

Honest shopkeeping

D&M might seem like a tool-retailing empire, but one hard-working man keeps it all together. Andy King meets **Paul Dowding**

Not being a fan of rugby, there are only two things I associate with Twickenham. The first is D&M Tool Store, the other is Erica Rowe. Let's stick with D&M for now!

I've known Paul Dowding, owner of the store, since his first tool show at Kempton Park Racetrack. He comes from a long line of woodworkers, but despite being something of a tool anorak, he had no interest in going into woodwork for a living. He took the company over from his father – 'D&M' actually stands for 'Dave and Mary', Paul's parents – who in turn inherited it from his father, having started the business 40 years ago. Back then it was a sort of ironmongers, but ended up selling a variety of products, including plenty of tools.

Dave and Mary moved into the current premises in 1978. It started as a double-fronted shop, but expanded to take up five buildings. In 1996 the first D&M mail order catalogue appeared, followed by a website in 2000. In



▲ D&M Tool Store began as a double-fronted shop, but expanded to take up five buildings



▲ Owner Paul Dowding prides himself on really knowing every product he sells



▲ There are more than 700 power tools and machines on display from the likes of Trend and DeWalt

2003 Paul began using the internet to sell products in earnest.

There are now over 700 power tools and machines on display, plus all the associated hand tools and accessories. (Luckily I had



▲ D&M also sells various hand tools, accessories, and toolboxes and bags

locked my wallet in the car...) A little atypically, it's toolboxes and bags that Paul's really into, though: "If I had my way," he enthuses, "I could fill the shop with them." In fact, there's a whole wall dedicated to them and I have some difficulty persuading him out of the aisle!

Aside from boxes and bags, there's such a range of tools – from all the big manufacturers, no less – that you could imagine yourself being lost for choice. Fortunately, Paul is usually on hand himself to help customers.

"I'm competent enough to be able to use anything I sell," he explains, "and I know everything that I sell. I may not be up to trade standard or speed in certain areas, but I do know when something is not as good as it should be when I go to tool launches." What's more, he's not going to cynically guide you

towards a more expensive product for the sake of it or sell you tools you don't need:

"If someone asks for a particular tool, or a tool at a certain price, we'll ask what he or she wants it for, and invariably offer them advice and a cheaper tool in some areas, or even advise them against a purchase. We may lose a sale, but the end result is the customer trusts us as tool specialists to offer the best guidance and will retain that faith in years to come."

Showtime

Clearly, Paul and his team have been very busy developing D&M, so it might seem surprising that he decided to launch the renowned D&M Tool Show too. "Most people in the trade will be aware of 'trade days'," says Paul. "These take place at the local tool stores and builders



▲ The D&M show grew out of the 'trade days' that were taking place so often at the store



▲ There are lots of demonstrations at the show from manufacturers. Also expect special offers...



▲ ...talks, tutorials and a wide range of brands. No wonder this show is so popular

merchants, where the likes of DeWalt, Makita and Bosch spend a day with their ranges of tools out on display for punters to try. There'll also be special offers for the day plus, of course, free tea and bacon sandwiches!

"We have space alongside the shop and behind where we used to have [trade days], and as we stock every major brand, we were having them constantly. It made sense to try and get a few along at the same time, and we did that for a few years before thinking about running our own show at Kempton."

I remember going to the first Tool Show at Kempton intending to have a look around for an hour or so. I ended up spending the whole day there, not only because every manufacturer you'd ever want to see was in one venue, but also because it was so packed. The show expanded year on year, and now, with indoor space limited, the outer entrance way has marquee and exhibition lorries as well.

The free entrance and free parking are certainly appealing, but the diversity of manufacturers attending is the main draw. This meant that the show managed to defy the economic downturn this year; last November it was solid with people as always.

The event's organisation must take forever – in fact, it commences a full year in advance: "Straight after the show finishes I look back to see what we could improve for the next one," Paul reveals, "as we strive to make each show better than the last. Then the work starts in earnest again three to four months before it's due. I have every single relative and friend of the family helping out, so it's still the



independent family business my Dad set up. He's still involved now, and comes into the shop to do paperwork." I can see for myself that Paul puts in the hours, and during the show he seemed to be everywhere at once.

Attention to detail

You'd be tempted to think of Paul as superhuman, running a shop, a mail order business and now a popular show, but he feels the need to remain hands-on through every aspect of the business. Every item is bought and sourced by him and if it doesn't meet his standards it's out.

The same quality control can be seen throughout the company – for instance, he has now taken on a full-time graphic designer to assist with the catalogue and to ensure the web pages are up to date, with an interface that makes it easy to browse and buy. That

struck a chord with me; I remembered the site being launched and Paul telling me that with only three clicks of the mouse you could find anything on the site. This holds true today, D&M's website being so simple to navigate.

As with any business, you only get what you put in, and smaller businesses are built on long hours and dedication. The dedication is obviously there: "I usually work around 70 or so hours a week and it's six to seven days a week, too," admits Paul. His only indulgence is a BMW, which sits at the back of the shop, but he drives to a lot of tool launches and seminars and can justify this one luxury!

Indeed, I've known Paul for a quite a few years now and couldn't think of a more down-to-earth bloke. His passion for tools, not to mention his hard work and personality, are undoubtedly the main strengths of D&M. He might well be Chief Buyer, Managing Director and owner all rolled into one, but at heart he thinks of himself as a, "good old-fashioned, honest shopkeeper!" It's difficult to disagree.

Having been involved since he was a schoolboy, you have to wonder if he's planning to pass the company over to the next generation of Dowdings. His two daughters are too young to be involved and at 44 he still has a fair few years left before he need think about retiring. "[But] as it is," he says, "I have my family involved whenever needed, so there's never any shortage of offers." You can certainly see this family-run business lasting for a long time to come.

For more information on D&M, visit www.dm-tools.co.uk.



▲ There is a wide range of Makita products on sale for the quality-loving customer