

HOW TO...GUIDES

How to...Maximise your retail offer

(author Susan Briggs, The Tourism Network)

“Maximising the profits from your retail offer is becoming more important for attractions, tourist information centres, and museums” Susan Briggs, The Tourism Network

1. Your retail outlet

Visitors increasingly look for signs of authenticity, for opportunities to buy things they can't find in every High Street shop. Authentic products produced by real people and reflecting the area they have visited, help visitors to re-live memories of happy holiday times. Such products provide a tangible way to encourage repeat visits to your business or region.

1.1 Location of your retail outlet

The essential ingredient for success of any retail outlet is footfall – the number of people who are likely to pass by your shop. There are three options for the location of retail outlets situated within visitor attractions:

- **At the entrance:** this works well for smaller attractions because staff can oversee admissions and the retail operation. Visitor spend may be lower because visitors are now conditioned to expect the gift shop to be at the shop exit. They are not necessarily in the right mindset for buying at the beginning of their visit and then have to carry their purchases throughout the attraction.
- **Along the visitor route for the attraction:** this means that visitors are bound to pass by the shop so footfall is high but they may be distracted and not in the right mindset to shop. Parents may promise children a gift from the shop if they behave themselves during the visit, so they are unlikely to purchase anything from the gift shop. Some larger attractions locate smaller shops in the middle of their attraction, to capture additional spend. This works well for smaller purchases such as snacks, rather than gifts.
- **At the exit:** this has become the traditional location for gift shops in visitor attractions, because almost all visitors are likely to see it, and are more likely to be in the right mindset to make a purchase.

1.2 Creating the right first impression

External signage:

Whether your retail operation is part of a visitor attraction, on a High Street or in a tourist information centre, good signage is essential to attract attention, set the right tone and entice customers inside.

Make sure your external signage complements your identity and is in keeping with the area.

If local regulations allow, consider the use of an “A-board” on the pavement outside your shop, used for displaying seasonal or special offers.

Don't clutter doors and windows with a proliferation of stickers and signs. If any window stickers include dates (such as inclusion in a guidebook or membership organisations), make sure they are recent. Remember to display opening times clearly.

Window displays – a chance to impress:

Window displays should attract and convince within a few moments.

Keep displays simple and uncluttered. Customers will scan them and instantly assess if they like what they see. Don't try to pack in examples of everything the shop sells. If the shop window is too crowded, it's harder to scan and nothing is left to the imagination. Hint at what the shop sells so customers want to explore further.

Make displays colourful to attract attention but not garish. Don't use too many contrasting colours – it looks cheap. Try to stick to two main colours for maximum impact. This also makes it more obvious to passing customers that displays have been changed, helping to encourage repeat visits.

Consider the different routes customers will use when approaching the shop. Follow each route and stand a little way away. Does the display look just as good from every angle.

The entrance:

This is the place where first impressions are formed, often influencing the rest of the shopping experience. Keep the area uncluttered and welcoming. Allow space for the customer to walk in, look around and be attracted by what they see. This is much harder if they are immediately confronted by tall displays or large baskets of stock in front of them.

Display selected products at the entrance to draw in customers, but beware locating merchandise too close to the entrance. This is often perceived as a mark of a low budget shop.

Use a focus display near the entrance, working on a colour block to catch attention, or perhaps a theme or seasonal display.

1.3 Encouraging customers to step inside and browse

Shop layout:

The layout of the displays in your shop will affect the way customers browse and by. Encouraging them to linger means they'll see more merchandise and hopefully buy more.

- Most people turn to the right as they enter a shop so make sure the route feels natural to them and goes in that direction.
- Are the routes through the shop wide enough for people using wheelchairs & pushchairs?
- Guide customers along a route so they see as much as possible. For example, you might wind your path down one side, around the back, down the other side and to the front again.
- Position displays, signs and merchandise so customers can see them as they look up and forward. Build the sense of anticipation. The aim is to encourage customers to explore, so make sure sight lines are clear.

Using colour:

Colour is an easy way to convey the right atmosphere and ambience to your customers. Cooler colours such as blue, purple, white and green, encourage feelings of calm and relaxation. Many customers are more inclined to spend longer browsing when the shop setting is in these colours. Hotter colours can make customers feel more impatient and less relaxed when in a shop, but they are useful to attract attention and for use on logo or brand identity.

Colour can also be used to zone certain areas of a shop, even when the retail outlet is small. You could use different colours to signpost particular items, such as spring displays or an area for children. Beware using too many contrasting colours so you don't cause confusion.

