

How's business? Leeds

This bustling Yorkshire city is the second largest legal and financial centre in the UK after London, with the financial and insurance services industry worth £13 billion to the local economy. It is also the UK's third-largest manufacturing centre with half of the UK's manufacturing based within a two-hour drive of the city

• Report · Francesca Seden



PARTNER BRANDS

>> Arlington Interiors
Kuhmann, Sheraton, Miele, Siemens and Zip.

>> Morland Bathrooms
Duravit, Hansgrohe, Villeroy and Boch, Victoria and Albert, Keuco, Matki.

>> New Wave Kitchens and Bedrooms
Uiform, Browns 2000, Franke, Bosch.

>> Sanctuary Bathrooms
Crosswater, Burlington, Arcade, Merlyn Showers, Kudos, Heritage Bathrooms, Roper Rhodes.

Arlington Interiors
Ben Russell, director



Business is very promising. We've recently moved premises and are now in a much nicer showroom. So that's certainly helped. Comparing with figures from last year, we're slightly up overall, but we've got a huge bank of stuff that we need to order over the next few weeks. There's huge potential here.

The city is fairly affluent, though there are differences depending where you are. North Leeds is generally classed as more affluent, but where we've moved to in Farsley seems to be a village in the city and there's a kind of village mentality. And we seem to keep everyone happy here.

We get lots of referrals, and most of our business comes through word of mouth. We've got a good database of previous clients, too. So, as well as word of mouth, we do a bit through Houzz, have our own website for general enquires, and we also try and keep our social media marketing channels up to date, though that is harder to maintain when it's busy.

In terms of the contract market, we don't go out looking for it, but if builders and developers come in to the showroom, we'll try and help them out. That's quite ad hoc.

Based on how things have gone in the past few months, we're more confident than ever, really. There will still be uncertainty when Brexit finally comes around but, looking at how much uncertainty there has been, we're still here now, and it's just something you have to work around. Unless there was an actual recession, I don't see us having many problems. We might see more price increases, but we'll deal with those as and when they come.

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Morland Bathrooms
Daniel Clay, managing director

Business is OK – 2016 was fantastic, last year was good, and this year has been alright, but not as good as previous years.

I think there are a few reasons. With Brexit looming ever closer, people are a little bit nervous and don't really want to splash their cash on high-end bathrooms. It's also getting much more difficult because of online players. There's a German brand selling products on its website for less than I can buy them for.

To display and sell a lot of these bathroom products, you need to meet certain criteria. We have a 4,000sq ft showroom in the city centre, and we've got trained, experienced staff, and this is an expectation from suppliers. But then there's the flip side, where we're trying to compete with mad online prices.

A lot of suppliers hide behind competition laws and I know that is an issue.

The only thing we can do to combat this is offer the best service possible. But the problem we're facing is that we're trying to do more, trying to offer more – drawing up CAD designs, bend over backwards for customers, sending product back when they don't like it – but for less margin. So it's very difficult.

Will there be a future for supply-only stores? I don't know, so we're thinking of changing the way we do business. It's the way commerce is going.

We do predominantly retail and very little contract work. Obviously, builders like to pay on account and we don't do that, so we just deal with one contractor that pays upfront. But those are very rare. Average spend is £10,000 and that's for supply-only. We don't install, but recommend installers.

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New Wave Kitchens and Bedrooms
Steve Twigg, managing director



This year's been pretty reasonable. We had a little bit of a slow start – in January and February – compared with the year before, but it's picked up quite nicely since the end of February.

Regarding our slow start, it's hard to put a finger on exactly why, but maybe Brexit talk has had something to do with it. When things like that are talked about in the news, it frightens people, and people that are nervous don't want to spend. But then it will pick up again. But we're flying at the moment and things are looking good.

A typical kitchen for us will retail at about £10,000, and we do some higher end stuff – up to the £25k mark. But we'll also fit a kitchen for £6,000. We're also cabinetmakers so we manufacture a lot of our own product, and that really helps as if a customer comes in desperately needing a new kitchen but perhaps with only £6k or £7k to spend.

We do no contract work. We're 100% retail. We don't deal with any builders or developers. With retail customers I can get a good deposit up front and we'll get payment on delivery. Obviously, it doesn't work that way with trade.

Our ethos is all about fantastic customer service. From the moment the customer walks in the door, to the installation and after sales care. If and when problems occur we tend to them immediately. And that pays massive dividends in terms of recommendations and repeat work.

In terms of product we make the cabinets but we buy in most of the doors, though we can get almost any size door to fit our cabinets.

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Things like Brexit frighten people and they don't want to spend

Sanctuary Bathrooms
Richard Roberts, director

Business seems good at the moment. We're probably a little bit up on last year. We're supply-only and people buy their whole package from us. It's quite cost-effective, because we don't do the fitting.

And as well as our showroom, we also trade online. We do quite well online. We started out much more showroom-based but, because of the competition we were facing, we decided to open an online arm. People are using the internet more and more, not only for making purchases, but for researching, too. It still surprises me that people buy bathroom suites online, as it's quite a technical product, but that side of the business is doing well.

People might not have time to visit or make more than one visit to the showroom, so we'll direct them to the website, then, when they can come in, they have a good idea of what they want.

I understand the issues some retailers have with it, but it can be a good way of promoting yourself. I think it can be a good avenue for retailers to go down, though if it became oversaturated, that could be problematic as well.

In terms of the installation, we recommend installers we've used before. If the customer has a problem after fitting, they'll generally come back to us, but if it's more technical, they'll go to the installer.

We try to offer great service, as then you'll get repeat business. We're a family business, so we've always had that sort of mentality. It's the most important thing. If someone has bought from you before and had a good experience, subsequent sales are easy.

We don't do much in the way of contract work – just a few small jobs, but it's something we've looked at. The payment terms are off-putting, though.

Our suppliers could help make the process more straightforward. If there's a problem with a product, the process of getting it sorted can be quite painful, so that's one area where they could improve.

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Online, if managed properly, can work really well

