

## INDEPENDENT VIEW

## MYSTERY SHOP

# Will indies make it a very merry Christmas?

Yes, but only if they stock the right range of items, including non-food. Christmas should be seen as an opportunity rather than a threat, reports Nick Hughes

Christmas is a crucial period for every retailer. Get your offer right and you could be toasting a very happy new year. Get it wrong and you're left with a stock room crammed full of unsold tinsel and unwanted Christmas puddings.

This week's mystery shop tested Reading's retailers on their ability to cater for Christmas shoppers. The results were a mixed bag. On the one hand, availability of food items was strong. Four out of the five stores stocked Christmas pudding, while three of the shops had mince pies for sale.

Their Achilles' heel, however, was non-food, with just Twyford Convenience Store stocking Christmas crackers and only two stores selling wrapping paper.

Independents are put off stocking Christmas items by a fear of being left with surplus stock, says Trevor Dixon, director of the Rural Shops Alliance. "Independents seem to have in their DNA a terror of wastage," he says. "It does weigh on their minds quite heavily."

With the multiples discounting heavily on Christmas lines, the independents have a tough time competing, he adds. "The times when indies had a significant Christmas range have diminished because of the offers in the supermarkets," he says. "Independent retailers can't even buy at the price the multiples are selling the product at."

However, independents should view Christmas as an opportunity rather than a threat, he says. "We believe that each Christmas retailers should make an extra effort to let the community know they are there, if they do – for example – happen to need a set of batteries on Boxing Day. Then that customer might come back the next time they need something. We are encouraging retailers to produce leaflets detailing opening hours and engage with the local community – to use Christmas as a way to promote the shop."

PRICE & SERVICE COMPARISON	SOMERFIELD	ICELAND	TWYFORD CONVENIENCE STORE	COSTCUTTER	SWALLOWFIELD PARISH STORES
<b>10 CONVENIENCE PRODUCTS</b>					
Sliced white bread (800g) – cheapest brand	0.72	1.34	1.20	1.37	1.15
Milk (1 pint) – semi-skimmed	0.46	0.45	0.50	0.50	0.55
Banana	DNS	14p <sup>1</sup>	30p <sup>2</sup>	DNS	DNS
Painkillers (8-pack) – cheapest brand	0.58	DNS	0.99	0.49	DNS
Coke or cheapest cola (500ml)	1.05	33p <sup>2</sup>	0.92	0.95	0.55
Walkers crisps cheapest brand (standard packet – 34.5g)	0.48	19p <sup>2</sup>	0.45	DNS	0.45
Water cheapest water (500ml)	0.55	0.50	0.50	0.55	0.55
Mars bar (standard)	0.46	23p <sup>2</sup>	0.45	0.45	0.45
Filter coffee (227g packet) – cheapest	2.24	DNS	DNS	DNS	2.99
Catfood (Whiskas pouch) or cheapest brand	0.37	0.30	0.45	DNS	DNS
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>€6.91</b>	<b>€3.48</b>	<b>€5.76</b>	<b>€4.31</b>	<b>€6.69</b>

### CHRISTMAS PRODUCTS – 1 point for each stocked

Christmas pudding	1	1	1	DNS	1
Mince pies	1	1	DNS	DNS	1
Wrapping paper	DNS	DNS	DNS	1	1
Cranberry sauce	1	1	DNS	DNS	DNS
Christmas crackers	DNS	DNS	1	DNS	DNS

### CUSTOMER SERVICE – 1 point for each criterion

Courteous	1	1	1	1	1
Knowledgeable	1	1	0	1	1
General helpfulness	1	1	1	1	1
Standard of dress	1	1	1	1	1
Personal hygiene	1	1	1	1	1

### SERVICES – 1 point for each criterion

Cash/billpay	1	0	1	0	1
Lottery/bingo	0	0	0	0	0
Communication (top-up/Post Office)	1	0	1	0	1
Administrative (fax, photocopying, email or collection)	0	0	0	0	0
Fresh food (barbecue, local produce, coffee machine)	1	0	0	0	1

### COMMUNITY – 1 point for each criterion

Bus stop/local service	1	1	0	1	1
Local events advertised	0	0	0	0	1
Personal adverts advertised	0	0	0	0	1
Charity collection boxes	0	0	0	0	0
Loyalty card scheme	0	0	0	0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>14</b>

Notes: 1. Multipack of seven for £1 2. Multipack of eight for £2.60 3. Multipack of six for £1.15 4. Multipack of seven for £1.59 5. Multipack of five for £1.49



The economic uncertainty is likely to have a significant impact on Christmas trade this year. Shoppers are expected to spend £170 on food and drink per person, down 4% on 2007, according to the Deloitte Christmas Retail Survey. Almost 4 in 5, meanwhile, say they will do the majority of their Christmas food shopping in supermarkets, meaning indies will have to fight harder than ever to win custom.

