



Sally Bailey

Retail guru, The Vet chair and avid traveller

Education

Loughborough University, History BA (Hons.), 1984-1987

I thought I wanted to be a librarian, but I'd rather confused the love of reading with doing library studies – obviously library studies involves reading, but it's also about data and statistics, the stuff I realised within the first term that I didn't want to do. So I started off doing library studies and history joint honours and then changed to just history.

Work history

Sales assistant, Liberty's, 1987-1988

I didn't know what I wanted to do next which meant I got a job at Liberty's in London in the leathers department which was good fun.

Merchandise assistant, Debenhams, 1998-1990

I realised that I really enjoyed retail but didn't like standing up all day, which is what you do on the sales floor, so applied for jobs in buying offices. Then I got my first buying job at Debenhams and was extremely lucky in that from not knowing what I wanted to do, I got into something that I really loved. I started in the menswear department with lots of really cool people – Belinda Earl, who's now a director at Marks & Spencers, was my senior merchandiser.

Assistant merchandiser, River Island, 1991

Then my boss went to River Island, which at the time was called Chelsea Girl. The company was at a very exciting place where it created River Island, so I was there for a while, helping set up River Island at a very junior level.

Merchandise manager, Freemans, 1991-1994

But then I got a bit bored at River Island and went to Freemans Mail Order. It was very good training for the upcoming world of online retail websites because a lot of the disciplines involved in selling in catalogues are the same to selling online. I gained experience of how to present stock and how to sell to customers without actually seeing or talking to them.

So it really helped me to be put in a position above other people when the whole digital side exploded.

Various roles, Topshop, 1994-1999

I was worried I would be pigeonholed as a catalogue person when it was obvious that wasn't going to be the future. So I then took a step down actually and went to Topshop as a senior merchandiser. I wanted to get into proper fashion, and I had sort of stopped learning at Freeman's. It's a big thing for me – I think that if you stop learning in what you're doing then you need to change, because if you're not moving forwards, you're moving backwards.

And I loved it at Topshop. It was at a time when Topshop was actually a struggling retailer and I was part of the team that helped build it to be the super brand it is today. We really focused on the customer and not being patronising towards them. It was really about taking the catwalk trends and making sure they were targeted at her and her lifestyle at a price she could afford. And also making things more aspirational. Topshop had been rather looked down on as being just cheap tat, so we then created 'Designers at Topshop'. We were the first young fashion retailer to partner with designers. Throughout my time there I got promoted to merchandise manager to head of merchandising, to merchandise director.

Brand director, Miss Selfridge, 1999-2002

Topshop's holding company Arcadia then bought Sears, which owned Wallis, Warehouse and Miss Selfridge. As I was the de facto number two at Topshop and Miss Selfridge was another young fashion brand they moved me over to run it and it was a very difficult gig.

Miss Selfridge had been pretty much run into the ground and one in three positions were vacant. It had too many stores in the wrong places and it had a really bad, toxic culture where people in the shops weren't allowed to talk to people in head office. It was losing a tonne of money, as people hadn't invested in it and all the attention had gone into Warehouse and Wallis. So I spent three years building a team and building a product offer again focused on the customer. And we turned the business around from losing £6 million to making £5 million within a three-year time span which was immensely hard work

but was immensely rewarding as well.

And then Philip Green bought Arcadia and I worked for him for six weeks before I resigned. One of my big core beliefs is that you can do good and do well at the same time and I didn't think the new management at Arcadia were on the same page as me.

Time out travelling, 2002-2004

I went to South America, the US and a bit of Europe. I love travelling. It's great to give you a break between intense work periods to make you think about what you actually want to do with your life. I don't think it's about finding yourself; it's about not letting yourself get lost in what other people think you should do.

Chief executive, White Stuff, 2004-2013

When I came back from my travels I was approached by this really teeny company called White Stuff, in fact the headhunter called me to ask if I knew anyone who'd be interested because they assumed it would be too small for me. The whole company was smaller than my jersey department at Miss Selfridge. But I went along and met the founders who I really liked and worked out I could walk to the office and thought I'd give it a go. And, I absolutely loved working for a small company where you could put your arms around the whole business and make a decision one day and implement it the next day. While I was there I built the business from a turnover of £13 million to £113 million and increased the profit from just over a £1 million to nearly £20 million.

Our success was partly down to recruiting the right people and making everything customer-centric. It was also about having a vision and purpose for a brand that is above and beyond selling another frock. So we created a foundation that ran alongside White Stuff. Every year White Stuff gave a percentage of profit to the White Stuff Foundation and every shop had a local charity it paired with that customers and suppliers were involved with.

Mentor to small businesses, mentor at the Marketing Academy and vice-chair, The Eve Appeal, 2014 – present

I had an amazing time at White Stuff but I didn't want to be a chief executive anymore, I wanted to do something different, it's back



to that constantly wanting to learn. So I had another year travelling and decided I wanted to split my time between working for profit and working to help. So I became the vice-chair of The Eve Appeal, which raises money for research into gynaecological cancers. My mother died of ovarian cancer when I was 24, so it was a cause close to my heart.

I mentor the female founders of three retail start-ups.

Additionally, I also mentor for a charity called the Marketing Academy which helps senior marketing leaders get board positions. I'm a real advocate of diversity and inclusion and part of that diversity comes through helping more creative people, i.e. marketing leaders, become chief executives or join company boards. It just helps to move the thinking on in lots of different industries.

Chair, The Vet, 2016 – present

I was approached by Bridges Fund Management to say they had a nascent company and they were looking for a chair that would help them think differently and help them grow. Now I love animals, so what was not to like. It's a business that does social good, is a challenger brand and you get to cuddle dogs.

My experience means I can help them with a big multi-site operation and help them concentrate on the customers, building a true brand. I think the veterinarian sector is really ripe for a challenger brand that has real deep brand values that's not just another vet on the high street. I'm loving it, it's really exciting. The business is doing really well and we're bringing employment to less affluent areas and helping people who couldn't afford to use a vet previously to use one. ■

Other chair/advisory positions

- Non-executive director, Thought Clothing, April 2016 – present
- Chair, Kin & Co, 2016 – present
- Board advisor, WoolOvers, 2017 – present.

Tip for success

Never stop learning and looking at what you can do better, because if you don't someone else will.