

TOUCH OF CLASSES

Having a clear business philosophy and identity is the defining characteristic of **The Myers Touch**, 2021's Kitchen Retailer of the Year. Knowing who you are is as important as doing what you do
Keith Myers tells **Andrew Davies**...

Keith Myers, director



Keith Myers is a man constantly balancing two seemingly opposing aspects of his personality. His logical and rational side sees his now award-winning showroom **The Myers Touch** follow an impressive and structured business plan with a highly effective use of IT.

However, the other side of Myers' nature reveals him to be an incredibly creative and empathetic designer who prides himself on truly understanding the emotional resonance with his clients. There is a distinct philosophical approach to The Myers Touch that places tangible value in defining not just what the business needs to do to make money, but what its overarching purpose is.

But it is the pragmatic side that wins in his disarmingly reasonable assessment of how it felt to take home the Kitchen Retailer of the Year trophy at the kbbreview Retail & Design Awards 2021 after being a finalist for several years.

"One thing that I've learnt over the years is that if you've made the final you really have already won because it's a very, very competitive award to get. When you look at the people that have consistently been up for Kitchen Retailer of the Year, they're all phenomenal businesses. This competition is stiff and it's always very close, so when you do actually hear your name, it is a moment of shock."

It's safe to say that Keith Myers has been on a very personal journey since he, in his own words, 'stumbled' into the kitchen industry. He trained as a design engineer in the electronics sector and spent 12 years with Sun Microsystems before happily taking

voluntary redundancy. "I didn't really enjoy it," he said. "I was more interested in people or what things did rather than how they did it. But it meant that I could bring that experience, that knowledge and that background, into the KBB industry. A practical example of that is when we first went into lockdown. All of my IT systems were already set up and we just basically picked up our computers and phones, went home and plugged them in and they worked."

Innovation

The Myers Touch, based in Winchester for nearly 20 years, began as a building company that subsequently switched to the retail of Siematic kitchens when it became clear that it was the design side of the business he and wife Helena enjoyed the most. From there, as Myers puts it, the company has been 'constantly innovating, adapting, growing and changing' ever since.



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That is driven by the desire to truly understand the effect that good design can have, not just on ergonomics, but how the user feels about the space.

Myers says he can trace this philosophy back

to a single moment of epiphany. "It came completely by chance," he says. "I was in Scotland visiting the Charles Rennie Mackintosh museum where I suddenly began to realise that design is so much more than just boxes and products. After that, our whole attitude and approach to design flipped over and started us on a journey. What we sometimes forget in our industry is that in certain situations we're creating very emotive, very spiritual, very other-worldly places for people. We're creating a feeling with our designs and that's not really

One of the displays in The Myers Touch showroom



Keith and Helena Myers with their kbbreview award

Lockdown lessons

Keith Myers on how to keep leading through a lockdown

- Protect team spirit by staying connected and supported.
- Act swiftly and don't be afraid to try new strategies.
- Keep talking to your clients.
- Increase and adapt your marketing.
- Be a thought leader.
- Make the most of the technology available.
- Keep a positive mind-set and be agile

common in our industry.

"We rattle off phrases like 'the kitchen is the heart of the home' so often, but most people really don't know what it means or how to get there. You've got to have a really focused, bespoke way of dealing with clients that draws them to you and have an engagement that stretches them into that place.

"We had one project where the client actually jumped up and down on the spot because she was so excited to be in a transformational space. So how far can design go and how far can it influence people's lives for the better?"

Vision

The Myers Touch is at the premium end of the market and so doesn't need high footfall to be successful, it just needs to attract the right clients and, Myers says, be prepared to turn away the ones that don't fit.

"A lot of our marketing is targeted around choosing our clients," Myers explains. "When a client walks in the door, we don't have to work with them, we have a choice. We're not right for everybody. We need to carve our own niche out of the market."

This level of understanding, Myers argues, leads to the sweet spot of real trust between client and designer.

"Some people find it kind of too touchy-feely for them, and I do understand that and we have to help them through the process," he says. "It is tricky because it does require a certain type of individual that is willing

to be open to you. I call it being a 'trusted advisor'.

"Not everybody wants to go that far because they're just buying a few boxes and a kitchen and we're very happy to service that. But the real change happens when you can form a professional friendship with a client and understand them more deeply. The kitchen is ultimately a very bespoke thing to every person.

"At our level of the market, we're really trying to find something unique that stands out and matches them personally.



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Keith Myers, director, The Myers Touch

When a client allows that connection, they step over a line and start to reveal their innermost thoughts, ideas and passions and how that can then be expressed in

design and through the kitchen. When you get there, you can create the most amazing things because you've almost accessed the spiritual aspect of them."

There is spiritual verve to Myers when he talks about kitchen design and retail, so does he think there is a

lack of this level of thought across the industry as a whole?

"I do think sometimes that kitchen designers are missing a massive opportunity if they just focus on boxes. When you look at architects and interior designers, that's a design industry. When you generally look at the kitchen sector, it's a sales industry.

"One of the things that the kbbreview awards is doing is raising the profile of great designers in this industry and I think it'd be lovely to see people coming out of university and wanting to go into kitchens and living spaces because they're phenomenally interesting and challenging.

"Obviously, I'm not saying we don't sell, but we just need to move on from that 'double-glazing' feel about it. We can learn from each other, and we can develop a profession where we become a design industry and make a phenomenal impact on the way people live in their homes."

Focus on design

One of the things that stands out with leading industry figures such as Myers is that no matter how long they've been doing this, they're always constantly looking for new things to try. Is success ultimately about having the mind-set that embraces change?

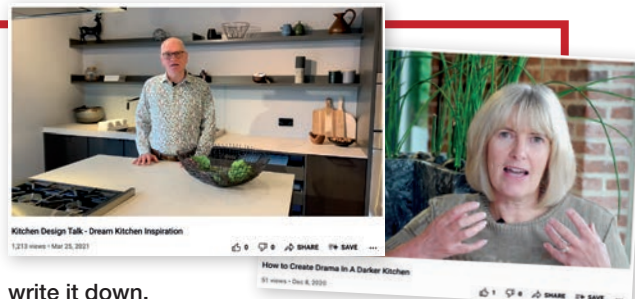
"Yes, it is," Myers says. "And it is definitely a mind-set. We all know people where nothing ever changes and they'll gradually fade away. Innovation is hard. While people can copy what we do, they haven't taken the hours to understand why we've done what we've done.

"And without that understanding it lacks a passion and an essence, and that is really what is compelling at the end of the day. It's about inventing what you are, who you want to be, how you want to help people, the message, and the legacy you want to leave with clients. Kitchens is a tough industry but it is rewarding and that's kind of what keeps you alive."

Virtual Design Talks

Starting in 2020 during lockdown, The Myers Touch introduced its 'Virtual Design Talks'. Free hour-long presentations on different aspects of kitchen design conducted via Zoom. Some talks are from internal experts and others local businesses such as architects and Siematic professionals. This has the dual goal of attracting potential residential clients with new projects and building relationships with the professional market, which will feed new leads.

"It was a massive learning curve," Myers says. "Getting hold of the technology to be able to do it with proper cameras and microphones was a bit fiddly. And suddenly having to write design talks on the fly was a very interesting journey because you don't realise how much you know until you have to



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write it down.

"We've done subjects like 'unlocking your kitchens potential', 'five steps to starting your new kitchen', 'dealing with small spaces', 'how to create drama in a kitchen' and many others."

"The first lockdown was very different because everyone was stuck at home and we had very good attendance every week. It worked well and taught us a lot about what we know and has developed and honed some of our thought processes." **kbb**