

How to... reinvigorate local shopping areas

Marketing the mar

With support, small retailers can make a big impact on local shopping areas, says **Diane Jackson**



Workshops for independent shopkeepers, including some from Rochdale, aim to upgrade promotional skills

There has been much in the news about the demise of small high streets and the rise of 'clone towns', but the other side of the equation hasn't had much attention. That is, the number of projects and initiatives being run by local authorities, town partnerships, market towns, community councils and their project officers to help local shopping areas fight back.

As a contractor hired by councils to work with project officers on such initiatives, we see the results when small retailers are offered business support. In the past, some retailers have missed out from receiving help as it was seen as giving them 'an unfair competitive advantage'. But what's the difference between supporting someone who is setting up a garden maintenance business and someone who is opening a shop selling garden tools?

Fortunately, there is a move towards recognising how important local shops are to the community they serve and the acknowledgement that allowing local shopping areas to decline impacts on neighbourhoods in many ways. Lack of amenities and vandalism are just two. Imagine your local shopping area, the place you pop out to when you've run out of bread or milk, and how devastating it

would be if all those shops vanished overnight. It would be more than the sum total of the shops that disappeared, it would be as if someone had ripped the heart out of the area.

The project

In the late 1990s, in a brave move to support local retailers, Stockport Council invested in developing of a short programme of workshops to upgrade the marketing skills of independent shopkeepers in a bid to help them be more competitive. The marketing workshops were part of the council's district centre regeneration strategy and this 'soft' regeneration initiative was thought to be just as important as the 'hard' regeneration of the same areas.

It took three years from conception of the programme to deliver the first pilot marketing workshop programme in Cheadle, Stockport, but the results were encouraging. Barriers were broken down between the council and retailers when the latter realised they were being recognised as a valuable resource in the community. It was a very small step in some ways, but significant and groundbreaking in others.

Over the next year the programme was

offered to all district centres in Stockport as part of a regeneration package and to some local centres too. Not all the district centres took up the offer, but some of those that did went on to commit themselves to programmes involving joint promotions and events. Retailers were also encouraged to have a voice in the community at partnership meetings, which have gone from strength to strength, with retail, resident and local group representatives meeting regularly to discuss local issues.

I'm sure that Stockport Council would be the first to agree that not all the district centres are perfect and that there is still work to be done. But in the centres where retailers have formed their own traders' association and joined together for the common good of their businesses and the community, for example in Marple, there have been significant improvements in trading conditions and the overall vitality of the area.

Stockport Council recognised the significance of the change it had nurtured in the district centres and the role marketing workshops had played. As the contractor and sole licence holder to the copyright of the workshops, we were encouraged by the council to offer the marketing workshop programme to neighbouring local authorities.

Different approaches

Local authorities work in different ways, not all have the same type of distinct district centres that Stockport has, not all have partnerships, but all them have local shopping areas that need help to survive. The challenge for us has been to adapt and develop the programme for the different conditions that face us in each area where we work. Last year, 84 businesses from different towns, including Rochdale, Blackburn and Garstang in Lancashire, took part in the workshops. Feedback from businesses revealed they had resulted in delegates carrying out 93 specific actions, 30 personal action plans were prepared in consultation with participants at one-to-one clinics and on-site visits and all reported they had learned something useful for their businesses.

A review last month for Blackburn showed that 87% of the 63 firms that had attended the workshops since 2003 as part of its 'smart shop open' and business growth programme were still trading.

Having worked in many different towns across the northwest, with different local authorities and project officers, all with their own style, it has become clear that the ways to invigorate local shopping areas are as varied as the problems faced – there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution. If independent shops disappear, we are all losers. To help them survive and thrive we must all support them by shopping locally and creating the right environment for them.

Learning Curve is a **New Start** resource to help share knowledge of initiatives and approaches that have worked well in regeneration and economic development. If you would like to submit an article, please email an outline of your idea to news@newstartmag.co.uk or call 0114 281 6133.

