



ACCESS & MOBILITY
P R O F E S S I O N A L

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WINNING FORMULA

WITH A THRIVING PRIVATE HEALTHCARE CLIENT
BASE AND ONE OF THE MOST ACCOMPLISHED
SERVICE TEAMS AROUND, BETTER MOBILITY
DISCUSSES THE INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

**MOVING AND
HANDLING**
KEEPING PACE WITH
NEW EQUIPMENT
TRENDS



WINNING FORMULA

With a thriving private healthcare customer base in London and one of the most comprehensive technical services team in the business, Better Mobility is proof that you don't need dozens of showrooms to make a name for yourself in this industry. AMP travelled to Hemel Hempstead to discover the secret behind the retailer's success and learn why it only works with suppliers that share the same user-centric ethos.



Jeanette and Lee Warner's entrance into the mobility equipment retail industry was born out

of frustration and confusion. After struggling to find accurate, reliable advice for their young son's wheelchair needs and being offered "appallingly inadequate" solutions they set off to gather their own information and soon realised there were many people out there feeling just as irritated. It quickly dawned upon them they could do a better job of offering a first-class experience and reliable customer service themselves.

That was 15 years ago and today their company, Better Mobility, is regarded as one of the most informed and established providers of wheelchairs and daily living aids in the UK.

For the first eight years the business traded from a shop in the small Hertfordshire market town of Berkhamsted before a second site opened eight miles up the road in Hemel Hempstead. The pair ran both shops side by side for a year before deciding they would only retain the shop in Hemel, where they have remained ever since.

"The Berkhamsted shop relied a lot on walk-in customers because of where it was located whereas we don't get a lot of walk-in trade here," says Jeanette, explaining that much of the company's business is done in London. "When we took this place it felt

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Better Mobility runs a showroom and technical workshop in Hemel Hempstead.

huge to us and we thought we would never fill it. Now we are bursting at the seams! All of upstairs is storage, we've got a workshop at the back and the showroom at the front, as well as two off-site storage facilities. We are looking for that right place to expand but in the meantime it is ticking over."

The "tipping point" for the business came in 2008 when the Warners had to decide whether to carry on alone or expand by bringing in outside staff. They chose the latter and hired Craig Topping, whose job title today is business manager and seating specialist, and haven't looked back.

Better Mobility now employs 12 staff, including a number of dedicated service engineers. Seven years ago it gained its first contract to service wheelchairs and manage parts replacements. It currently has more than 20 agreements of that type now.

Equipment that needs expertise

Although it has always sold small living aids, the business has grown through its focus on wheelchairs and equipment that needs its expertise, rather than items that are just sold over the counter. It now does beds and shower chairs too, and is open to the idea of keeping its portfolio fresh.

"As soon as something is mentioned by a therapist or a customer, we tend to try and find it and see if it is something we can source rather than say, 'no, it's not something we provide,'" explains Craig. "That's how our fleet has been built up — through things that we didn't realise were available. We will find out who supplies them and order them in."

Better Mobility has four vans on the road — and a fifth on its way — taking care of deliveries, servicing, assessments and prescriptions. Customers include end-users and their families, care homes, private hospitals and occupational therapists. It is a "person centred" approach that is all about specifying the exact solution a customer needs.

"Although we may have been pushed over the years by certain manufacturers — 'how much are you going to sell, how many are you going to take?' — that's not how we work. We have always provided what's best for the individual, and that's always been key," says Jeanette. If that ethos ever changed, she says she wouldn't continue. "I will never give an employee trouble for turning down a sale. If it's not right, and if there is any inkling that it may be dangerous or that the person is



The company is one of the UK's top specialists in customised wheelchairs.



Jeanette Warner.

not getting the right equipment then we will suggest they try something else. I think we have shocked a lot of suppliers over the years who have just said, 'what do I need to do to get you to take more of our product?' There is nothing you can do, it's just down to what people need. And I would like to think that's why we have survived."

Have manufacturers come to accept that response? "Some," says Jeanette, who is also the current serving chair of the BHTA's mobility group. "There are some good manufacturers out

there with a very similar or the same ethos. And there are others that have never had that ethos, and never will. I believe there is probably a market for both." Craig adds: "I think you find that with the manufacturers that have the same ethos, they are the ones with the specialist equipment that needs to be specially made and ordered into the specs that we require, whereas the ones that are more sales-driven tend to be off-the-shelf products, which we don't do as much of compared to the specialist side."

The strategy is certainly paying off. Such is the demand for its services that Better Mobility currently has a two-week waiting time for appointments. In general, manual wheelchairs remain the key driver of the business but, as Lee points out, this can encompass a broad spectrum of product. "You can go from inexpensive £165 chairs to some of the manual chairs worth £4,000 or £5,000. So it's a huge variety and we probably do more of the high-end expensive ones than we do of the really low-end ones or the inexpensive ones," he says.

Competition from many corners
The company has certainly seen the

competition change during its time in business. Boots, Argos, Asda, even Halfords, have all ventured into its territory at one point or another. Wholesaler Costco sells wheelchairs now. Jeanette admits it "scares" her that somebody can walk into a non-specialist environment and buy a scooter without any formal advice or training, but on the other hand the level of guidance and expertise Better Mobility offers helps to set it apart from the mainstream crowd.

