

# The City interview

by Alex Brummer

**S**ITTING on a coffee shop balcony overlooking B&Q's vast store at New Malden in Surrey, Thierry Garnier looks slightly agitated. 'What's wrong?' I ask.

'When you've spent 20 years in the store you can smell if it's managed well or badly,' he says.

The tall, elegant and fashionably bearded French chief executive has spotted a stray wire hanging from the translucent ceiling.

Immediately below us the 55-year-old (pictured right) points to the empty spaces on shelves displaying teal coloured, ceramic plant pots.

Garnier is a mathematician-turned-businessman who spent the early part of his career working in the French public sector for euro-crat Michel Barnier. The Kingfisher boss honed his retail and commercial skills at France's hypermarket pioneer Carrefour.

His vision for the future of Kingfisher was incubated during a seven-and-a-half year stint for Carrefour in China, which taught him that Europe's big challenge is catching up with Asia on the speed of e-commerce. His years in Beijing also



# How DIY bloomed during lockdown

(should've gone to B&Q, Carrie)

became an intellectual challenge for Garnier, his wife and four children.

He personally set out to become fluent in Mandarin and by the time he left for his new life in the UK, he was able read his morning paper over breakfast in Chinese.

It is the meticulous attention to

detail which distinguishes the better retailers from the rest, and in 18 short months at the helm the Frenchman, now living in West London, has already made an enormous difference.

Assisted by the pandemic and lockdown, the do-it-yourself and do-it-for-me company has seen revenues, profits and market share soar.

Among Garnier's early decisions was to kill off the 'One Kingfisher' strategy of his predecessors, which meant promoting own-label merchandise and uniformity across the stores.

As we explore the vast floor space of one of the three top selling B&Qs in the country, he points out that the stores have reverted to selling best known brands - Stanley for tools, Dulux for paints and high end German branded power tools alongside own label products.

**G**ARNIER also rejected the idea that somehow Kingfisher's three distinctive enterprises - B&Q for consumers, Screwfix for the trades and Brico, its Continental discount operation - could somehow be brought together under one brand.

'When you have those strengths you don't try and merge them into one proposition,' he says.

'It's three different customers and three different pricing models. The strength is in the different banners.'

Standing in the bright garden centre at the back of the store, a big destination for shoppers during the lockdowns, Garnier expresses extreme satisfaction with the tightly displayed arrays of greenery, bushes and brightly coloured border shrubs.

Among the most popular lines are the large ready-planted pots brimming with blooming plants, ideal for flat dwellers with a balcony. As we pass through the nursery, the manager reports an invasion of shoppers over the last weekend and expects an ever bigger socially-distanced tide over the May bank holiday.

The next port of call on our store tour is a neatly screened off area with a click-and-collect desk. The area behind is where staff sort online orders after picking items off the sales floor.

The pandemic was a trigger which led B&Q to up its e-commerce game.

On the first day of the first

lockdown, Garnier decided the DIY group needed to move online immediately. Even though, technically, hardware stores were allowed to operate, none of the disease protection protocols were ready.

To make the online task manageable, as it was rolled out across the 300 B&Q stores, Garnier and colleagues chose to begin with 6,000-lines, known in the jargon as stock keeping units, each identified with a bar code.

Working overnight, the stores were reorganised for online.

Garnier said: 'We responded to the explosion in demand by operating store picking. That's typically the Chinese approach.'

'In China there is a lot of store picking and it's fast with a pledge of 15-minutes delivery time from store to home.'

'Over time, B&Q is able to extend its offer to the full store assortment.' As Kingfisher

adjusts to a new post-Covid world, it is to China that the Frenchman looks for the model.

'The younger generation of customers are really looking for speed everywhere,' he says.

'You see that in grocery. You see that on TikTok and its 15-second movies.'

When he was working for Carrefour in China the Kingfisher chief learned that customers wanted their basket in half-an-hour. That meant 15 minutes picking and 15 minutes delivery. He is seeking to bring the same discipline to his new operation.

'B&Q is doing click and collect in one hour. We are fighting for speed. I think one hour is too long. In Spain they are doing it in 15 minutes and at Screwfix it is one minute,' he says.

As well as turbo-charging online commerce in the UK and in its Continental operations, Kingfisher is also having to adjust its model to reflect the cultural change during the pandemic and the swing back to DIY.

**T**HE more time people spend at home, the better for both Kingfisher's do-it-yourself and trade arms. As well as Screwfix, B&Q operates a cavernous self-service facility known as Tradepoint for the smaller builder, seeking timber or a cement mixer hire, in the basement space beneath its larger stores.

Garnier says: 'If you are more at home, you have more wear and tear, you may look for a garden you don't have and you need to have a proper home office, a room to exercise in and maybe a cabin in the garden. This is the new DIY.'

Marketing surveys conducted by the company show that large cohorts of younger people aged between 18 to 34 have been drawn to DIY, and an amazing 75pc said they enjoyed it.

After the pandemic bump, which saw same store sales across the group soar 71pc to £12.3bn, Garnier is confident that DIY and home improvements are set for a good ride over the medium term.

As lockdown has eased, B&Q has been able to reopen its kitchen design services, paint mixing facilities and bulk up its now fashionable again wallpaper choices. Pity that Boris Johnson's fiancée Carrie Symonds (pictured left) didn't think of B&Q before opting for Lulu Lytle rococo.



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