

GOOD MIX: Bowker is a 'family run company with a strong customer focus'

FACT FILE

Porsche Centre Preston

Established: 2019 (parent Bowker group 1919)

Brand: Porsche **Staff:** 35, aftersales 20

Location: Preston **Ramps:** 12 plus MoT

Culturally aligned

Andrew Charman

Tom Fox, MD of Porsche Centre Preston, describes how Bowker was chosen to represent the German sports brand

Opened in 2019, Porsche Centre Preston is both the brand's second-largest UK outlet in terms of floor space and the first open point in almost two decades filled by a dealer group not previously representing Porsche.

The building's name, Centenary House, celebrates the fact that the owning Bowker Group, 77th in the latest Motor Trader Top 200 Dealer Groups,

celebrated 100 years of existence in 2019.

Heading up the new centre is Tom Fox who has been with the Lancashire group for 28 years.

Before taking on the Porsche challenge, he was managing director of the Bowker BMW Centre in Preston.

The centre is one of a portfolio of 10 BMW, MINI, Ribble Valley and Harley-Davidson outlets operated by Bowler Motor Group.

Why did Porsche choose Bowker to represent Porsche in Preston?

Paul Bowker, our chief executive, has always had a passion for Porsche. He previously raced a 911 and has been trying to represent the brand for many years.

Through sheer persistence we were eventually granted an hour to make a presentation. Groups already representing the brand were also keen to win this open point that had been created in an area previously split between Bolton and Kendal. The hour-long meeting ran on a lot longer and led to several more, as Porsche liked what it saw.



What appealed to Porsche?

Firstly, that Bowker is family-owned and run, with Paul very much involved in the daily operation. We have won many customer service awards, we are very good used car operators, again with quite a lot of awards, and our marketing also appealed. We have won BMW's marketing award twice.

The company was also culturally aligned with the Porsche vision. It was clear when walking around our centres that the family invests in the business without being told to by the manufacturer.

What defines award-winning customer service?

I like Richard Branson's philosophy: look after your staff well and you set the right environment for them to look after the customers. If staff feel comfortable they perform better.

We provide a nice environment, all the equipment staff ask for and they also have a forum to come and have a chat if something concerns them. It is very important to gauge the temperature of your staff on a daily basis. If someone is having a tough time it's vital to look into it, to be human with them. When someone is performing poorly a chat with them might reveal for example problems at home that leave you amazed they've even made it into work. Managers sometimes can focus on the result and not realise what pressures staff members may be under.

There is a skill shortage of suitably qualified technicians, especially around this area with its defence and aerospace industry, so they are hard to recruit and harder to retain. We provide our technicians the best facilities, pay them well and offer such perks as subsidised car leasing. Cars are

key to many people and driving them makes the staff members feel a greater part of the business. We also train our staff well, spending a third more than most companies on training.

How was the recruitment of staff for the centre?

The strength of the Porsche brand ensured many applications, and we were pleasantly surprised by the calibre of applicants. My simple formula involved recruiting enough existing staff from within the Bowker group to provide a spine for the new Preston business.

I also needed people with Porsche experience, which was more challenging as you immediately risk offending your neighbours by taking their staff.

We tried to blend those who knew how we work with some fresh blood. We ensured each department had an experienced manager and among the recruits someone who knew the Porsche systems.

Porsche GB was very supportive and we had a lot of intensive training before opening, with specific workshops set up for us. And after we opened Porsche provided a lot of hand-holding, especially with aftersales.

We recruited from outside the industry, especially for such roles as showroom hosts. We looked in busy environments such as restaurants. A local chain of restaurants train their young staff well and also attracts the same kind of high-end customer that we do, so the staff are used to and relaxed around dealing with such people.

I'm also a great believer in giving youth a chance. We took on an apprentice in the workshop and we deal extensively with local colleges.

A highly successful business



Nick Franklin – AutoProtect

Head of Distribution & Product Development

Reading through the Porsche Centre Preston journey over the last year, MD Tom Fox and the team at Bowker Group have been very successful. A theme strikes me in the interview that illustrates the importance of embracing the rapidly changing times in which we all operate across motor retailing – cultural shift.

