



**Pier1 Bathrooms** in Hove won the New Bathroom Retailer of the Year title at the 2021 kbbreview retail & Design Awards. **Chris Frankland** talks to MD **Angus Warner** (pictured) to find out what lies behind that success

# PIER PRESSURE



The 1,500sq ft showroom has around 20 displays

**A**s I walk through the door at Pier1 Bathrooms in Hove for my interview with MD Angus Warner, I am greeted by store manager Rosie Proto. I recognise her at once as the person I had seen on stage at The Anglican Cathedral in Liverpool proudly waving aloft their trophy for kbbreview New Bathroom Retailer of the Year in 2021.

She goes off to find him and I am left to look around 20-odd displays in this 1,500sq ft showroom on its excellent corner site at the intersection of Church Road and Albany Villas in this very Bohemian and artistic quarter of Hove, near Brighton.

Surrounded by classy food and drink stores and many boutique showrooms specialising in home interiors and kitchens, Pier1 seems ideally located to sell its offering of luxury bathrooms.

Warner emerges from the back of the showroom sporting a light covering of dust from some work he had been doing and as we sit down to talk, I notice Pier1's kbbreview Retail & Design Award proudly displayed on the shelves behind store manager Proto's desk.

And so, I just have to know, what did winning the award mean to Pier1? He smiles and says: "It is a validation of a lot of the work that was put in by the team and showroom manager Rosie who have made the business what it is

– the customer service, the style."

In its submission to the kbbreview Retail & Design Awards 2021, Warner said that the philosophy that underpins Pier1 Bathrooms is "bespoke luxury for all on a range of budgets".

I ask Warner how that works in practice. He explains: "Luxury is a feel, a look, ease of use, the service – all of those things. If people are in a place where they are frustrated that their fitters are not fitting what they wanted and they can't talk to them because they are not an expert – that's not luxury. We manage all of that for our customers, irrespective of the price of their bathroom. So luxury has a number of dimensions."

### Excitement

That ties in with a statement on the Pier1 website that says they want customers to get excited about the design rather than technical specs.

Elaborating on that, Warner says: "For sure. That comes back to that luxury experience. They are not having to worry about whether something is a centimetre too big. That is just done. They simply choose the style they like, the attributes of the bathroom that they want, the products they want, and we take care of all the tedious stuff and the outcome is that luxury experience."

And technical specs should not enter the equation. He adds: "Customers get looked after here. We really



A busy corner location ensures good footfall

make sure they know what they are getting and that it meets what they want. That is followed through to the fit-out where the fitters get the technical specifications of what they need to do and we oversee what they do."

And this is what Warner is trying to convey by the term luxury. He continues: "So luxury is the service, the quality, the look, the experience both here and in their bathroom going forward. Luxury for a mum of three might be ease of access for bathing the kids, but then being able to close that door and enjoy the space for herself. But that may not be luxury for someone else, so it is a case of understanding what the individual wants. Is it a space that will be used by friends and family who come to visit or will it be a space exclusively for themselves? And understanding that is a key part of ensuring they get that luxury experience."

So what was Warner's background

before he opened Pier1 Bathrooms in July 2019? He originally worked in online bathroom retail for his brother who owned two high-street stores. Then he moved into heavy engineering and then, four years ago, consulting, when he and his wife Stephanie decided to move back down to Brighton and Hove – an area they both love. Today, he still manages a power generation plant in Hull as his main job, putting in a couple of days a week at Pier1, where he is assisted by Stephanie as his business development manager.

When the couple moved to Brighton four years ago, Warner soon saw potential in the local area for a luxury bathroom showroom. He recalls: "It has a similar population to Wandsworth in London, and there you have got CP Hart, West One, Kallums, etc. It is that kind of vibe that we are bringing to Brighton, that kind of experience, and there is a market down here for ▶



that for sure – and there was no one here doing it to the quality that we do, in my opinion.”

Having opened the showroom in July 2019, it wasn't long of course before Covid struck with its lockdowns and forced closures, but Warner reports that business recovered quickly for Pier1, and it came out the other side with a backlog of orders.