Marketplace



Garstang, Lancashire, took part in the scheme and provided positive feedback

Steps to help breathe life into local shopping areas include the following:

- Be realistic – it will take time, especially if the area has been neglected in the past and has become rundown
- Win the confidence of the retailers by doing something positive for them
- Take a genuine interest in their issues
- Encourage them to form an active traders' association – retailers often feel isolated
- Engage with the traders' association and suggest some 'winnable' ideas such as a simple joint promotion or event
- If possible, form a partnership, involve the traders' association and other local groups
- Give retailers a voice in local issues – two-way communication is key
- Offer business support, too often retailers are excluded from initiatives
- Develop a local area action plan in conjunction with the traders' association and partnership
- Make sure that progress on the action plan is seen
- Start a 'shop local' campaign

An idea that started as a simple solution to a local problem has grown into a body of work that I believe is of national importance. We have improved the lot of individual shopkeepers, we have given them tips and techniques that they can put into practice for little or no cost and that have a significant effect on their bottom line.

Our experience has grown considerably since the early days, and we have probably learned as much from the retailers as they have from us. I feel that we have become a conduit of experience between the various groups – they couldn't and probably wouldn't ever talk to each other, but we can share the knowledge and experience of them all.

► find out more

Diane Jackson is the founder of Main Marketing and PR, based in Stockport, which began in 1995 to offer a practical marketing services to SMEs. It became involved in the retail marketing workshop initiative with Stockport Council in 1999 and now provides support to independent retailers through local authority SRB5 and ERDF projects, regeneration, market town and community council initiatives across the northwest. Call 0845 129 9948, email: dj@main-marketing.co.uk or visit www.retailersurvival.co.uk

Don't miss out

Rural futures – who cares?

Simon Berry, chief executive of Ruralnet, believes debate about climate change, food miles and other issues have created a positive vibe around the work to improve rural communities. Ruralnet's annual conference will look at how key players can capitalise on that. Sessions include delegates helping write a book in eight minutes, which will be published after the event. Graham Russell, director of practice at the Commission for Rural Communities, and Tom Oliver, head of rural policy at the Campaign to Protect Rural England, will be among the speakers. Venue: Sutton Coldfield
10-11 October
Details: www.ruralnetuk.org/conference

Footsey 100

UK's biggest social economy trade fair
Venue: York
18 October
Details: www.footsey.org.uk, 0114 221 0428

Regeneration: what's the role of business advisers?

Institute of Business Consulting conference
Venue: London
19 October
www.ibconsulting.org.uk/conference2007

Tackling antisocial behaviour

Charter Housing conference
Venue: Cwmbran, Wales
22 October
Details: Cally Robinson, 01633 678 552, cally.robinson@charterhousing.co.uk

Sustainable communities summit

TAE conference
Venue: London
25 October
Details: www.sustainablecommunities2007.co.uk, 0161 832 6000

Housing and place making

Bura course
Venue: various
29 October to 22 January
Details: www.bura.org.uk

A taste of success

BSN Women in Business event
Venue: Saltash, Cornwall
30 October
Details: www.businesssupportnetwork.com

Professional development for social enterprise advisers

Rise course
Venue: Bristol
31 October to 2 November
Details: www.rise-sw.co.uk/training, 01392 435775

Business meets community

Yorkshire Forward conference
Venue: Leeds
7 November
Details: 0113 394 9711/12

New development and urban green space

Flora Locale seminar
Venue: Newcastle
8 November
Details: 01488 680457, info@floralocale.org

Ensuring effective provision of affordable and sustainable housing

Centre for Public Policy Seminars event
Venue: Sheffield
9 November
Details: 01422 845004,

www.cppseminars.org.uk

Creative economy

Creative Clusters conference
Venue: London
9-14 November
Details: www.creativeclusters.com

Images for change

Church Action on Poverty annual conference
Venue: Gateshead
10 November
Details: 0161 236 9321, www.church-poverty.org.uk

Emerging immigrant communities

De Montfort University conference
Venue: Leicester
10-11 November
Details: 0116 2577377, dmccc@dmu.ac.uk

Annual youth justice convention

Youth Justice Board
Venue: Bournemouth
13-14 November
Details: www.neilstewartassociates.com/yjc07

Mapic 2007

Reed Midem conference
Venue: Cannes
14-16 November
Details: www.mapic.com

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