



Jeremy Piercy

Retail Q & A

If you've been watching *Mary Queen of Shops* on BBC2, you'll realise what a struggle it is for retailers in some small market towns – if you're not struggling already yourself, that is.

Q. How do you cope as a retailer in a small town?

The effect of out-of-town shopping centres can be horrendous. Towns become 'ghost' towns when footfall reduces to the extent that you just can't keep going. The advent of multiples attracts custom, but if independents can't compete, and an important multiple like Woolworths closes, it can have a negative effect in the long run. In a recession, head offices don't care about the local town, they care about their overall profits. A new out-of-town shopping centre is the worst threat of all.

There's no easy answer. Action is needed at both local and central government levels; this is not just an economic issue. It's a social issue about the type of country we want to live in. The greed of developers whose only concern is to make money should be curbed.

Mary's suggestion – if things haven't already gone too far – was to act together with other retailers. We need to think of creative ideas to market our towns and high streets, not just our individual shops. She took the example of Tewkesbury in Devon, and showed how much extra trade they could attract by working together.

The issue of saving costs was not really explored; an unexciting topic for TV, perhaps. Asking for help from landlords, Mary said, was almost pointless. But let's be optimistic – if their properties are empty, they're not making any money. In Bristol, where Shared Earth opened a shop in the Mall three years ago, sales plummeted by 25% last autumn when the Cabot Circus shopping centre opened nearby. Our landlord – ironically another shopping centre – has hinted that substantial help may be on its way.

Marketing is key, and I firmly believe that fair trade, preventing climate change and other ethical issues are ideal ingredients in marketing today. Another small town in Devon recently became interna-

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tionally famous. "On May 1st, 2007," its website states, "every trader in Modbury joined together to make Modbury plastic bag free. The first town in the British Isles to do so." Its 40-odd shops have seen a definite increase in footfall; the website goes on, "Please DO NOT telephone the shops directly, we have been inundated." It's worth a look. With reports on national TV and media, this was a marketing coup as good as getting Mary Portas involved.

A sustainable jute bag with the logo 'I love Tewkesbury' – or any other town – would promote both Tewkesbury and the environment. I have given our Bristol shop manager the task of approaching local shops to ask if they'd like their own, individually designed, jute bags – Shared Earth has a supplier in Kolkata which makes them fair trade as well as sustainable. Acting effectively as a wholesale agent, this will provide an extra income to a shop that is struggling.

Can you think of similar creative ideas that will either increase footfall or increase income whether footfall increases or not?

Can you do something on the Internet? Can you work with one of your suppliers to promote their goods, locally or in neighbouring towns, to increase your income and maybe your margins by obtaining a better discount? Can you harness the public concern about climate change as you market your business? And can you work together with other retailers to increase your chances of success?

Finally, a challenge to this magazine. Can it act as a forum for ideas from retailers on the ground – what are we doing that works, that will save our towns and help us beat the recession?

Jeremy Piercy is the founder and managing director of Shared Earth, the fair trade retailer and wholesaler. He recently published his first book, *Coffins, Cats And Fair Trade Sex Toys*.
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Recycled tin can car, from Madagascar

