



## an eye opener

I have often passed the intimate, upscale hotels that stand in the shadow of The British Museum and idly wondered – or to be truthful fantasized – as to whether they rented rooms by the hour and what the reaction of the smartly-uniformed staff would be if I enquired. How fitting then that I should find myself being directed along the thickly carpeted corridor of just one of these hotels on my way to find the EDF meeting.

Before knocking, I reviewed what I knew about the EDF. It wasn't much. The brainchild of N.A.G. chairman Jonathan Lambert and chief executive Michael Hoare, it had been launched a year ago to give experienced retailers an opportunity to develop their management skills, and thereby improve their business. Key to the programme was the beneficial experience of sharing information with the group in strictest confidence, specifically about the member's business and its management style.

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This I'd imagined would be liberating for any manager used to making decisions based solely on small number of information sources, their own limited experience and gut feel. Where better than from your peers to seek new ideas, or to affirm that your strategy and tactics should take the business in the right direction? What else did I know about the programme? That in Mike McGraw the N.A.G. had found a business consultant and trainer of wide commercial experience who could offer insights from a wealth of other industries while adding a disciplined structure to the group's discussions.

I had chatted to one of the group at last year's Loughborough Valuers and Jewellers

Conference and they were enthusiastic following their first meeting. One comment was: "there are no big egos in the group" – which must have been a relief all round. Keenly aware that the dynamics of any bonded group can be delicate, and upset by an intrusion by an outsider, I knocked quietly and slipped in as unobtrusively as any man can carrying a four-foot tripod.

My first impression was that I was obviously with a group of people who had not only bonded, but come to know, trust and respect each other as colleagues and even friends. It was rather like the atmosphere at a Board meeting of a young and vibrantly successful company. Far from interfering with the group dynamics, the members were so engrossed in discussion that my arrival went unnoticed. Taking the Board analogy further, firmly in the chair was Mike McGraw, who looks a lot younger in the flesh than he does in photographs, or at least in my ones.

Mike gave an incisive introduction to a topic – for the hour I was present that topic being the role of the internet in retail jewellery, just one of a number covered during the day-long meeting. He presented some well-researched facts and observations on the use of the web by a selection of jewellery retailers. Following this, Mike gave his views on the way internet retailing would develop and then opened up the discussion to the group. Each of the seven members had their own experiences to relate of using their sites to market their business, and in some cases to sell products.

It was clear that while the group's success with the internet to date had been mixed,

The Executive Development Forum nears its first anniversary with one cell established and a second likely to form in the coming months. *Jeweller* editor Anthony Levy was allowed to attend a recent EDF meeting for an hour. So impressed was he by what he saw that after his hour was up he had to be asked to leave. Twice.

each member saw having a web presence as necessary. The right and wrong ways of setting up and commissioning a site were discussed, as was the likely costs involved. One of the members revealed they were launching a pure internet retail jewellery business which was to be kept completely separate from their bricks and mortar operation. This move was questioned by some in the group, who argued that it would be better to use the considerable investment required for such a venture to build an internet presence on the foundations of their already strong brand.

Over the course of 45 minutes, the group generated over a hundred thoughts, experiences, anecdotes, observations and conjectures, from among which each would extract their own nuggets to use in their business. What struck me was the sheer quantity and quality of information that was exchanged in less than an hour, and its potential usefulness to any retail jeweller with an interest in the internet. I cannot imagine where else a retailer would go to learn so much relevant material in so short a time. I'm not aware of any research, articles or publications covering internet use in the





retail jewellery sector. Web experts and designers with retail jewellers among their clients tend to be less than impartial when giving advice. And web business magazines are generally aimed at the technically minded, significantly reducing potential readership. If it were possible, and this I doubt, it would have taken many days or even weeks of research to discover what the EDF group shared in the hour I was with them. How odd that a number of members declined an invitation to get involved with the EDF because of a lack of time!

Also surprising was the openness of the group in discussing not only where they had

succeeded in their use of internet technology, but the blind alleys they'd had to explore to get there. And while you learn most from your own mistakes, you can learn a great deal from those of other people. Moreover, it was obvious that this frankness – fostered by an understanding that EDF discussions are strictly confidential – was a feature of the meetings regardless of the topic discussed.

I'd been sceptical when I'd heard that EDF members shared sensitive business information with a view to gaining a thorough understanding of the challenges faced by each of them. Having witnessed a meeting, I was no longer in any doubt that members

were willing to reveal all. Another marked feature of the meeting was the respect that each member gave to the views of the others. The comment that there were "no big egos" was spot on. Overall, my impression was that the EDF was a fantastic opportunity and of tremendous value to any go-ahead retail jeweller. Indeed, I very much wanted to stay and take part, and would have done had I been invited. Which I wasn't.

Given my full conversion to the EDF concept, I'm disappointed that there aren't cells mushrooming up all over the UK. But it probably requires the experience of a meeting to gain a real idea of what EDF can offer. There's no doubt that the programme will catch on, when word gets around that EDF is not only informative, motivating, challenging and highly useful from a business perspective, but also very enjoyable. And, certainly worth noting, excellent value for money compared with the high cost of significantly less relevant management training. My advice to every member is to look into getting involved. You and your business are guaranteed to gain hugely from the experience. I did; I was only there an hour – and I'm not a retail jeweller.

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## What's the point of your website if it doesn't bring you business?



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