

TALKING TIMBER



HOW OTHERS SEE YOU

Gervais Sawyer's wood science credentials are hidden from view when he goes shopping for timber



Even if you are in timber, I assume that from time to time you have to buy the stuff. A new kitchen perhaps or just some fence repairs or a new deck? So, if you have to go to another local outlet, what are the chances that the experience won't be quite as great as the one that you would provide yourself? And have you ever thought how nice it would be if a market researcher stopped you in the street and asked you about your shopping experience –

why did you go there and not there, etc, etc?

I have a daughter who used to be in the fashion industry. Highly competitive and forever changing, so it is quite normal to send people, predominantly women, out to do some 'mystery shopping'. And there are many companies out there who will do it for you. One of the oft perceived snags, which should, of course these days, not be an issue, is that our trade is a rather male oriented one.

Occasionally the timber industry *has* done some mystery shopping. In Slovenia, for example, they did a big exercise in mystery buying preservative-treated timber and checked on quality. Subsequently, when the sorry results were presented at a conference, all the delegates smiled and shook their heads knowing full well that it represented their own markets – there were at least 10 countries in that audience.

Well, I have been buying timber products for rather a long time and from many suppliers so can I reveal some of the idiosyncrasies that I have encountered?

Pricing excludes VAT. Is this some newfangled tax? If you are inviting me in as a retail buyer, I want to know what it's going to cost me before I get to the tills.

Whilst the yard operative loaded my vehicle, I went in to pay. When I came out, he greeted me with the words "I've put a couple of extra sheets on" and held out his hand. Daren't go there again.

I booked an appointment to see a kitchen designer. Nice chap, really knew his stuff and how to sell it. A few days later I got a £90 parking ticket for having been in their car park for more than 60 minutes. End of that sale.

The lack of product knowledge. For how much longer will you try to sell me WBP plywood? The quality of so much of the plywood is questionable anyway – see previous Talking Timber articles? Poplar core marine? Really! Hardwood or softwood sir? Why should I have hardwood? Well, it's tougher and more durable. Turns out to be rubberwood, tulipwood or light red meranti.

As for preservative treated wood, phrases such as "high pressure" and "deep penetration" abound but you still want to

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Below Mystery shoppers could expose areas for improvement
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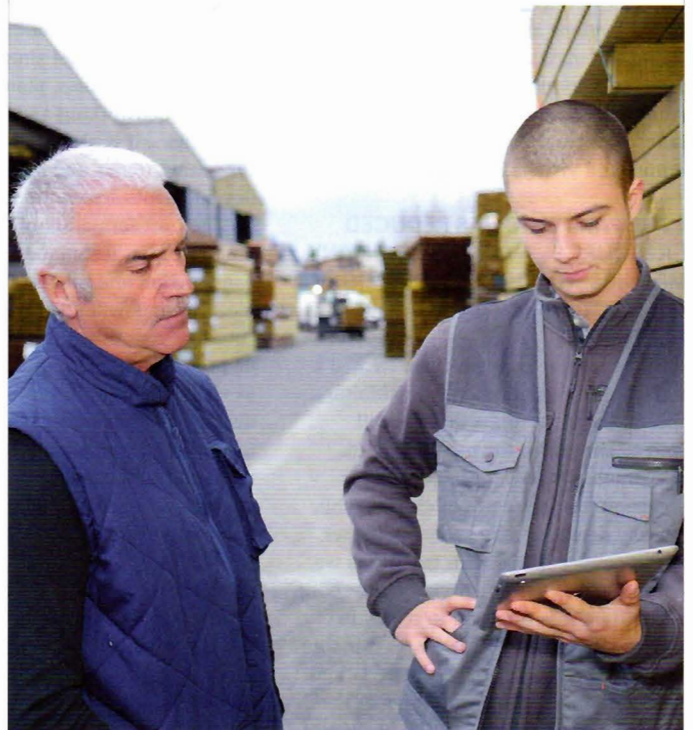
sell me Use Class 2 for my fence posts.

And what about measure? At least one company offers everything in imperial units. Two by four etc. Now they are really talking my language, only they then tell me that it is actually finished to metric sizes.

A common situation is when you go to the counter and ask for some wood, only to be told to "go out into the yard and find Joe who will sort you out". Joe is somewhat set in his ways and not really up on product knowledge, so I grit my teeth and prepare to be patronised.

So, what is my message?

Well, why not do some mystery shopping? The results may be shocking but will be an invaluable learning tool. Don't forget to send some women – that could be especially revealing. ■



The Wood Technology Society

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