditional setting.

“Quaint” is great- but it’s what goes with it that matters.



*RSA chief executive,
Kenneth Parsons*

“Quaint” is great- but it’s what goes with it that matters....

Quaint it is, quaint it ain’t - both can work