"We spend a lot of time with our patients and our customers. We get to know these people and as a result the repeat business we get is phenomenal. We have some customers

IN PROFILE

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who are buying their sixth or seventh chair from us and we get to know what they like and what they don't like. It really makes a big difference. We are a bit unique as well in that you can go to many places and order a chair, but typically it's, 'these are your choices because these are what's on the form'. We think outside the box, we always have. In a manual wheelchair alone, we may get the frame from one company, the brakes from another, wheels from another, hand-rims from yet another, the back from another. You could have a piece of equipment with five or six components from different manufacturers because that is what's right for the individual. We have got the expertise to do that."

Better Mobility works with a lot of private healthcare businesses, which partly explains why the company has gravitated so heavily towards London. It plays to the strengths of the business, insists Jeanette. "Private hospitals expect that white glove, immediate service," she says. "They want the top equipment, they want the expertise and that is where we have

BRAND REFRESH PROPELS BUSINESS FORWARD

Better Mobility has just updated its corporate identity and brand logo. "It was just time for something fresh," explains MD Jeanette Warner. "We released our first own-branded brochure a couple of years ago and we have just published a new one. New products have come out and we are now doing more products than we did before. We have also added two seating specialists to our team in the past 18 months and we're focusing more on the customised service we



offer." The original logo depicted somebody sitting in a wheelchair and made

use of a static arrow, whereas in the new version the arrow has been tweaked so that it portrays the user propelling themselves forward. "It's that self motion and I think that's just much more representative of what we do and the expertise we have developed over the years," explains Jeanette. "And to be honest, in a geriatric-dominated industry, most of our clients are actually under 50-years-old, which is quite unusual, but it is just down to the type of equipment that we do. They tend to be younger and perhaps that's due to it being more sports injuries and things like that, so we wanted something that was younger and fresher to show that," she adds.

excelled. Of course, if we were located any closer to London it would cost a fortune so it works well, but that's where we have grown. And I think a lot of people are afraid to go into London to be fair."

That said, it receives requests from all over the country. It always makes it clear to customers that if they are not on its doorstep then it is harder to service them and they might be better going to a local retailer, but quite often customers don't mind because they value its expertise so highly.

The only time it tends to draw a line is when it is contacted by a person or organisation north of the border. "We get a ton of requests from Scotland but the reality is we can't, it is just not

“PRIVATE HOSPITALS EXPECT THAT WHITE GLOVE, IMMEDIATE SERVICE. THEY WANT THE TOP EQUIPMENT, THEY WANT THE EXPERTISE AND THAT IS WHERE WE HAVE EXCELLED AS A COMPANY”





Better Mobility relies less on drop-in trade and more on direct, prescriptive sales to private hospitals, care homes, individual end-users and the NHS.



Craig Topping.

realistic. In that case we try and refer them to a fellow BHTA company.”

Facilitating online sales

It is impossible to discuss the dynamics of the mobility retail market without the topic of internet resellers cropping up. The Warners certainly have reservations about the value that these companies bring to the market but are astute enough to know they are not going to go away. They themselves are exploring the possibility

of selling more prescriptive products online in future but are adamant it will never undermine what their core business is about, simply because of the level of face-to-face contact their operation demands.

Their biggest grievance with the web is not price or margin, but the fact it can facilitate sales that a reputable retailer like Better Mobility would not permit. “Somebody can come in here and want to buy an 8mph machine that weighs the best part of 200kg,” says

Lee. “It’s a big, heavy piece of equipment that you can drive faster than most people can run and you can drive it along the pavement. If the individual comes in and we assess them and they can’t drive it because they are not safe to themselves or to other people, we don’t sell it. But there is nothing stopping anybody from buying it online, which is quite wrong.”

But Lee also agrees the online versus physical retail argument is not as black and white as it is painted. He acknowledges that there could be occasions where it makes sense to use the internet. “I think in the not-too-distant future, if you are a wheelchair user who has been using a wheelchair that you are comfortable with for the last 15 to 20 years, and you know how you want your chair set up, why shouldn’t you be able to buy it online? But we will always be that human contact. And if they want somebody to come out and visit them and shed some more expertise or shed some more knowledge then we will do that.”

All the Warners ever set out to do was provide the impartial advice they believed the market was crying out for in order to help people make informed decisions. The impressive growth of their business over the past 15 years proves just how right they were to follow their instincts. **AMP**

‘MOBILITY EQUIPMENT SHOULDN’T BE SEEN AS A LUXURY’

As far as Jeanette Warner is concerned, funding remains the biggest challenge confronting the mobility equipment industry — and she says that cautiously given that nobody really knows what is going to happen with the NHS and there’s a General Election later this month. “There is a huge opportunity for the NHS to do things right and really genuinely help people with equipment,” she says. “There is also a gigantic opportunity for them to screw it up as they have previously.”

It is not just a public sector issue. Private funding also comes with challenges, she says. “Until people see mobility equipment as not a luxury, there is going to be an

issue. It is not a luxury, it should be everybody’s right to access it and get what’s best for them.”

She has seen parents come into the shop with their adult children and get talked out of buying something they need. “The attitude still seems to be very much that if you’re buying a nicer wheelchair, you are treating yourself. Well you’re not, it’s going to be easier to use; it is accepting that it is an everyday thing. People will drop money on a car they drive once a week but they balk at getting something that is good and supportive and will make somebody’s life easier.”