### Accelerated

“Turnover has doubled for us, if not more,” Warner tells me. “We got accelerated through that lockdown period. We went from just two people here to five employees. In addition to our store manager, Rosie, we have designers George and Lilly, Emily on accounts, plus Leanne who is coming back from maternity leave shortly.”

With Pier1's philosophy of offering a fully curated, luxury experience, I ask Warner if finding installers was a challenge. He says: “We are growing and bringing new guys on board isn't always easy. We have the teams we have always used and we've also been speaking to another team who want to work with us – they have installed bathrooms before for people who have just bought the products, and we have got to know their work and have also had feedback from customers. That is one way to find

them. We are always there for the end of an install and so we can get to evaluate their performance.”

Warner adds that at present his installers are all subcontractors, but he recognises there may be an argument for employing their own if business increases. He adds: “At the moment, the quality is there with the model we are using and we don't want to change that right now.”

In terms of brands, Pier1's main names are Villeroy and Boch, GSI, Dansani, Crosswater, Arte Form, Ciphial, Kast, Ca' Pietra, Calypso and BC Designs, although they say they work with more than 100 different brands. Customers, Warner says, are typically spending between £5,000 and £50,000.

But Warner sees the danger of offering too many choices. “There are so many options out there that people could get confused,” he tells me, “which is why we have experienced designers to narrow it down for them. They tell us what kind of bath they want and our team can quickly narrow that down to a choice of one or two.”

Sales for Pier1 are predominantly to retail customers within a catchment area of 20 to 30 miles. Warner says they have done a few bathrooms for small developers, but acknowledges that they are more set up for retail at

moment. Mind you, store manager Proto did mention that one random walk-in resulted in their selling products for 10 bathrooms in a development in St Lucia.

Trend-wise, Proto confirms that they do sell quite a few colourful bathrooms, with pink being a popular choice, although spa and wellness is not a huge area for them.

And are people asking for sustainable and water-saving products? No, not according to Warner. He says: “People are not asking for it. People don't get it yet, but we make sure we source from suppliers that are conforming with EU regulations around carbon management. Most people have other issues in their lives that prevent them from making environmentally-based decisions and until the Government legislates on it correctly, you have to rely on companies like us, who can use the right suppliers that have committed to the EU carbon management programme.”

With many retailers complaining about supply chain problems, Warner says it has not been a huge issue for Pier1.

As he observes: “One of the valuable

**“Most people have other issues in their lives that prevent them from making environmentally-based decisions and until the Government legislates on it correctly, you have to rely on companies like us who can use the right suppliers**

activities we do here is the design process, not least because we can see what is happening in terms of stock and say to someone that if they want a certain style of products, here is one that we can get more quickly. That process can help iron out those supply chain issues. There will always be a similar product you can use.”

Despite their excellent location and good footfall, Warner still recognises the need for effective marketing and makes use of local lifestyle magazines such as The Hovarian and has recently taken on an agency to provide a more online-focused with their website and social media.

“We are investing not a huge amount, but it has made a big difference and so at some point we will definitely open the tap on that and really drive footfall. We have taken it up a level now because, (a) we're ready and (b) what we are doing now is laying the foundation for the next change of gear.”

And what will that next change of gear be?

Warner confides that he definitely plans to open another showroom, maybe more: “For sure. Six to 10 maybe in the long term. I have been looking at a couple of sites, but the critical thing is to find the right people. Sites are easier to find than people and, as you can see, we are building up the team here, so that as and when we find the next site we can very quickly get up and running. That is all part of the strategy.

“Recruitment is the key. Once we have got one or two more people, then we will be ready to open a new store.”

He concludes: “In terms of location, they would have to be in areas where we are likely to make money and, with our current catchment area of 20 to 30 miles, they would need to be 60 miles from here.”

Pier1 Bathrooms may be a new kid in KBB town, but they are no rookies and their ambitious plans could see them heading for life in the fast lane. **kbb**