## Somerfield

Address: West Street

**Time & date:** 26 November 2008 at 12.30pm  
Our shopper visited during a busy lunchtime with many customers buying food to go. Two members of staff manned the checkout while several more busied themselves filling the shelves. However, by the time our shopper joined the queue, it stretched halfway down the store, with no extra help forthcoming. Most of the seasonal products were stocked with the exception of the wrapping paper and the Christmas crackers.

## Iceland

Address: The Wickes Centre, Weldale Street

**Time & date:** 26 November 2008 at 1.30pm  
Fixtures at the entrance to the store offered loaves of bread at 2 for £1. This was replicated throughout the store with a host of prominent special offers and discounts, some of which spilled over into the aisles, making the store difficult to navigate. Service at the checkout was polite and efficient. Staff were able to point out the nearest bus stop, but other than that there was no community information available.

## Twyford Convenience Store

Address: Longfield House, Longfield Road

**Time & date:** 26 November 2008 at 2.30pm  
Located next to a large residential area, this store was big for an independent, although it was devoid of customers when our shopper visited. The store was well stocked but difficult to navigate due to a lack of signposting. The solitary staff member was helpful and courteous but his knowledge of the store and its products was somewhat limited. The store offered billpay and top-up services.

## Costcutter

Address: 104-108, School Road, Tilehurst

**Time & date:** 26 November 2008 at 3.35pm  
Though small, this store was logically ordered and easy to navigate. Wrapping paper was the only Christmas line stocked – located in a cardboard display near the back of the store. A lengthy queue had formed by the time our shopper reached the checkout, but the hardworking assistant was efficient and polite and quickly shortened the queue.

## Swallowfield Parish Stores

Address: The Street, Swallowfield

**Time & date:** 26 November 2008 at 4.40pm  
Unlike some of the chain stores we visited, this shop was clearly at the hub of its community. Stock was well presented on newly fitted shelves, while one of the gondolas ends was dedicated to Christmas products, many of which were locally sourced foods. The assistant welcomed our shopper personally and offered help without prompting.



### STORE FACTS

**Address:** Swallowfield Parish Stores, The Street, Swallowfield, Reading  
**Owner:** Naresh Kumar (not pictured)  
**Tenure:** Three months  
**How do you feel about the mystery shop?** It's a good idea. It helps to motivate the staff and recognises them for giving good customer service.

### INTERVIEW: NARESH KUMAR, OWNER, SWALLOWFIELD PARISH STORES

#### Are you in touch with your community?

Of course. Because I run another store, I visit the shop at the weekend to meet and talk to staff and customers. It's so important to talk to the customers.

#### Our shopper said the store was a pleasure to shop in. Do you feel you can offer a more personal level of service than a chain store?

Absolutely. I'm trying to get as many goods and services as possible into the store for the community. Also if customers come in and ask for products that are not stocked or are out of stock, I ask our staff to write them down and I will do my best to get those products into the store.

#### How have you improved the store since you acquired it three months ago?

Product availability has improved considerably compared with the old store and product presentation has also improved. We now have

proper shelving to display the stock; this is an ongoing process. A local villager has supplied the shelves. It's another way of supporting the local community.

**Who are your key suppliers?**  
We sell a lot of newspapers and magazines, so WH Smith is my biggest supplier. I also source a great deal of produce from local suppliers.

**Do you plan to make any changes to the store?**  
I'm planning to install a coffee bar and an off-licence in the next few years.

**When do you start selling Christmas lines and what festive products do you stock?**  
We start selling Christmas lines in November. This year we've gone for wrapping paper, cards, cake log, mince pies and Christmas puddings.

**Who supplies your Christmas lines?**

They're mostly from local suppliers. The cards, cake log, and mince pies are from a company called Teatime

Tasties while the cakes are from Caké of the Connoisseur. **Have you noticed an uplift in trade in the past few weeks?** Not noticeably but I think sales will pick up as we get closer to Christmas. It's still a little bit too early for say what effect the economy will have on Christmas trading. **How important is Christmas trade to independents?** Christmas trade is very important. How important it is can depend on the area, what people demand and how they get into the festive spirit. In London, people tend to want decorations and lights. Here in Swallowfield, they are more interested in mince pies and cakes.

**Have you had to sacrifice other lines to make space for Christmas products?**

The shop has recently been extended to make room for new products. In fact, I am still bringing in new lines so, no, I have not sacrificed space for seasonal lines.