

## Alex Foster Interview Transcript

### 00:00 Welcome

Hello everyone and welcome to the My Local Marketer podcast. I'm Maria and today I'm speaking with Alex Foster, Director and Owner of Caversham Picture Framer. Alex, hello and welcome to the podcast, How Are You?

I'm good, yes.

Well, today we are in, do you call this the print room?

This is a Caversham Print Club. an artist space, mostly for printing, but it can be for other arts as well.

### 00:32 Introduction to Alex

It's beautiful and it's based just behind the gallery, which we'll come back to later. But I suppose first of all, could you please give a brief introduction to yourself and to your company?

Yes, I mean, I suppose, where did I start? I started as an art historian, studied at School of Orient and African Studies and UCL BA Masters, then got into picture framing, really as a result of struggling to find a job. I have a family friend up in Birmingham who runs a very old picture framers. They've been going now about 175 years and found out that picture framing is a perfect marriage between art history and being a bit more creative. So that was sort of where I started and then found a job in London, which was more convenient. From there, really my dad, I suppose, he said, well, there's not really much of a direction going forwards. It's just being a picture frame as a craftsperson. It's quite difficult to progress. You sort of have to have your own company. And he pushed me into buying into a picture framing business, which is down here in Caversham. And that's what I've been developing ever since.

And you've been doing this for 10 years now, is that right?

Almost nine years actually, but it's very close. It'll be 10 by the end of the year. When I started, I took over two businesses actually. I took over one in Tilehurst called Angles of Art and I took over one in Caversham called the Complete Picture Frame Maker. And the owners in Angles of Art said that they'd been there for 10 years and I was like, my God, how would anyone manage to do it for 10 years? Not from a negative point of view, it just seemed like such a long distance away and it's just like gone like that.

When you have your own business though, the years just melt away.

Well, you get absorbed in projects that you're very passionate about, so then the time flies. It's much quicker and better than working with someone else.

#### **02:46** Alex's business advice to his younger self

You're learning so much at the same time, you're developing the areas that you want to develop or are interested in. So it gives you much more freedom. Thinking about those nine, almost 10 years then, what would you have done differently, would you say, if anything, at the start, what would your advice be to your younger self?

I've learned that you're always going to make mistakes. Whatever I've done, just built this print club. I know very little other than having gone on lots of art classes myself about the processes behind it. And so last year in some ways wasn't that efficient, but I made lots of mistakes. And as long as you learn from those mistakes, it doesn't really matter too much. Too much can go wrong. It's just about what can you do to make it go better? I mean, the only thing really, I suppose, is that I probably would have said to start earlier. And I'm not sure how much earlier I could have started as a trajectory because I finished my degrees and then I tried to do some other jobs. But there's always a tendency to go, I could just get that little bit more experience and then I'll be able to do my business better. The reality is the government changes all the rules all the time and you can't plan the things like that and it's the experience on the job that shows you what to do. So the earlier you start, the less other risk there is in your life, whether it's house mortgage or dependence or whatever it is, it's getting started as early as possible.

#### **04:27** Why Alex decided to start the Print Club and lessons learned

I think that's a great piece of advice. Well, going into the print club a little bit more then, because you mentioned it just there. What made you want to set up the print club in the first place? And what were those lessons that you learned when you said last year wasn't efficient? What did you learn from last year?

Well, I've had this space since I moved the gallery to where it now is in front of it. And it was just a storeroom and I spent quite a long time humming and harming, not quite committing to anything because it's basically a large box. Sort of had an idea of an event space, but then I couldn't quite bring myself to do anything because it didn't mean much to me. I went on a Christmas present etching course in South London and walked into the space and it's kind of the same sort of size as this and it's like, this is something I can do. And so I set about how I would build it. I've built a workshop before. We got a picture framing workshop in Pangborn. So I can build a workshop and I can set this up and we can start running art classes. The bit which I probably got wrong right at beginning was the assumption that as soon as you made the space, people would know that it was here.

