



## NIGEL WITHAM

Not long ago I was waiting for a potential client in one of his tile showrooms. It was a fairly average set up, one of a small chain, in prosperous area with mixed retail and trade sales. It was a fair sized store, about 3000 square feet on an industrial estate. While waiting I was people-watching; one of my favourite vices. The tiles on display were not exciting (a tactful understatement), and I was considering whether I should comment on this to the MD during the forthcoming meeting. I do not like to give rash advice. I think that if someone is paying me to consult then I should consider matters thoroughly beforehand so I was undecided and likely to hold back for a while, for all I knew he may have tried exciting tiles without success. As it turned out I was wise to keep quiet.

A young couple I had been watching were spending some time selecting floor tiles for their kitchen. I had observed (as discreetly as possible whilst covertly amongst the stands in the best traditions of all designers and international spies) that price did not seem to be much of a concern. In truth the showroom was a desert of grey and beige with hardly a scrubby puddle of colour let alone any true oasis of visual excitement.

I cringed at every boring tile the couple seemed to linger longingly over and time began to drag as I waited for my appointment. "Come on!" I found myself thinking. "If you're going to pick something that dull you might as well get on with it." Then, at last, there was a decision! Somehow amongst the riot of cream and pale brown the couple finally happened upon the beige of beige tiles. They ordered a few square meters and some grey adhesive, and left hotfoot, no doubt to travel home just within the speed limits in their ivory colour Ford Escort to Artex their ceilings and emulsion their walls in magnolia matt vinyl.

Had it been my choice, I am sure I should have stretched the bounds of the shop's most daring fashion tiles and made a selection which would have caused Mr and Mrs Beige, as I shall now refer to them, to simultaneously palpate redly. Not a nice picture.

Many times I have been in a tile store and heard customers ask if there are any recommended designs or styles, preferably in pattern books that they can take home.

Now it might be that I am unusual in my tastes. In fact I am sure I am simply by virtue of my job but most people like what I do so I do not think I'm unpopular or radical - just professionally discerning. I'm a perfectionist and I think that many of us are the same, especially when it comes to home improvements. People like to get things right. They like their friends to be pleasantly surprised. They like to live in clean, visually relaxing yet stimulating homes. People enjoy and need approval for their choices from their peers. They like sophistication. When people are shown clean, fresh and modern ideas they embrace them with alacrity. In practice, though, they lack the confidence to explore new ideas.

I am sure this explains my observations. On the one hand Mr and Mrs Beige were so careful not to choose anything that might jar that they chose the most secure and dull tile of all. On the other hand many people look for the reassurance of tried and trusted combinations rather than follow their own instincts. In the final analysis people need help to make choices and the greatest help is to see what the chosen product will look like before purchase.

Room settings are a really good means of providing this confidence to buy but I fear they are nearly all almost as boring as the Beige family's holiday photos. Why? Because they are chosen by shop staff or directors who want to play just as safe. Am I being unfair? OK, I accept that there are exceptions, both in respect of whole stores or areas within individual stores - Porcelanosa is a good example. But most tile stores don't excite me. They don't make me want to forego my new sports car or a long haul holiday in favour of the latest tiling styles, even if it boosts my home's value.

A tile chain MD I once met had his house tiled top to bottom. Lovely it was. But the trouble with it was that it was almost the chintziest decor I ever saw. My granny used to have one of those Spanish dancer dolls to hide her spare toilet roll and a mat around the pan the same shape as the black ones they now put round your neck in desperately cool hairdresser. That was even more chintzy but not by a very wide margin.

I admit I'm a snob but even I can agree that chintz is fine if you like it and you can do what you like in the privacy of your own home, even if it involves fuchsia-coloured tasselled curtains, but the problem is that many think that their tastes are what just what every one else will like too. A lot of people think they have good taste but in my experience it is a particularly uncommon attribute. Some are truly skilled and some have serendipitous instincts but many get it wrong. Hopefully though not as wrong as my acquaintance, because the room sets in his stores looked just like his downstairs privy and, judging by his sales figures, they enjoyed even fewer visitors.

Here is my suggestion. Why not spend some time with a well-established local interior designer or consult with your manufacturers and suppliers about how to set up your room sets with variety and cross-market appeal? They will know exactly what matches what and what's coming next. Sure, keep some of the dull stuff for the family Beige but why not dare yourself and build a few sets that are more fashionable and cutting-edge too?

The most dependable marketing advice I have ever been taught is differentiate your product. Room settings are a vital means of showing your customers how to move on safely from the past and of reassuring them that new styles will work in their homes. They can demonstrate how to show off their individuality and style confident of a tasteful result and they can improve your profits because new designs will always sell at a premium price.

My message is clear, if you want a more colourful and longer business life move on from that beige old showroom and create some modern room sets that will inspire your customers to make the most of modern tile styles in their homes.