The sales counter:

The sales counter is arguably the most important part of the shop. It's where cash is taken, where staff have direct contact with customers. It's usually the final interaction with customers as they are handed their packaged purchase. The area next to the checkout counter is a prime position for impulse merchandise. Use this space for small luxury items, add-on accessories or new items that you wish to highlight.

Here are some points to consider when deciding where to site or relocate the sales counter:

- **To the right of the entrance:** There will nearly always be someone at the counter to greet customers as they come in. This is often the most active part of the shop, giving the impression of a busy, successful business.
- **To the left of the entrance:** This works well because it is at the front of the shop, however customers tend to turn to the right on entering and so may not notice you.
- **Against a side wall further into the shop:** This is a good place from which to greet customers but may mean losing some display space.
- **At the back of the shop:** This draws customers in to make their way through the entire shop, however you will be unable to greet customers from this position. Your shop may be more vulnerable to shoplifting if you can't see the entrance easily.
- **Centrally located within the shop:** This is not the ideal situation. It allows you to be at the heart of things, greeting customers and looking around the shop but you may not have full visibility of the space behind you.

Internal signage:

Good signage is uncluttered and easy to interpret. It's consistent and helpful, giving an immediate insight into what kind of shop you have, what customers can expect to find and where. Carefully positioned signs are an easy way to provide customer service, answering basic questions in advance. It's important not to clutter the shop with signs to stick to a consistent style. Check the amount of signage from time to time so you don't simply add more signs without removing irrelevant ones.

Use the three-layered approach to signage:

1. Identify different sections with simple signs hung from the ceiling
2. Put more detailed information at eye-level
3. Show detailed signs and information on the shelves and displays

Remember, the higher the sign, the simpler the message should be.

Consider these ways of enhancing customer service with good signage:

- Display welcome signs, details of special events and products on the threshold as the customer enters. They should evoke a sense of anticipation and create interest in the inside of the shop.
- Provide directions, for example to the sales counter or toilets

- Highlight special offers or new product lines. This helps convey the impression that you're constantly improving your range and will encourage repeat visits to your shop. Use signage to indicate sale items you want to move more quickly.
- Explain details about particular products such as where they are made, by whom and any background story
- Describe product benefits and differences between similar products. Use signs to persuade customers with words like "most popular", "new"
- Quirky signs and anecdotes can entertain your customers and make them smile, making them feel more comfortable and engaged
- Don't forget to display prices clearly

Displaying merchandise:

Be prepared to keep changing and experimenting with your shop layout, to keep it fresh and ensure all merchandise is displayed to its best advantage.

Displays for different price ranges:

Give more expensive items an air of exclusivity by displaying fewer of them. If you display expensive items in locked glass cabinets, make sure the quality image is maintained with clean, polished glass. Locate the cabinets close to the sales counter so staff can quickly unlock them and enable customers to handle them.

Less expensive items can be grouped and displayed in baskets or blocks. If you sell smaller items that might otherwise look lost, use props to create a more eye-catching display. Use different sized risers for displays at varied levels, or pieces of contrasting coloured cloth underneath the small items to make them stand out.

Focus displays:

- Create special areas featuring changing displays. Allow space for seasonal displays and cross merchandising. This means displaying merchandise from different sections together, so regular customers see something new each time they shop.
- Encourage impulse buying by creating interesting cross merchandising displays on the basis of a single colour, e.g. red dishes placed with red table linen, red pepper-pots and napkin rings
- Inspire your customers with gift suggestions. For example, you might put together a display of scented candles and bath salts, evoking the image of a relaxing bath, reminding customers that candles are not just a dining room accessory

- Merchandise could be themed to give customers ideas for putting together their own gift baskets. For example, in October, near Apple Day you might want to use an apple theme, with bags of potpourri, apple-shaped biscuit cutters, an apple corer, or tea towels with an apple design
- Create attractive massed displays by putting several products of the same thing together in blocks. Simple repetitions can look particularly effective, especially if grouped with others of similar size and shape but different colours. Grouping products in colour blocks makes a pleasing display
- If you pile up several items or display them in towers, ensure it is still easy for customers to handle them, so they don't feel deterred from picking out products to buy. Avoid displays that look so perfect, that customers may be reluctant to touch or remove items to make that all important purchase

Creating displays at different levels:

Use a variety of fittings to display stock at different levels and create interest as visitors move around the shop. For example:

- Tables at different heights, in different shapes and materials
- Wall shelving and free standing racks which can be moved around easily
- Glass cubed shelving
- Round racks to display large quantities of merchandise and promotional items
- Display cases – ensure you place these close to the sales counter for easy access
- Slatwalls into which hooks, acrylic shelves and bars can be fitted to create changeable displays
- Second hand furniture can add to the quirkiness of a display, creating a sense of surprise and interest

Displays need to include enough items to have “authority” to sell. A display of 10 similar items may sell quite quickly whereas a display of just two may take longer, just as 20 items might also take longer to sell. Obviously this depends on the product and some experimentation will be necessary to get it right.

