



**JULIAN CHAMBERLAIN AND
JANET WESTWOOD**
RETAIL ACTIVE

SECTOR: CONSULTANCY



In 2014, Julian Chamberlain and Janet Westwood sold their consultancy Retail Active, after 14 years of successful trading.

BUILDING THE BUSINESS

Julian and Janet originally trained in the luxury hotel and catering industry, before working together at pub group giant Mitchells & Butlers.

In 2000 they set up their own consumer research agency called Retail Active and within a few short years gained contracts with some of the world's best known brands.

Retail Active began offering store-by-store training programmes and 'brand audits' to maintain service standards.

COMPANY NAME

Retail Active

LOCATION

Oxfordshire, UK

FOUNDED

2000

BUSINESS ACTIVITY

Consumer experience consultancy

ANNUAL SALES (2014)

C. £4M

SOLD

JULY 2014

REASON FOR SALE

Lifestyle change

ACQUIRER

Blueprint Group Australia

bcms

“

LIFE FEELS
A LITTLE BIT
LIBERATED
NOW.

Continued...



“We thought that quality was more important than profit at the time,” says Julian, “But we also noticed that a lot of other companies were taking short cuts but were growing quicker than us. We had a delayed growth while we established our reputation, then it exploded because we were able to offer real quality.”

Mindful of these peaks and troughs, along with increasing competition, Julian and Janet planned the next growth stage, then printed a “success card” – five bullet points on what a more successful Retail Active would look like.

One of the steps to growth was to offer new services, so the next logical progression was a move into mystery shopping.

“We kept getting asked by our clients, so we looked to see what best practice looked like in the USA and then developed a comparable service,” says Julian.

The firm’s first account was a small clothing chain with 17 stores. From that, the service expanded until Retail Active was visiting over 1500 shops a week.

From there, they moved into luxury car manufacturers and their dealerships, as Janet recounts.

“There was only one other company serving the automotive market, who audited their clients once a year. We quoted the same price, but offered four visits a year instead, whilst still generating strong profit.”

The Success Card was working, and Retail Active’s sales pipeline was strong. But the client base was internationalising, putting increasing demands on Janet and Julian to grow faster and further afield.

DECIDING TO SELL

Both Janet and Julian became victims of their own success. Since the end of the recession, Retail Active’s turnover had doubled in just two years. Trying to manage the growing demands of their blue-chip client base was exhausting them both, and they frequently found themselves in the office at gone 8pm.

Janet recalls: “Getting business wasn’t the problem. But trying to get it done and out at the other end was a struggle.

“We were getting enquiries, and clients want us to move into Europe and the US, and we were told that we have to move up to the next level. We needed another 50 staff, and we were knackered.”

At the time, Retail Active offered a niche range of services to assess the customer experience for luxury car dealerships and retail chains, including mystery shopping, brand audits, and satisfaction surveys.

Eventually, after another evening working late, Janet said: “This is ridiculous. Why don’t we see if we can sell the business.” And in that moment, they both said yes.

THE BCMS PROCESS

Having decided to sell, they were cautious about appointing a business sale advisor.

“We had been ripped off by lawyers and advisors over the years, so I was suspicious.”

They chose BCMS because “they were honest, and the only people who would actually do what they say.”

The sale process generated several expressions of interest, before accepting the final offer of Australian field marketing specialist Blueprint Group.

But as the paperwork was assembled to sign over Retail Active, Janet and Julian discussed if they really wanted to sell.

Janet says: “We had learnt so much about the business during the sale process, so right at the end, I reminded Julian that we didn’t have to sell it. We could just move some of the business away to make it more manageable for both of us.”

Of course, they did complete the deal, and have enjoyed a well-earned break since finally leaving Retail Active behind.

LIFE AFTER SALE

Julian found the first few months after the sale difficult. He recalls: “You go through various stages – it’s a bit like a bereavement in a way. At first it was a bit of regret, we weren’t sure if we had done the right thing. But you get through that. You have more time and freedom. You’ve got more cash and you start to do the things you’ve always dreamed of doing. Life feels a little bit liberated now. Very few people successfully sell their business, it’s one of our proudest achievements.”



GETTING BUSINESS WASN'T THE PROBLEM. BUT TRYING TO GET IT DONE AND OUT AT THE OTHER END WAS A STRUGGLE.

Tel: 0118 207 9800 | Email: info@bcms.com | www.bcms.co.uk

Europe | North America | Asia | Middle East | Australia