

HIGH STREET HEROES

How M&S's values



From humble beginnings, Marks & Spencer became retail's leading light. In this extract from his new book, Timpson chairman **John Timpson** looks at what set it apart

It is difficult to know where to put most credit among the Marks (Michael and Simon) and the Sieffs (Israel, Marcus and Edmund), but between them they did an amazing job between 1894 and 1984, building everything that made Marks & Spencer an example for the rest of us to follow.

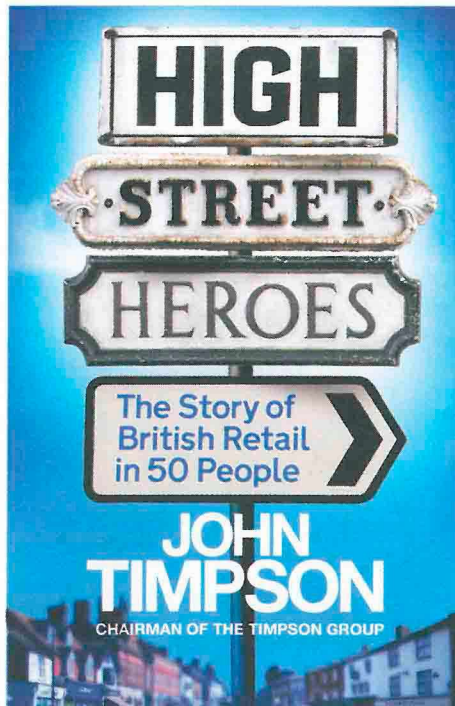
It can't have been part of a long-term plan; no one could have foreseen how a market stall in Leeds, followed by a penny bazaar in Birkenhead and their first proper shop in Cheetham Hill, north of Manchester city centre, would blossom into the chain that dominated our high streets after the Second World War.

As a fellow retailer I confess to feeling, at the time, a slight irritation at the unique reputation their stores had in the eyes of customers, which implied, perhaps rightly, that all other multiple chains were in another, inferior, league. This jealousy didn't stop me admiring their achievements and trying to copy some of their best ideas. There is no doubt that the Marks and the Sieffs developed a business and created a culture that showed how, by running a really good business, you also make very good money.

The M&S culture based on quality, value, integrity and high standards meant that every part of the business followed the same philosophy. Customers, colleagues and suppliers all enjoyed the benefits of being part of the M&S experience.

Customers got a fair deal, especially if they had a problem. The M&S no-quibble returns policy, which allowed exchange or a refund on any recent purchase, may have encouraged some unscrupulous customers to claim money for slightly worn or even shoplifted garments, but the cost was well worth the reputation earned for great customer care, which was reflected in all the other ways customers were treated. Although M&S was mostly self-service, pleasant staff were usually willing to give a helping hand.

The stores weren't spectacular but they were spotless. M&S was always happier to be a follower of fashion than a leader and the store



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High Street Heroes – The Story of British Retail in 50 People, by John Timpson, is published by Icon Books and is available now through Amazon, priced £12.99 in paperback or £9.99 as an ebook. Amazon.co.uk/High-Street-Heroes-British-Retail/dp/1848319169



design provided a comfortable welcome for most age groups. Teenagers found little of interest in M&S but returned as regular customers as soon as the first baby was born. For a lot of basic purchases most people recognised that M&S was the most obvious, easiest and best place to shop.

The promise of 100% British goods was an important cornerstone of the M&S image. It was a way of underlining their quality while reassuring regular customers that they were being loyal to home-based industry. At a time when cheaper, often shoddy, imports were starting to threaten UK manufacturers, the 'British only' claim gave M&S a special place on the moral high ground.

Support for home produce meant they had to develop a special way to work with suppliers which went well beyond the usual buyer/seller relationship. Many regarded selection as an M&S supplier to be a major accolade, a sign that the supplier was well run and had high quality standards.

Such recognition generally came with the promise of a long order book and support from M&S research and development. But M&S suppliers had to maintain high standards to keep their membership of this exclusive club. The rigorous inspections by quality control

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set it apart



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and the expectations of good housekeeping, prompt deliveries and exclusivity meant many suppliers had to sell their soul to M&S to keep the business.

Customers came to rely on M&S quality and some items, like socks and knickers, were so popular they achieved enormous shares of the market. By working so closely with manufacturers M&S was able to develop whole ranges of merchandise that enjoyed special customer appeal and a commanding position in the market. Men's suits and women's cashmere sweaters were examples of the M&S master touch.

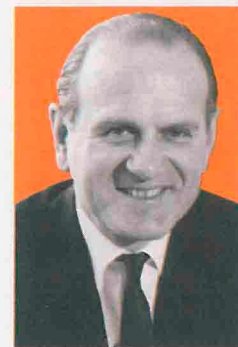
The best example of the M&S ability to innovate and create a new market was, and still is, in food. They were at the forefront of developing convenience food, introducing sell-by dates in 1970 and tempting a large number of British households to try things like avocado, fresh orange juice and prawn cocktail in a way that persuaded people to pay

premium prices for good quality produce. Customers were happy to foot the bill for quality they could trust because it came with the M&S values.

To underpin the whole philosophy, M&S was able to attract great employees. No other retailer did so much to pamper their shop workers. From 1930 onwards a new, improved staff welfare policy began to develop such benefits as cut-price chiropody and hairdressing, free health screening for breast and cervical cancer, healthy food in the canteen and a free uniform, with the girls getting a generous supply of American tan-coloured tights.

It wasn't surprising that so many people applied to work for M&S; the company could take their pick from the best available talent. This was particularly true of management trainees, who were given an all-round grounding in retailing from shop floor to the buying departments. M&S management

John Timpson on why he rates Marcus Sieff number one in his list of UK retail's top 50



Marcus Sieff ran Marks & Spencer from 1974 to 1984. It was the time when the rest of us regarded Marks as the gold standard of retail. We were envious of its culture with its

reputation for value, quality, reliability and being a great place to work. Marcus Sieff influenced most major retailers through his graduate training scheme which, as well as developing the next generation of Marks' managers, produced a lot of talent that won top jobs elsewhere. M&S training was the perfect passport to put on a CV.

Under Marcus Sieff's leadership Marks & Spencer became far and away the best retailer of the age. That's why he is at the top of my list.

training was a passport to lots of the top jobs throughout retailing.

In the mid-1980s M&S seemed to have it all. Years of dedicated development based on a social conscience and a passion for excellence had created a complete culture that set the chain apart from all those that claimed to be competitors. But the next few years showed that it was not so easy to keep those traditions up to date.

Perhaps someone should have written down the things that made the difference, a list of the essential building blocks that made M&S such a powerful force. It would have included at its core the way they looked after their colleagues and customers and how they valued suppliers. But even with these core values the company still needs to be led by someone with the flair to fashion the culture from decade to decade. Things seem to have slipped as soon as Marcus Sieff stepped down as skipper in 1984.