And that's probably partly because I bought my businesses. So they were already established with a certain degree of goodwill. People knew that they were there. I've just kind of developed it. Whereas this is a new thing. So it started off, I assumed that because people knew my gallery, they would then just learn about it, but it doesn't quite work like that. So there was kind of like a bit of a false start. From that and I've slowly, we've slowly been developing with getting guest tutors in. We had an artist in resident who graduated last summer from Reading University in the autumn. We'd like to run some more artist residencies both for established and new artists and sort of try and build up the community and by building up the community more people will know about it and like business and it should work better going forwards, but it's a slow burn, whereas I thought it was going to be sort of open the doors. Wham, there we go.

So I suppose in hindsight, something would have been too, as soon as you had the idea and you wanted to do it, because it takes time to build the place and get everything in situ. Right from that point, you knew you wanted to do it, start to tell everyone about it and get them excited.

Yes, I'm not sure that I know how I would do that. Marketing has always been, to me, a bit of a tricky thing. Partly doesn't help, and in a way, I had no required deadline for building the space, so it took me a year to do that.

**07:24** The creation of the galley in The Caversham Frammer

But now it's here and it's beautiful. as well as the framing business, you have, as you said, the gallery, which moved into the main gallery space. And it seems to be really popular.

I actually rented the retail shop next door. So what happened there was that the old shop was also my workshop, but I'd managed in the time I was there to build a workshop. So all of that moved out, but it wasn't designed to be a gallery really. And then the pandemic happened and we started doing gallery exhibitions in the windows, which were very successful. So when we were able to then move here I rebuilt the space for the new shop as a gallery rather than as an extension of workshop space.

**08:27** Why Alex decided to start organising exhibitions

Well, it's a beautiful space and the current exhibition, and we're talking February, 2026 is one mirror and it's beautiful. And at the end of the month is the next exhibition, which I'm really looking forward to the talk from someone at the University of Reading. What got you on the idea of setting up the exhibition in the first place? Because they're really successful. I always come in, they're always packed with people. So bringing people into the space, seems to have really worked.

Well, in one sense, the whole exercise is a marketing exercise. We don't worry too much about making money on the events or even, indeed, necessarily on the exhibitions. Of course, that's what we want to do. And it is growing in that direction.

**09:01** Identifying a measurement of success for the exhibitions

But when I first started and I did a few exhibitions in the old gallery space, I was very disappointed because my metric for success was effectively how many pictures we'd sold because that's what I thought was required based on my experience as a student going to art galleries and open events in London. But actually, when I swapped it around, it's like the metric for success was how many new email addresses I could add to my newsletter. Then you started to feel good about the fact that it was what it was.

And that's what's enabled it to grow and develop and become more all the time, because we're not trying to just sell a picture. If the pictures get sold, they might sell in six months' time or 12 months' time, depending on what they are and how much, etc., etc. But by getting people onto our mailing list, we have a larger and larger body of people who are interested in the art and the community and what's going on and then they can talk to people out and about wherever they are and discuss the space. So hopefully then more can come in who are interested as well.

**10:56** The importance of hiring marketing consultants to get input

I think it's such a good tactic because the awareness part, people are finding out about you because they're finding out about the different exhibitions and getting drawn to different things. But then you're keeping them on your email list. They can find out about other exhibitions. So you'll keep them in the ecosystem and you can tell them about offers and everything else you have. So getting them on that email list, I agree, is a brilliant metric. And realizing that, I think, was a stroke of brilliance, really, because most people would think, it's not working and go into something else. They're realising you had the wrong metric. That was really clever.

I have over time hired people to help consult a bit on marketing. There is so much stuff that you think you could do. I find it very difficult to necessarily identify what I should do and then also identify what counts as an achievement on it. And it's by spending money on not very much money, it's sort like one day a month or something like that with someone who's consulting, who knows more about this part of the industry and seeing what they take and hopefully then being able to take things away, which I can carry on applying. So in one sense, yes, I did realize that myself. No other marketer told me that, but I have had people who've said that you need to decide on a success metric, what you're actually trying to achieve, and also a way of trying to record that information, even if it's anecdotally, to be able to decide whether or not to do more of it.

