

Kbbreview Industry Awards 2007

CATEGORY: Showroom Award for Bathrooms

FINALIST: Ambient Design, Bath

What is your overall showroom strategy?

Ambiente Design was opened in 2005 by Mark Walker. Having 10 years of experience in the UK and international bathroom industries, he recognised a niche for premium bathrooms (and later kitchens) in the Bath and South West region, offered in a fresh and original way.

Since the first day, our showroom strategy has centred on passion: passion for products shown in contemporary settings with a focus on design and functionality; passion for superlative customer service; and passion for creating a modern organisation that pushes the industry forward in what has traditionally been a conservative region.

Offering a hand selected range of products across a varied range of styles, we aim to present our clients with the best in bathrooms and act as design consultants: helping them to make informed decisions on their interiors, planning their spaces and facilitating the execution of such projects. Indeed, we don't aim to just provide our clients with new bathrooms. Many showrooms can do this. For ambiente, it's about living environments, which is why our marketing uses the tagline "ambiente: bathroom environments". We strive to create new living spaces that reflect our clients, their lifestyles, personalities and dreams.

How have you considered the customers journey through the store?

The journey through our showroom is one of the most important and enjoyable parts of the customers' overall experience and we have strived to push the boundaries forward in this area.

Set on a period street in the Roman city of Bath, you are immediately struck by innovative designs in the windows of the showroom, with unique styles exclusive to ambiente.

This intriguing mix of overflowing water, subtle lighting and contemporary luxury draws you into the showroom and you are greeted with a smile and a welcoming offer of assistance. Opulent tiled displays fully accessorised as complete environments are juxtaposed with simple design concepts shown on minimalist white walls. Struck by the clever use of space, you realise that this isn't just a showroom. It is a place where art and design come together in real bathrooms.

The faint sound of trickling water draws you further, between two complimentary bathroom settings, and you arrive at an elegant "Waterwall", designed specifically to pull clients into the showroom where they can choose to veer right for kitchens or left and straight for bathrooms. The Waterwall is a unique feature to ambiente and although it has no saleable value, this fact alone serves as a statement of our intent in challenging accepted norms.

Intriguing shapes appear through the water, and behind the Waterwall you find a cutting-edge selection of displays: established designer classics mixing with products new to the UK market.

As the mix of complete settings and concept displays continue to guide you through the showroom, the music and calming scent of flowers triggers senses. You feel comfortable, at ease, and yet excited to see a world of bathroom environments opening up before you. The suspended lighting throughout coupled with high ceilings creates the feel of a spacious area, unlike most showrooms where one is overwhelmed with products, in setting after setting.

The showroom layout then brings you to "The History of Bathrooms", showcasing design through different eras for a more traditional style of bathroom. With more contemporary bathroom settings around the corner, the intrigued visitor is then led into a spacious open room, full of our most funky

designs, looking back out onto the street.

Further displays downstairs include a working shower test-bed designed to show clients what performance they may expect from different systems, a room devoted entirely to tiles and other technically advanced products.

Offering to give demonstrations of these products gives our design consultants the ideal opportunity to engage clients in conversation.

We believe that it is important to strike the correct balance between allowing customers time to browse whilst also making ourselves available to them. To this end we fully price all displays but only offer brochures on request and again use this opportunity to explore our customers' requirements.

Design Consultants are not centrally located but rather are situated at various points throughout the showroom to allow clients greater access to staff and to enable more privacy for discussions. The aroma of freshly ground Italian coffee then draws clients back through our kitchen division, with a fully functional kitchen acting as the hub of the showroom.

We believe that all the above contributes to the realisation that ambiente can provide you with the living environment you want, and it is our hope that you then ask to discuss your project in more detail.

What innovative ideas have you come up with that sets you apart?

Having visited showrooms all over the country, Mark had a clear idea of what to do and what not to do. But what really brings ambiente alive are the original features we have created.

We realised that clients need to see a mix of complete settings, fully accessorised down to the last robe hook, as well as concept displays that seek not to illustrate how your bathroom could look but rather show you what shape, form, colour, texture, light and finishes are available.

Washbowls clad to vertical columns, large tiles arranged like a colour palette, the Waterwall.... all these and more play with your perception of what bathrooms can be, how they are designed, why and how we use them.

We also want to provide our customers with an overview of styles from within our carefully selected portfolios. Relying not on one single, main brand but on a mix of established names and exclusive imported ranges we nevertheless showcase a large cross section of what is available today. By limiting the number of brands we work with for each product category we are able to forge strong relationships with suppliers and maximise our product knowledge.

Finally, many other showrooms also shy away from product that is not easy to handle, or from non-standard items. At ambiente we are not scared to bring bespoke solutions into play when necessary and several examples of this are on display in the showroom.

What specific evidence (including financial) can you give that your business is successful?

Our combined turnover before the merger was approximately £8million. Since the merger we are on target for our budget turnover of £10m with an expected profit of approx. £1m. Our budgets were prepared at the start of the year and management accounts are prepared quarterly. All costs are achieved within budget.

Success is evident in:

1. Financial terms
2. The quality of our staff.
3. The enjoyment in being the force behind Kitchens International.

What strategy do you have for the future?

We aim to open two other studios in Scotland within 3 years,(we have an offer in for premises in one of our target areas). This will enable us to further develop our contract and retail business and

reach our target turnover of £20m.

Internally we have started to proceed with our After Sale 'MOT' which will be a contract taken out with the client (first 2 years free) to service their kitchen yearly. This service will include eg. polishing worktops, adjusting doors, etc. This again will make Kitchens International proactive in the care of kitchens instead of being reactive to clients calls for aftercare.



