

Ian Johnson

Ian Johnson's easygoing manner belies his reputation as a shrewd entrepreneur: at 46 he has two successful companies to his credit.

Marie Shields talks to the man who pioneered picture framing as a franchise.

A self-confessed “bum at heart,” Ian Johnson eschews suits in favour of patterned sports jackets and brightly decorated ties. He lives in an eclectic fashion on a seven acre converted farm in Northumberland with Margaret Hewitson, his companion of ten years, and their three-year-old daughter, Rioja.

In his office at Fastframe's international headquarters in Stannington, Johnson sits amid the space, light and greenery, and explains how he came to turn the world of picture framing upside down.

“Fastframe was an opportunity I stumbled across—every businessman, no matter what business he is in, always dabbles at diversification. I had reached the comfort zone in my printing business, and I wanted to try something new.”

Printing had long been Johnson's primary occupation. From the age of 16 he worked as a printing apprentice, and at 22 he set up a printing business with a friend and two other partners. Gradually the others left, and Johnson remained as sole owner of Unit Offset.

Fastframe came about almost by accident. Johnson, a keen collector of antique art, was asked by the owner of Newcastle's Dean Gallery to have a look at a small picture-framing business he was running.

“At the time, he was employing five or six people, but even though he had the business coming in, he couldn't get it to work. I went and had a look, and didn't like what I saw: it was too parochial and antiquated. I advised him to change it into virtually what Fastframe is now, but he said you couldn't do that with picture framing.”

That was the end of the matter for about 18 months, until the business looked in danger of closing, and Johnson decided to step in and revamp it.

“I looked at the whole business objectively, and realized that the industry was one that nobody had looked at before. Picture framing was considered an art in itself by those who practised it, and as such was a very fragmented industry.

“For example, when I tried to find out how long it would take to frame a picture, the only answer I could get was ‘you can't look at it that way.’ So I came up with my own estimate: seven minutes.”

Clearly, this target could not be achieved using traditional framing methods. As Johnson explains, “The whole process had to be de-skilled. The mitres are cut mechanically, and no glue is used—instead, we punch special angular pins into the back at the corners. This actually produces a better effect, because the use of traditional nails leaves holes in the front that have to be filled.

“Before we came on the scene, if you wanted to get a picture framed, you first had to find someone who could do it—which wasn't always easy—and then you often had to wait several weeks.”

Fastframe was established in 1983. The original Fastframe shop on Dean Street was run as a pilot for a year before the concept was offered as a franchise. Johnson found Unit Offset provided him with valuable experience, as well as much needed financial backing for the project.

“The experience I gained in printing was invaluable. Unit Offset had an art department, and we designed corporate identities for companies. Often we gave advice, and it was not followed. It was great to be able to design my own strategy and implement it.”

Fastframe's corporate strategy includes a firm emphasis on consistency. Every new shop is outfitted in

the corporate colours: red and blue, chosen for their simplicity and availability. Even in Ian Johnson's office, every accessory is either red or blue—Johnson believes in practising what he preaches.

There are now 100 Fastframe franchises in the U.K., and a further 100 in the U.S. It particularly pleases Johnson to have been one of the first people to sell a franchise back to the U.S., the country that originated franchising.

Fastframe franchises will also soon open in France and Australia, and possibly Japan, but in the beginning it wasn't always easy to sell the concept to potential franchisees.

“When we first started, franchising was still recovering from the bad press it had received after pyramid selling. People didn't know much about the business, so we had to prove to them it could succeed. This is why we piloted it for a year, to prove it could be done.

“Now that we are successful we do get a lot of interest from people, but we have to vet potential franchisees carefully because if they don't succeed, we have a failure in our name, and there's no way we could allow that to happen.”

Johnson's current project is ProntaPizza, the pizza delivery franchise that sprang from an idea by Matteo Valente, a partner in Marco Polo's pizzeria on Dean Street. There are eight ProntaPizza outlets currently operating, and Johnson talks optimistically of expansion.

Yet he readily admits that franchising is not easy. “Franchising itself is a twofold business: you've got to have a sound idea, and you've got to be able to franchise it successfully.

“Sometimes managing those two sides can be difficult. The best attribute you can have is persistence. You can be clever and not succeed, but if you're persistent you'll get there.”