And that's really hard, as you said, given all the different things that you do, knowing which things to focus on in order to develop them and how it leads into everything else. It takes some time just to sit back and have a think about that. So going back to the picture framing business, when do people come to you to get frames? Because I bet a lot of people probably don't even realize or think about the frames. They probably just order something off Amazon or go to Ikea or something just to get a bland frame, which really goes away from centuries, gone by, where the frame was a piece of art in itself.

#### **12:42** How a frame changes the experience of a picture

Everything should be well-famed. But I would say that, wouldn't I? There is a market out there for the off-the-shelf frames. It's not necessarily a completely bad thing, but the most important thing to me is for a picture frame to enhance the visual experience of the artwork. It is like the book cover or the record case. There's various different ways of looking at it. It's there to make the pictures more about what you as the owner see. There's a very interesting example. If you came in with a romantic landscape, so that's a stormy sea with a bit of coastline, you can change the picture, the experience of that picture by what frame you choose. If you choose a dark frame, you can make it look like the storm is coming in. If you choose a light frame, you can make it look like the storm is going out. And it creates a difference of experience. If you've got an abstract painting, variety of colours, like a mirror, seeing we've got those on show at the moment. If you choose a different colour, so like if you mount with a little bit of red, the red in the picture is going to become much more dominant and that's something which maybe as the viewer that's what you see and what you really like about that picture. So you create harmony with the artwork and then it looks more spectacular on your wall than if it was just in a standard frame.

#### **14:56** Framing from an interior design perspective vs framing to enhance the artwork

That's really interesting because I always thought you get the picture frames to match the other picture frames. So if, for example, you've got some pictures up already in a black frame, probably get more black frames because the room then sort of has like this sea of black frames and it looks more in line. But actually what you're saying is each piece of art or each photo is unique in itself. So you shouldn't be worrying about matching the decor.

There are lots of people who do fame from an interior perspective. It depends on what you're faming. If you're going to fame a load of family photographs and make a wall display, then you probably do want to have something which looks in keeping and all together as a unitary sum. It's a bit like dressing yourself in the morning. You don't worry about what everyone else is going to wear at the train station. You wear what works for you, and that's the same for the artwork and then it will work in the space. The things which tend to look awkward are when you sort of shoehorn it in on something which doesn't work for it.

### **15:39** How people are guided through the process of choosing a frame

So when people come in for the experience, they come in, they have their pitch, their piece of art to go in a room. How do you guide them through that initial process in choosing the frame? What advice do you give them?

Well, there's a degree of advice just on construction. So depending on what it is, I we do lots of 3D memorabilia, just done a set of silver spoons for a customer. We do sporting things as well. Lots of textiles. They all have different ways that you need to construct a frame so that it's preserved. We try and do purely conservation framing. So in theory, everything is reversible.

So there's construction element and then it's about within that construction element, helping guide what would look right in terms of color and shape, textures, but it's conversation. There's no right way of doing it. There's lots of wrong ways. So you have to talk through and end up with a huge array of different alternatives than it's down to individual's taste important is for customers individual taste because they are the ones that have to live with it.

### **17:04** Alex's role within his business

So we've discussed the framing side and the print studio and the gallery. You've got a lot on there. How do you divide the different activities over say your standard, we?

It goes back to why I came to Caversham. There's an opportunity at the time to buy two picture-faming businesses. In retrospect, probably that was stretching me a bit thin at the time, but by the two picture-faming businesses, then I should have an economy as a scale. What I always want to do is stop doing the thing that I'm currently doing and pass

it on to someone else. So I have Lydia and Sophie have moment doing today and they're doing the work in the gallery, they're doing the general sales. I can do the sales, but they're doing this on a regular basis in all of the administration. Likewise, I have a team of guys at the workshop. In theory, I can do most of what they do and I do when they're on holiday, but they're doing it on a regular basis and sorting all of those things out.