What is your best seller? Display it with pride and sell even more. Don't make the mistake of putting a slow seller in the top location in the hope of increasing sales. It might slightly increase sales of the slow seller but space is valuable and you can increase revenue with the best seller. If

you display your best seller in your window or even use it in advertising, make sure it's quick and easy to find within the shop.

1.4 Customer service

One way of setting your shop apart from others is to offer excellent customer service. Some of the following may sound obvious but many shops fail to take these simple steps. Staff training may be necessary to point out the big difference these small gestures can make:

- Assess what your customers and target market want and consider how to give it to them
- Make sure that every customer feels welcome and acknowledged as they come through the door, greeting them with a smile and friendly greeting
- Make sure you and your staff put aside whatever they are doing and immediately attend to customers when they need help. Never make customers wait.

Communicate effectively. In many shops, customers are greeted with "may I help?" which is usually met with "no thank you, I'm just looking". It's better for staff to use positive, conversational language to engage customers and make them feel welcome, e.g. "how may I help you?", "Good morning, another beautiful/rainy day isn't it?", "Did you enjoy your visit to the attraction/museum?".

1.5 Visitor spend

Visitor spend tends to increase the further away from home visitors go (so long haul visitors spend most) and the longer they are away. For example, day visitors are most likely to choose cheaper gifts and post cards.

Visitors will still spend money on traditional, lower-priced tourist gifts but they are becoming more selective and even the cheapest items need to look good and be of decent quality. Provide traditional souvenir items but make sure they don't dominate and try not to stock too many made-somewhere-else-stamped goods with no local authenticity.

Visitors like to spend money for good causes (e.g. National Trust) or to feel they are doing good with the money they spend. Part of the reason they may increasingly like to buy locally made products is because they feel the money is going to real individuals instead of faceless corporations. Knowing how their money will be spent can encourage visitors to spend more. In the shop at Chester Zoo, signs tell visitors that their purchases help to support important animal welfare and conservation projects, offering strong reassurance messages to visitors.

Price-led promotions:

From time to time, you may wish to sell items more quickly, or draw customers' attention to particular products. Price-led promotions are one way to do this but your business and reputation will become damaged if you are over-reliant on them.

- If you sell items at a discount, show the percentage discount, but also mark sale items with their final price so customers don't have to do the maths.
- Buy one, get one free offers (commonly known as BOGOF) are essentially half price sales but give the impression that the customer is getting something for free. They are useful for getting rid of slow moving stock.
- Offering a free gift with a purchase is usually something that suppliers offer and promote, however you can also develop your own product combinations and promotions.
- The advantage of discount coupons is that they enable you to see how effective particular advertising is or see if your leaflets are working. The disadvantage is that they rely on customers remembering to bring along the coupon and don't create the right impression for all shops.

Adding value:

If you want to increase spend, then it's much better to find ways to differentiate your shop from others and offer added value, perhaps by offering some of these additional services:

- Invite local artists, craftspeople and authors to do brief talks, demonstrations and book signings
- Local food tastings
- Personalise products, either with a place name or person's name
- Gift wrapping service (perhaps using paper with a local map or pictures of the area)
- Visitor information point, where visitors can pick up information about other places in the area to encourage them to extend their stay

Increasing profitability:

- When you buy new stock, think which products you can link together to cross sell and up sell them so you maximise the income from each sale
- Enhance descriptions of products to demonstrate how they are special or different

- Make sure staff have good product knowledge. Introduce them to suppliers and make sure they feel confident about the products they are selling so they can enthuse about them
- Humorous or quirky products are often good sellers.
- Make sure the products on sale link to the place where they are being sold – create a strong sense of local distinctiveness.

2. Stocks and suppliers

2.1 Choosing the right stock to sell

There is enormous competition between retailers on the High Street but luckily there are still plenty of ways to differentiate your shop and make people want to buy. Ways to differentiate your stock include having products produced just for your outlet or products made on site. This could be as simple as postcards of regional beauty spots supplied by local photographers, or more exclusive craft items. You might choose to develop your own label products. These could be products made by others on your behalf, enabling you to put your logo or shop name on them to reinforce your brand strengths.

