

Now we're ALL doing the High Street haggle

HAGGLING is a skill that we Brits have yet to master. The more confident among us may be comfortable with knocking down the price of a trinket in a Moroccan souk.

But it's a different story when it comes to asking for a discount in Marks & Spencer. Or is it? According to the boss of one store, haggling is returning to the High Street. As the economy limps on, it seems the British are developing a backbone when it comes to bagging a bargain.

'People are haggling a lot more than they did before,' says Leo McKee, chief executive of hire purchase firm Brighthouse, which has 243 stores around Britain.

'They're looking for established brands — they're looking for bragging rights. It's all about BlackBerry, Apple stuff, Hotpoint fridges.'

And it seems to be working. 'Put it

by Jill Foster

this way,' he says. 'If you come in and you're going to buy a sofa for £1,000, we'd be reluctant to see you walk out without it.'

Many of us would rather eat our lunch off the pavement than ask a shop assistant for a few pounds off a product. We assume it's rude, brash and well, so un-British. Some of us even believe it's against the law — which it isn't.

'You have nothing to lose by trying to haggle — apart from a bit of pride — and there's no law against it,' says Sarah Pennells, founder of finance website SavvyWoman.co.uk.

'The shop can refuse to give you a discount, but that's the worst that can happen. Retailers know all too well how tough consumers are finding it, that's why flash sales and mid-season sales keep popping up everywhere. It may not be in our culture to haggle on the High

Street, but it's worth giving it a go. You may be surprised at the discounts, you'll be able to negotiate.' But how embarrassing is it? And is there a secret to haggling?

'Chutzpah is a powerful consumer weapon, especially when combined with talents not often evoked in the money world: seduction, a gentle patter and a twinkle in the eye,' says Martin Lewis of money savingexpert.com.

'Aggressive or forceful haggling is usually a mistake. It annoys the person you're dealing with and your discount is at their discretion. If you're polite, charming and treat the whole process with humour, you'll get further.'

So how would I get on haggling down the price of items in five High Street stores...

JOHN LEWIS

HEART racing, throat dry, my first haggling challenge is to buy a new oven in John Lewis in London's Oxford Street. I feel mortified about what I'm about to do, but take a deep breath and approach an assistant.

I deliberately choose the most expensive oven for £699, thinking that the more costly it is, the more money the store might knock off it, and, ask, erm, if there is, erm, any discount on it.

Oh, for goodness sake, I make Downton Abbey's meek little Daisy look more like Kirstie Allsopp. He smiles and shakes his head. Then I remember Sarah Pennell's advice: 'If your haggling seems to be going nowhere, either be prepared to walk away or ask for extras such as accessories or delivery to be thrown in for free.'

'What about installation and delivery?' I ask.

'It's free delivery and it's £85 for installation.'

I ask if that's a fixed price — as my budget was £700 and he says 'yes', if I tried to get an independent installer, it would cost around the same. I slink away, my face the same colour as the poppy on my coat.

CARPHONE WAREHOUSE

FEELING humiliated, I cross the road to buy a mobile phone handset.

'I want to buy this BlackBerry for my husband,' I tell the assistant in a no-nonsense voice. 'But it's £159.99 and my budget is £150. Is that the best price?' He nods. I won't give up.

'OK, if I buy it for this price, will you throw in the case?' He shakes his head. 'A deal on insurance?' Nope.

Then, he says I should try a cheaper phone. 'If you go away and look on comparison websites, you'll see that this is a very good phone,' he says. He wants me to go away. So I do.

DEBENHAMS

DEFLATED and with nothing to show for it, I am determined to do better. I re-apply my lipstick (a fail-safe confidence booster) and head to the homewares department.

According to seasoned hagglers, one of the best ways to negotiate a deal is if the item is damaged. On a bottom shelf, I spy a battered box of four Tefal pans for £165. I look inside and see that the pans are perfect, but the edges of the box are crumpled and torn. Is this my chance? I take the box



Picture: GETTY

over to the counter and ask the assistant if there's any chance of a discount.

'Is it just the box?' he asks and I can feel the bargain slipping away from me.

'Yes, the pans are fine, but that box is damaged. I'll buy it if you can give me some money off.'

He disappears to ask his supervisor and returns two minutes later to say he can take ten per cent off — that's £16.50 — and if I like, I can open a Debenhams account and get a further ten per cent off as well. Success at last and a saving of £33.

MARKS & SPENCER

MY CONFIDENCE boosted, I hold my head high. I have to buy a winter coat and spy a black-and-grey one with faux fur collar in the Speziale range for £179. Now I have to concoct a reason why I need to get it cheaper. I grab an assistant.

'Excuse me, could you tell me if there's any way I can get a discount on this, please? I've clubbed together with some work colleagues to buy this coat as a gift for our friends, but it only comes to £160... is there some way I could get it at that price? Perhaps I could open an account or something?'

The friendly sales assistant takes me to the counter to ask one of her more senior colleagues. The supervisor says she can't give me a discount and opening an account won't give me any money off, but she asks have I tried looking online?

'It's often much cheaper to get the same item you see in store online,' she says. 'Sometimes you can get 10, 20 or even 30 per cent off — have you looked on your iPhone?'

I tell her I don't have an iPhone, but will look online later — and when I do, I find some great bargains. Plus, M&S isn't

the only website to offer better deals online than in store — H&M also came up trumps.

CURRYS

THE High Street is getting busy and crowds are a haggler's enemy. 'Try not to haggle when a shop is crammed with customers,' says Martin. 'The last thing sales people are interested in is reducing their margins when they can see lots of people willing to buy. Go during times of shopping serenity, such as mid-week mid-mornings.'

Still, I walk into Currys and ask an assistant about a 42in Toshiba television for £749.

'Is that the best price you can do?' I ask and he smirks. 'Yes, if you can find it anywhere cheaper, we'll match it,' he says. Damn. I try a different tactic.

'What about delivery and installation?' I ask.

'It's free delivery and the price depends on whether you want it on the wall or on a stand — it's between £80 and £100.'

Aha! I ask if he can check if he has any in stock and he goes away and says, 'yes', he could deliver it in eight days.

'And installation?' I ask again, giving him a cheeky smile. He's silent. Eventually, he says: 'I can give you installation for £40 — and I can throw in an extra set of 3D glasses.' Another small, but rewarding success!

WAS IT WORTH IT?

ONCE the initial humiliation has worn off, it's fun engaging in sales banter with the assistants to see who will crack first. Perhaps London's Oxford Street just weeks before Christmas isn't the best place to haggle, but if you can't do it here, where can you?

Now my price-quibbling confidence has been boosted, will I try this again? You can put money on it.

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Styling: ANTONIA MAGOR