So I try not to have too many things, if you like, which I do deliberately every week. That obviously doesn't work because there are always things to do because they are running a business. But that's the idea. I do spend a lot of time doing marketing type things and also accounting type things. I also try and spend a lot of time thinking and starting and working through projects. I realised over the last 70 years that actually what I really like doing is a project. So this was a project building out a print club, developing the print club. By the end of this month, we're actually going to start working on opening a space in Henley. So my big project for this year is making a gallery and retail space in Henley a reality. The other thing that I'd spend a lot of my time doing is if you like putting out fires.

Based on that, you need really good processes in place to minimise those fires that you put out. If there are processes in place, in theory they know what to do, so hopefully you can minimise the number of fires that they have. I like systems, I really enjoy setting up systems. Systems never fully, you're developing all the time, but it's taking the time with staff members to go through and work out what's going wrong with the system and then adapting it and changing it. In theory, all of the processes which happen in the gallery in Caversham are also the same processes that happen when we take sales in the workshop in Pangborn. And so it should be possible that someone, they were doing sales in Pangborn, to be able to come over to Caversham and it would be the same. There's always idiosyncrasy to that, but that's the idea. And it's about creating the system to enable that to be as similar as possible and it saves time for you. Everyone's on the same page.

### **20:26** Alex's projects moving forwards

And like you said, once you've learned, there's a hole in this system here, next time you know exactly where it is and how to fix it so it doesn't happen again. What are your projects for moving forwards? Is the headline one, as you said, is that your main one for this year?

Setting up in Henley, I've been trying to negotiate to sort out for a couple of years, like things getting away and all sorts of other things, but that's been a target for a while to be

able to do, so I'm really glad that there's going to be something physical to actually start being able to do something with. I've also got to make sure that this space, print club, is running and developing. I'm going to run a few of my own etching classes. So we've got to be running this here. There's also the inevitable questions going forward that obviously we're adding an extra unit effectively to the business. So what does the workshop need to be able to do the work for the extra site? So not possibly this year, but next year there's an expansion question on what do we need to enable the work to keep on going there without the production stopping, then I suppose also on that, we've got a framing desk for consultations in the workshop and that we started last year when I had to close Angles of Art due to changes in rental agreements. So I opened the space in the workshop and that's been developing. And there's going to be a point at which probably that's busy enough for workshop staff can't also be maintaining that. There's sort of chess pieces and growing pains and you have to sort of work out how to negotiate them as you go forwards. People say that small business owners don't switch off and that's me not switching off. I'll lie there and lie thinking, well if I do this I can have to do that.

### **22:35** Why Alex is looking to establish a base in Henley

Doing the work itself when you're in the midst of it, I know it can feel a bit overwhelming, but actually thinking about how you can develop and grow. And Henley's a really interesting site. I think that would do really well. Why did you decide to go for Henley?

Well, when I first took over the gallery in Caversham, there was a very experienced and very high quality picture framers in Henley. Six months after I'd been running the business, he actually passed on his trade to me and retired. And there hasn't been really a picture framers which I'd considered to be equivalent of calibre that I try and do, I've carried them in Henley. We do have people who come from Henley here, but then there's lots of people who don't and they don't have anywhere to go. So it's always seemed like a good place to be able to grow to. Various things over time have gotten away, the pandemic being a major one and then recovering from a pandemic after that and then having children.

It's just things which have delayed it.

**23:40** Alex's final thoughts

Alex, thank you so much for your time today. Is there anything you'd to leave our listeners with?

Everything that I'm doing both in the print club and the gallery, it only works because we want it to be a community for art locally. So anybody who's even remotely interested can go on our website and sign up to our newsletter. And that's the best way then to find out what exhibitions we're doing, what courses are coming up, what events. We very recently did a wine tasting for people who don't

want to actually create stuff that you can drink and enjoy instead. So we're doing a whole series of different things and by being on the newsletter you can join in and be part of what I hope is developing into a pretty good community around art.

I highly recommend everyone you sign up to the newsletter. really enjoy the exhibitions when they're on and the talks as well. They're always really enjoyable. So Alex, thank you so much for your time and everyone should get down here to Caversham Picture Frame in Caversham.