Stocking different price ranges:

It's useful to stock products at a variety of price levels, for example:

- Small, pocket money items such as key rings, erasers, pencils and badges, which can be displayed in baskets or in groups on low tables. Children visiting in school groups can provide good core business, with an average spend of £2 - £5 per child
- Mid-range merchandise such as shopping bags, mugs, books and stationery
- More expensive items such as jewellery and higher quality gift

Matching stock to your target markets:

An important consideration when choosing stock is to make sure the merchandise is suitable for your target market. It stands to reason that an attraction with a strong family market would need to stock a good range of gifts for children. Don't underestimate customers: it can be hard to judge which visitors are most likely to spend on souvenirs and gifts. Visitors with relatively low income may still be ready to buy more expensive items because they are in a "treat" mindset when visiting with their family.

Changing tastes:

Visitors are increasingly looking for signs of authenticity, for opportunities to buy things they can't find in every High Street. Authentic products, produced by real people and reflecting the area they have visited help visitors re-live memories of happy holiday times and provide a tangible way for them to pass on stories and recommendations to others.

Visitors buy gifts and souvenirs to keep or share memories of a visit and/or to offer a present to family and friends when they go back home, perhaps to ease their conscience or say thank you (e.g. for house sitting). The impact is lost when they buy mass-produced goods that can be bought anywhere. We need to make sure souvenirs are distinctive and "ambassadors" for your area or region.

Locally made souvenirs also offer more economic benefits to local designers, producers and craftspeople. There is increasing evidence that visitors appreciate the availability of reasonably priced items that properly represent the place they are visiting.

Common Ground's Manifesto for Souvenirs:

Several years ago, the charity Common Ground developed a Manifesto for Souvenirs which stated souvenirs should be:

- true to their place, full of meaning, reinforcing identity
- locally derived, unique to the locale
- produced nearby
- making use of and building on the natural and cultural assets of the area or region
- made from local renewable materials
- ambassadors for their area or region, able to carry their story with them
- authentic and of good quality
- offer good value, be ethically derived and fairly traded
- of benefit to local makers and the broader tourist industry as well as retailers
- clearly labelled with sources of material, name of designer, maker and place of production, feeding back into local culture
- capable of reuse, recycling and simply packaged

They cited several good examples of locally distinctive souvenirs that link to the area they come from and which are attractive to visitors. These included Northumberland Tartan, lavender oil and products from the Yorkshire Wolds and Whitby Jet jewellery.

Sourcing local products:

There are numerous local organisations and networks that can help you to source interesting local products:

The Aurora Project:

The Aurora Project is a collective of over 120 artists and craft people based in Northumberland and Tyneside. Members include people specialising in: fine art, photography, ceramics and glass, wood, metal and sculpture, paper crafts, jewellery and textiles. Their website features descriptions and images of their work, as well as a directory so you can find their contact details, it also has an extensive calendar of events and exhibitions where you can meet the artists and producers.

<http://www.auroracreativearts.co.uk>

Taste North East:

The North East has many excellent food and drink producers. Consumer demand for home grown products is growing as people are thinking more carefully about where their food comes from: purchases have doubled over the last 5 years and are forecast to continue to grow.

Taste North East is the region's food and drink sector group. Its aim is to position the North East as an area renowned for the high quality of its food and drink and excellent service, by stimulating demand for local produce, supporting local companies and working with them to develop new markets.

<http://www.tastenortheast.co.uk>

Hadrian's Wall Heritage

Hadrian's Wall Heritage has identified and worked with a large number of local producers whose products now bear a distinctive logo, showing that they are locally produced. Strong emphasis is placed on quality product and craftsmanship. Some participants focus on tradition and the Roman legacy whereas others have developed new and innovative products.

The website shows some local producers in action (useful for staff training!) and has comprehensive lists of people offering locally produced arts and crafts and food and drink.

<http://www.hadrians-wall.org>

Made in Northumberland

'Made in Northumberland' celebrates the very best of Northumberland. The 'Made in Northumberland' website identifies and promotes "treasures" such as food, drink, art, craft, music and culture. It looks at how artists, makers and artisans of Northumberland react and respond to the landscape, the environment and the sense of place.

