

Just what the doctor ordered...

Traditional specialist retailing won't be consigned to history by the internet, says **Bill Smith** (aka The Shop Doctor), but a few adaptations may be necessary.

The prevailing economic climate will almost certainly have added to the pressures faced in sustaining the economic vitality of your business.

Unlike many high street retailers, those serving niche markets - such as many in the equestrian sector - often work from a remote location. They are also reliant upon the development and retention of a loyal client base formed over many years and founded upon the provision of the right products, at the right price, at the right time.

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Those operating from a high street location benefit from the potential to develop footfall beyond their traditional customer base. This is usually achieved by ensuring that they diversify their appeal on the high street and take advantage of incremental sales that might be available to them.

Whatever the location, specialist independent retailers have the opportunity to provide a bespoke offering to their customers; an offering frequently based upon practical knowledge of the sector developed into retailing reality.

Combining hands on understanding of the needs of those looking after animals with the provision of product knowledge based on practical experience, individual flair and entrepreneurship provides

independent retailers with a unique opportunity to service their customers in a way that cannot be matched online.

However online is where many traditional customers are now looking to purchase product, or where new to industry customers are searching for information or supply.

All too often, independent retailers are not taking the opportunity to maximise their own web visibility. In a climate where search engines now provide an easy route to information, making sure that your business has web based credibility is an essential element of maintaining positive momentum in a constantly changing retail environment.

Online retailing will undoubtedly continue to impact upon independent businesses, with customers tempted by effective product promotion through websites and where purchasing is simply a click away. This does not mean traditional retailing is doomed, but it does herald a need for adaptation and development to ensure that business momentum is maintained.

Establishing an effective and fully functioning web based trading platform requires considerable investment in

both time and money. A decision to develop a business in this way needs to be as carefully considered as would be the case in setting up any new business venture from scratch. Success cannot be guaranteed.

Whatever the decision, a website should ideally portray a dynamic and attractive image of the business it represents, an image supported by the reality of the shop itself; images that deliver the very best of impressions.

Good retailers recognise that positive first impressions online are essential; excellent retailers deliver them.

Unfortunately, the reality of the physical presentation of many businesses does not meet the perception created online. If customer expectation is impacted negatively on arrival, even the very best of customer service will start at a disadvantage.

Shop frontages must be clean and weed free; shop fascias well signed, informative and engaging; paintwork regularly refreshed and windows sparkling. Doors need to be notice free and, where possible, left open.

Customer movement around the shop should be maximised to provide effective exposure to a wide product range displayed utilising proven

merchandising techniques.

As is the case online, giving customers the ability to locate a product easily is key. Finding routes to link it to other purchases is desirable, enticing additional impulse purchases is profitable and making the payment process as simple as possible is essential.

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Trading online may seem like the answer to a sustainable future. But knowing your customers and providing the very best of product knowledge and customer service in a modern, bright and well merchandised environment is something that web based retailing cannot easily replicate.

In store customers don't even have to wait for the product to be delivered!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Smith 'The Shop Doctor' has worked in customer service for Godfrey David (Car Hire) and helped develop convenience retailing in service stations for the likes of Shell, Esso and BP. Now based in Cumbria, Bill advises the independent market town and rural retail sector via bespoke consultancy and mentoring support. Nine years

ago, Bill and his son Andrew set up Lakeland Fells Furniture which employs four young craftsmen. Bill is chairman of the Bowness & Windermere Community Care Trust which, among other activities, manages eight public conveniences rather than see them closed by the local authority. Contact The Shop Doctor at bill@sldt.co.uk