For me, the development of a customer-centric culture is critical to the long-term customer experience; it drives reputation, retention and sales. The industry has long recognised the importance of customer service; indeed, Bowker are award winners in this area, but there is a new dimension evolving that the Porsche Centre Preston has tapped into – social conscious. This emerging factor has both internal and external implications.

This year, millennials will comprise more than 50% of the total workforce, according to PwC. Inevitably, these same millennials are increasingly a crucial car buying audience. As a cohort, their awareness of their rights, social and environmental compass, are arguably more pronounced than preceding generations.

Tom's recognition that his team set the tone for the business and how its customers perceive it is crucial. The open, caring and coaching culture for his team referenced in the interview are revealing; as he observes, they set the tone for customers.

In an increasingly regulated operating environment, this care matters. A culture that delivers 'fair customer outcomes' needs to be 'business as normal' because it is commercially smart. The fact that the business has already sold out its allocation of the forthcoming electric Taycan only serves to underline that social consciousness can be a route of opportunity. Our best wishes to Tom and his team.



TOP TARGET: Porsche Centre Preston is targeting owners of older cars to keep workshop busy

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What's it like creating a customer base from scratch?

We opened on 15 May, but a Porsche advance marketing suite was fielding enquiries and training staff from January. Those recruited from other businesses were started early and sent on training modules. We also put them into our BMW dealership. They saw how we worked with customers and equally we saw how well they interacted.

There was much pre-publicity around the centre, a real buzz about the new showroom helping to regenerate this area. Our launch night attracted just under 600 people, which Porsche told us was a record for a centre launch. We started with no database but the enthusiasm of the people of Lancashire counted for a lot and we were fully operational by the middle of June.

How did you market the new centre?

We are very much in the digital arena and we make great use of social media, Instagram, Facebook and more recently LinkedIn.

Our area of representation is larger than our BMW territory so we've tried to increase our profile in outlying areas, broaden our reach. We've staged ride-and-drive exercises with key partners in outlying areas such as The Inn at Whitewell, the Moor Hall two-star Michelin restaurant and the Hillside Golf Club.

Nine months in, how is it going?

It's been great, better than expected. The general UK car market was a war zone with Brexit, political uncertainty, consumer confidence through the floor

PERSONAL FILE

Tom Fox



Position: Managing director, Porsche Centre Preston

First job: Civil Service, DHSS clerical officer

First car: Mini 1000

Current car: Porsche Cayenne Turbo S

Best business decision: Paul and I buying the site where centre was later built, regenerating the local area

Worst business decision: Recruiting additional staff just before 2008 crash

Newspaper: Daily Mail, Daily Telegraph

Film: Taken

Book: Anything by David Baldacci

Downtime: Cycling, walking, anything outdoors

Gadget: iPad

and the death of the high street. There was a lot of negative news around but we have set off well. Our forward-orders are strong and the new Taycan has hit the right note, people quickly overcoming any reticence at Porsche making an electric car. We are sold out for 2020 on Taycan – it shows the strength of the brand and the growing acceptance of electric.

Are you targeting owners of older Porsches for aftersales?

Yes – with a 13-ramp workshop we need older cars to come in to keep our technicians busy. We opened with no database so we had to generate work for the business.


We've done a lot of internal work, bought plenty of stock to ensure our technicians are exposed to all types of cars, while keeping the workshop busy. Retail work is increasing and we are up to seven technicians having opened with four.

Porsche offers a menu-pricing system, like all manufacturers realising that customers in the three to 10-year old market often don't use main franchises. But as values have increased on many niche model Porsches customers are bringing those cars back in, especially older 911s on which values are rising. Owners are prepared to invest to keep them on the road.

What do you predict for the next year?

I think we are in for another turbulent year, but there is now at least a degree of certainty.

Bowker Group is a diverse business, with an established, strong transport side, the second largest in the north with a lot of specialised work and long-term contracts. It's rare that two sides of a diverse business suffer a downturn at the same time so that provides a level of absorption protection.

The Porsche brand is in a very good position – the 911 remains an iconic car, while the Taycan is arriving at a great time. It's a convincing electric car and it still looks like a Porsche. 



LAUNCH TIME: The opening evening for the dealership attracted just under 600 people



BLENDED RETAILING: Centre recruited experienced staff and newcomers



Thank You!