<http://www.made-in-northumberland.co.uk>

2.2 Working with suppliers

Choosing the right stock for your shop is clearly essential. It needs to be in keeping with your shop's profile, profitable to your business and attractive to customers. Here are some questions to ask when dealing with suppliers:

- Where else is the range sold in your area? There's clearly no point in selling distinctive items if they are also available in many other local outlets
- Can you take goods on a sale or return basis to test the market?
- When are the supplier's seasonal price breaks? The majority of manufacturers have regular periods when they reduce the price of their products. Knowing when these are will help you to be first in line for the good discounts
- Does the supplier offer any promotional products or special deals to help support particular ranges, or perhaps display stands or other ways to support you?
- Does the supplier have any images of their product range that you can use for promotional purposes?
- What is the delivery time for an order? Try to agree cut off dates by which the goods will be delivered or your order will be cancelled
- What terms of payment do they offer? Most companies offer a standard 30 days in which to pay. Can you get a small discount for earlier payment?

3. Online retailing

3.1 Deciding to sell online

No matter how good the footfall at your shop, you can extend your market by deciding to sell online. This is now getting easier and easier. Set-up prices are falling, with numerous options available for those dipping a toe into e-commerce.

It's now become common practice for "bricks and mortar" retail outlets to have an e-commerce arm. Online shops are open 24 hours a day, every day. They can extend your brand and reach new markets, changing or enhancing perceptions and raising your profile. It's easy to monitor effectiveness of an e-commerce operation and to target new and existing visitors. They have the potential to significantly increase your revenue, but you must be prepared to invest, not only in the set up but in an e-commerce venture's ongoing maintenance. Simple activities such as photographing all the stock may not be expensive but it can be time consuming. If you decide to sell online, you will probably need a dedicated member of staff to deal with inventory control, general enquiries and sending out merchandise. The public expects a very fast turnaround and delivery from online shops. You will need to invest time in search engine optimisation to ensure the shop is highly ranked, easy to find. Detailed attention must be given to data and payment security.

3.2 Choosing an e-commerce system

There are now more options than ever before to help set up an online shop. You might find yourself starting off by selling via your own online shop, then eventually expanding your sales channel to include sites like Amazon and possibly setting up your own affiliates. Affiliates are businesses that will link to your shop and help you sell in return for a commission. There are three key options to consider:

3.3 Developing your own shop:

This can be relatively easy if you work with a UK provider such as www.ekmpowershop.com. A provider like this will be PCI compliant, which means they have been certified to securely process transactions, and have taken all regulatory precautions to prevent credit card fraud. This type of shop is accessed and managed entirely via a web browser and will cost around £20 per month, inclusive of hosting. In addition to this, you will need an account with a payment card processor, such as www.paypal.com or www.sagepay.com.

If you have large numbers of products to sell or more complex demands, then you would need to commission a system especially for your organisation, which would be much more costly.

3.4 List your products on an established market

This is becoming a very popular option, even if you have your own shop, because market places such as eBay and Amazon have a massive presence so you can reach a broader market. They have both

expanded beyond their original activities of selling second hand goods and books and are used by a wide variety of organisations to reach new markets. They take care of all the hosting, marketing and payment processing on your behalf. Amazon also offers hosted online shop software <http://webstore.amazon.co.uk/>.

3.5 Working with specialist sales outlets:

This is a good option if you want to reach bigger markets within a niche area. A good example is www.etsy.com which has become popular for distinctive, unique, hand-made items. These sites are similar to setting up a shop in a very large shopping centre, which has a guaranteed annual footfall.

3.6 Web marketing tips

- Invest time and effort in search engine optimisation – using the right key terms so your market will find the shop
- Promote the shop offline by stating the web address in the signature file of all company emails, by adding the website address, logo and signage, and on all packaging.
- Developing a good e-newsletter works well so visitors can simply click through to more details
- Make sure your shopping system works. Customers hate slow-loading sites and complex checkout procedures. Up to 50% of customers will abandon their shopping basket if the checkout process is complex or difficult
- Build confidence – make sure your contact details are displayed prominently throughout your site, and use appropriate logos to demonstrate secure payment systems

4. Checklist for retail outlets

When a retail outlet runs into difficulties, there is a tendency to lower prices or have a discount sale in order to generate interest and income. Instead of automatically assuming the problem lies in pricing, more profit can be generated by carefully analysing each of the following areas.

This checklist aims to help you go through your retail operation and understand its strengths and weaknesses so you can make appropriate improvements.

4.1 Shop stock

- Are products on sale appropriate for the area and target markets?
- Are you selling something different and interesting?

- Is it clear how your shop is different from the competition?

4.2 Customers

- Have you profiled your customers so you know as much as possible about them, their likes, dislikes, etc?
- Can you broaden your market by developing an e-commerce element to your business?
- Do you know the key reasons why customers shop with you?
- Do you emphasise special areas of appeal such as: type of merchandise, service, unusual products, local suppliers, etc?
- Do you collect details of customers so you can undertake mailings (opt-ins) to them?
- Do you make it easy for your customers to make suggestions?

