



sharing success

Jeremy Piercy is one of a growing breed of entrepreneurs proving it is possible to trade fairly and be successful. Read on to find out more...

Despite a difficult retail climate in the UK in recent years, Shared Earth's seven shops have continued to thrive. Now founder Jeremy Piercy is hoping to double fair trade sales in the UK over the next five years by franchising the business model. He feels strongly that the time is now right to provide an array of fairly traded goods to customers, hungry for ethical products.

Jeremy has worked within the fair trade industry for the past 20 years. His business has enabled him to benefit entire communities in the developing world.

Here he talks fondly of his fan-flung friends and the passion, enthusiasm and kindness wrapped into their livelihoods.

What is your background?

Before starting Shared Earth I was unemployed for six years due to severe epilepsy. I was then put on a new drug, which controls it.

How did you get involved in fair trade and what was your motivation?

After leaving school in 1971 I travelled overland to India and was struck by the hospitality of people in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other very poor countries - sometimes it seemed the less they had, the more willing they were to share it. I decided when I got a job I would try to find one which would repay this hospitality and do something to

address the imbalance of wealth and poverty in the world.

When did you open your first shop?

Shared Earth was one of the first fair trade shops to open in the UK, in a busy street in York in 1986.

How do you source your products?

We buy products directly from producer organisations in about 12 countries, visiting many of them regularly to design new products, help them develop their businesses and check that fair trade standards are being applied. Many are members of the International Fair Trade Association (IFAT); others have been recommended to us by fellow IFAT members such as Oxfam Australia. We share information about producers with fair trade organisations throughout the world. We also source recycled products from several suppliers in the UK.

What are your key considerations in selecting new lines?

Design and price; whether they will fit into our other ranges; whether they fulfil our ethical criteria.

How do you transport goods?

Almost all are sent by sea. We don't believe in shipping by air unless there is an emergency, as air flights contribute so much to global

warming. For the same reason we travel on all but long flights by train/public transport - in India for instance we use overnight train to travel on journeys between cities of 1500km, which most business people would make by air.

Do you implement eco-friendly measures in your business practices?

Yes, we recycle as much as possible, try to reduce energy consumption and buy products, which use sustainable materials wherever possible. We avoid hardwoods for instance and buy a lot of crafts made from bamboo, jute, grasses etc.

What were consumer attitudes like towards fair trade when you first started out and how have they changed?

When we started hardly anyone had heard of fair trade - now almost everyone has. A lot of people were sceptical that a fair trade shop would work in 1986 - now our like-for-like sales are up in double figures.

How do you view the growing trend towards ethical trading - is it a passing fad or here to stay?

Fair trade is here to stay. People have begun to realise that enormous poverty in a world of plenty is not right. That we shouldn't be buying goods that have been made by people who earn less than \$1 a day, who are



struggling to put food on the table, who can't afford to send their children to school. It's like the movement to end child labour and awful working conditions in Britain in the 19th century. It's picking up momentum all the time because people know it's a just movement and want to do something to help on a long-term basis, rather than just giving donations if there's a flood or famine. People are also realising that trade has to take the environment into account and that will continue to grow as the effects of global warming become more apparent.

How do you compete on prices?

Most people think our prices are very reasonable, in fact usually they're cheaper than large chainstores, despite us paying more to our suppliers. That's because the large chains usually pay high rents on the high street, and often put very high mark-ups on their products, so they can reduce later if necessary. Clothing and jewellery chains for instance will buy a product abroad for £1 and sell it for £10. Then they reduce it to half price if it doesn't sell. We'll buy it for £1.20 or £1.50 and sell it for £7 or £8 - still allowing us to sell it to our wholesale customers for half that amount, so they can make a decent mark-up too.

Tell us about your plans to franchise the business model.

We have only just launched the franchise scheme but are already getting far more enquiries than expected. We had our first "Discovery Day" for potential franchisees recently and at the end of it, EVERYONE wanted to continue and open a Shared Earth franchise. I think we have proved from our current shops that a Shared Earth shop can be profitable - particularly because we will be passing on our low purchasing costs to our franchisees. We also have a team

of three excellent designers, allowing us to create unique products, and systems in place generally that many franchisers would be envious of. And on top of that, more and more consumers are asking for fair trade and ethically sourced products. That demand is only going to grow. It's not something the supermarkets will take from us either - they're threatening independent health and wholefood shops by stocking more and more of their core products, but it's almost impossible for them to do the same to us, because our products are handmade, and change each year.

What are your objectives?

Ultimately, our objective is that ALL trade should be fair. Our objective is to grow until fair trade gifts, stationery, accessories and other non-food products are available in every town in the UK, no matter how small.

As the owner of Shared Earth, my ambition is very different from most of the people you see on TV on programmes like Dragon's Den. I want to make a living for myself and be secure, but beyond that, I'm not too bothered. I know that after you've got your basic needs met, you don't become happier no matter how much money you have.

Happiness increases when your attitude to life and your relationships with people are healthy. Caring about the people we buy from gives everyone who works at Shared Earth a boost. We have fantastically motivated staff and I'm sure they're happier people through knowing that their work is serving others as well as themselves.

Your greatest challenge to date?

The greatest challenge was surviving after a bad business mistake. I signed up to a long-term lease on a large warehouse for our wholesale operation in the mid-1990s. Sales didn't increase as expected, and we decided

to sub-contract distribution to another firm and move out. But we couldn't get out of the lease, and had to go on paying rent on it, until the landlord agreed to a one-off payment to let us out. Over three years, it cost us £250,000, and we nearly went into liquidation.

Greatest success/personal satisfaction to date?

The greatest personal satisfaction I get is seeing how the ongoing success of Shared Earth benefits the people we buy from in developing countries. Every time I visit our suppliers, I meet people who otherwise might be struggling to get enough to eat, to afford somewhere to live, or even worse.

Near New Delhi, for instance, there's an orphanage for street children, where women from local villages come in to make bags and other products which we sell - that's how they get their funding. When I visited them recently, three of those children, who'd formerly just begged and sold their bodies on railway stations, had grown to the age of 18 and were actually in charge of three of the craft workshops. It was a real joy to see them looking so happy and fulfilling such responsible roles.

Vision for the future?

Apart from the growth of fair trade, I would like to see a change in our society away from its materialistic attitudes to life. I'd like people, especially young people, to understand that it's what you do and the way you work that matters, not just how much you earn. If people actually started to realise that caring about other people makes you happier, as well as those other people, then attitudes might change and society could only be the better for it. ☺

For further information visit the website www.sharedearth.co.uk.