4.3 Presentation

- How does the shop look from the outside? Does the outside of the shop convey the right feel and identity for the shop, attracting and keeping visitors?
- Is the shop window clean, tidy and attractive? Does it give a flavour of what's inside, without cramming too much in?
- How does the door look? Is it clean, uncluttered and without any out-of-date stickers? Are opening hours clearly displayed? Is there a welcome sign?
- How does it feel to enter the shop? Is there space at the entrance so you have space to stop and get a positive first impression? Does the store layout invite you to explore further? Does it have good visual impact? Does it convey the message of what it is about? Do you feel welcome or do you want to turn and walk out?
- Are displays enticing and do they change regularly?
- Are colours used effectively, for example in blocks?

4.3 Prices

- Are prices appropriate for the products on sale and target markets?
- Are prices clearly displayed?
- Are profit margins realistic?

- Do you have a range of products priced from low-priced pocket money gifts, to more expensive products?
- Do you know what your average sales transaction is – and what you can do to increase it?

4.4 Systems and plans – do you have the following documents for your shop?

- Buying policy
- Pricing plan
- Merchandising plan
- Brand & labelling plan
- Staff training programme

4.5 Staff

- Are staff smartly and appropriately dressed?
- Are they approachable, do they engage potential customers in friendly conversation?
- Do you offer regular staff training/updates so they are fully informed and enthused about your product range?

4.6 Promotion – are you using every promotional tool to attract, draw in and retain customers?

- signage
- advertising
- public relations' activities
- word of mouth recommendations
- social media
- newsletters and mailing lists
- website

5. Tips from some experts

Chris Calvert

Bamburgh Castle, Bamburgh, Northumberland, NE69 7DF, www.bamburghcastle.com

Chris Calvert at Bamburgh Castle shares some of his retailing secrets for success below. One of the key changes he has noticed in recent times relates to the kind of merchandise that visitors want to buy. They are happy to find cheap products but are demanding better quality products. Bamburgh Castle has been particularly successful in sourcing and selling products locally produced. They now sell dozens of locally produced products and have even managed to source their souvenir chocolate locally. Jewellery tends to sell well and they even have a member of staff who makes items to sell in the shop.

Last year they joined forces with an artist and ran a gallery in the stable block, taking commission on art sales. This proved to be really successful, and added another dimension to the visit. They will build on this during the coming season. Homemade fudge is produced on site and they sold over 2500kg in the first season!

Three years ago the whole shop layout was redeveloped, with fixtures chosen and bought from the internet. They change the layout of the shop every year to keep it fresh and try to improve the visitor flow around the units. Chris' top tip is to think carefully about the merchandise in your shop. He recommends asking all members of staff what items they would buy. If staff see visitors leaving without buying anything, then they should try and ask the visitors what they would have liked to have seen in the shop so you can make improvements. He also recommends undertaking a display and merchandising course so that your shop doesn't just look good, it encourages visitors to pick things up and buy products to maximise your profits.

Dawn Goodwill-Evans

Sales Development Co-ordinator, Culture, Leisure & Tourism, Customer & Community Services, 28 Bridge Street, Morpeth, NE61 1NL, www.northumberland.gov.uk

Dawn Goodwill-Evans and her team has managed to increase revenue at 11 Tourist Information Centres (TICs) across the North East by 10.1% 2009/10 compared with 2010/11. Income at two of the centres has increased by 30% and 18.8%. She's used a variety of methods to achieve this.

Better buying

Visitors go into Tourist Information Centres to get information about the area. Many TICs increasingly stock a range of souvenirs and other merchandise as an additional service and to generate income. Unfortunately many TICs stock bland products, some of which are a little dated

and not necessarily even made in the UK. Dawn set out to improve the stock available in the TICs in Northumberland. These are some of the changes she has brought about:

- increased range of items available
- provided more diversity, with strong emphasis on local products
- offering more higher priced products
- to increase spend, whilst not neglecting pocket money gifts
- tailoring stock according to the season and changing stock to appeal to different demographic markets depending on the time of year, for example encouraging local people to buy gifts in the TICs out of season, and stocking suitable souvenirs for visitors at other times
- adapting the range of merchandise according to the location, making sure that staff were able to make suggestions for what might work better in a particular place

Probably the biggest change has been the focus on locally made merchandise and/or products that reflect the local area. Basic products such as postcards, maps, calendars and books are core items that already sold well. Spend has been increased by bringing in new ranges and displaying them in different ways.

At some outlets such as the Chantry in Morpeth, there are opportunities for local artists and craftspeople to display and sell their creations. The TIC takes a weekly rent and/or commission on sales. This not only makes for interesting displays for the public to enjoy but offers local artists and craftspeople the chance to test markets and discover what sells best so they can adapt their products to the market place. Dawn Goodwill-Evans also coaches the artists and craftspeople to make sure their product range, displays and pricing are in keeping with the demands of visitors and local people. Product development is a large part of her role: encouraging local suppliers to produce items where there is a gap in the market. This has included shopping bags with puffins and local castle designs and a local coffee roasting company packaged a unique product –“Northumberland blend coffee” using the local castle logo on their packaging.

Creative customer service and marketing

In order to highlight the changing stock and the focus on locally made items, special events were held in some of the TICs such as Morpeth where “meet the maker” days, book launches and signings attracted visitors and locals. Press releases were issued to make local people aware of the new range. New signs were placed outside some of the TICs where space allowed: promoting “Local crafts, art and food”.

Extensive use is made of A-frame black boards outside the TICs to flag up “meet the maker” events, new book titles, a new product line or chocolate flavour, book of the week etc. The TICs also offer a

range of tickets and services on which they take commission, such as selling local attraction tickets at a discounted price to visitors, coach tickets, local shows and events etc.

Better displays

The Tourist Information Centres have been re-branded to make them more attractive, welcoming and to give them a more contemporary feel. Products are grouped together in motivating categories such as “explore”, “indulge”, “mementoes” and “discover”.

New display stands and shelves meant investment, but have helped to generate more income. For example, postcard and card sales dramatically increased when more attractive new acrylic stands were used. One local supplier was happy to fund the new acrylic stands as sales of his postcards rose. Locally made tags were printed and attached to gift items made locally. This all means that point of sale material is now used more effectively and professionally.

Staff training and involvement

Staff have been fully involved in the new development, with training provided about the new product lines and how to sell them. Although a minority were initially unsure how the changes would work and whether local people would buy the new product range, staff have been motivated by the changes and are now full of enthusiasm. Interest built as the refurbishments took place, they were excited to have the chance to be involved, and sell the new merchandise in a more attractive setting. Staff are encouraged to know the top five best selling products, their percentage mark-ups and have good product knowledge so they feel more confident when selling.

Best Practice Examples from other successful retailers

Fountains Abbey (National Trust) World Heritage Site, Ripon, North Yorkshire, HG4 3DY

www.FountainsAbbey.org.uk

The National Trust relies heavily on income from visitors, from membership, admission sales and their retail operations. Research has shown that visitors started to perceive National Trust shops as becoming too corporate and “samey”. Their retail outlets are now being re-developed to give more emphasis on the site and locality. Many National Trust visitors are interested in heritage and gardening so these are still strong themes for merchandise. New product lines are being added, with special “local products” and “from this area” displays at each property.

Efforts are made to connect what visitors see at the property with merchandise in the shop. For example, at the World Heritage Site of Fountains Abbey, local artist Ian Scott Massie was invited to spend some time at the Abbey painting and interpreting what he saw. He was then allowed to use one of the buildings as an open studio to display his work, which was then also sold in the Fountains Abbey shop, alongside local honeys, books, rugs and other locally produced crafts.

The River and Rowing Museum, Mill - Meadows, Henley on Thames, Oxfordshire RG9 1BF

www.rrm.co.uk

The River and Rowing Museum in Henley-on-Thames uses its location and theme to offer a wide range of gifts and souvenirs related to Henley, the River Thames and rowing. Some of the items have been specially commissioned for the Museum and are aimed at higher spenders, such as an Italian silk scarf, presented in a blue crocodile skin effect box. This depicts the John Piper's *Landscape of the Two Seasons* – the original painting can be seen in the Museum.

For younger visitors, the Museum picks up on the story of *Wind in the Willows*, inspired by the River Thames, with a range of soft toys designed for the museum using E H Shepard's famous and much loved illustrations as a template. Raoul Dufy's *Regatta* is on display in the Rowing Gallery and the museum sells a reasonably priced range of prints and cards featuring the painting.

York Tourist Information Centre - 1 Museum Street, York, YO1 7DT

www.visityork.org

In 2010, Visit York decided to relocate its tourist information centre to a street with greater footfall. They took the opportunity to completely redesign the layout of the TIC and gave the new centre a much fresher, more vibrant and contemporary feel. Information is provided in a number of ways and in different locations: by staff at the sales counter; by staff who move around; in a small exhibition room; on plasma screens displaying different information and promotional messages and through traditional wall panels and leaflet display racks.

This approach also enabled them to use different areas of the TIC to sell merchandise and to update the range of products on sale. For example, a range of local food items was added, locally made crafts and a colourful, fun "kids' zone" range which features quality pocket money toys. The average spend on pocket money toys has risen considerably with one of the most popular items now being a £5 branded, rubberised calculator rather than the usual souvenir pencil.

Staff are all trained to offer appropriate information as well as working behind the sales counter so they enjoy varied roles and can react quickly to different situations. For example, on rainy days the plasma screens displaying messages to the passing pedestrians say, "Umbrellas on sale here". Staff are also trained to switch sell where appropriate and make sure that visitors don't leave disappointed. An example of this is when the tickets for the York Maze Fireworks display sold out, the team were immediately able to offer details of other displays in the city.

The Chatsworth Estate - Edensor, nr Bakewell, Derbyshire, DE45 1PJ

www.chatsworth.org

The retail operation on the Chatsworth Estate has become so successful that Sheffield residents now travel several miles simply to shop on the Estate. The Farm Shop has become a destination in its own right, spawning a small cafe which was recently extended to cope with demand. The key to the entire operation is excellent, and offers consistently high standards of service and high quality products. Many of the shop staff live on the Estate and are often the second or third generation of their family to do so, so there is a strong sense of loyalty. The Farm Shop is in an out of the way location, apart from the main House and Gardens. It recently won *Farm Retailer of the Year* and *Best On-farm Butchery* at the 2009 and 2011 FARMA awards. The shop is attractively laid out with a magnificent, traditional tiled picture backdrop to the butcher's counter, with impulse purchase items scattered throughout the shop in attractive baskets. Much of the fresh food stocked in the shop comes from the estate, tenant farms, Derbyshire suppliers and small food producers. Butchers are knowledgeable and ready to talk customers through the various cuts and options. The bakery provides wonderful fresh bread and cakes, with the smell permeating through the shop and welcoming customers.

There are five gift shops in different locations by the House and Gardens stocking a wide selection of gifts at all price ranges and exclusive products inspired by different aspects of Chatsworth. This includes the Duchess of Devonshire's own range of jams and preserves, her own books and even the same silver polish which the Chatsworth cleaner uses in the property, branded as Chatsworth Silver Polish.

Customer care training is carried out regularly, with Chatsworth's own extensive programme. Visitors are surveyed to get feedback and mystery shoppers employed to measure the visitor experience. League tables and friendly rivalry chart the success of staff. Customers are encouraged to feel comfortable about their purchases, with good information provided by sales staff and on shelf displays. Further signage and information provides self-justification messages such as: "It's also good to know that by shopping with us you are helping to support our charity, the Chatsworth House Trust."

Innovation is important, with new ideas regularly being trialled, or in some cases brought back again. A recent "innovation" has been to re-introduce a range of around 50 high quality garden furniture, each piece manufactured by skilled, local crafts-men, made to order and available for export all over the world.

Hampton Court Palace - Hampton, Surrey, KT8 9AU

www.hrp.org.uk/HamptonCourtPalace/

Historic Royal Palaces is an independent charity that looks after the Tower of London, Hampton Court Palace, the Banqueting House, Kensington Palace and Kew Palace. Although the palaces are owned by The Queen on behalf of the nation, they receive no public funding so rely on income from visitors. Their retail operations are an important contributor and have been re-vamped to take advantage of each palace's individual identity and heritage. For example, Hampton Court Palace has four shops, each housed in a different area of the palace and with a different focus.

The Barrack Block shop offers general gifts on the theme of palace living including tapestries, cookery and pastimes as well as an extensive range of children's gifts, guidebooks and postcards. Its location at the main entrance of the palace means that visitors can shop here without paying for admission. The Henry shop is set in one of the oldest parts of the palace, with an entrance in Anne Boleyn's archway. Merchandise focuses on Tudor-inspired and Henry-related gifts for all ages including books, tankards, and full size replica armour. The Garden shop looks out on to the baroque gardens and carries garden-themed ranges. The Tudor Kitchen's shop is next to Henry VIII's wine cellar so focuses on English wine, traditional ales and food. Attention to detail is also given to additional items such as the bags provided in each of the shops, where ceiling detail from the Chapel Royal is used as part of the design on the bags.

Historic Royal Palaces encourages new partnerships by offering to work with others on licensed partnerships, inspired by their thousand year history of architecture, interiors, furniture, textiles and ceramics. The benefit of this is that Historic Royal Palaces can extend their product range in the Palaces but also indirectly promote them elsewhere through the availability of palace-inspired gifts in other locations, as well as generating an income from the licensing arrangements.