



DIGITIZING THE HIGH STREET: Event Report

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This summary sets out some of the highlights from the Sheffield Community Network event held at The Circle on 15 February 2013. For more information, please see the full presentations, available at www.sheffieldcommunity.net

THE PURPOSE OF THE EVENT

The aim was to explore how digital tools and innovative approaches could help to reinvigorate high streets and town centres, connecting producers with consumers and encouraging new uses of buildings and space.

The context for the event was one of accelerating change in town centres, illustrated by the recent failure of four major retail chains: Jessops, HMV, Blockbuster and Republic. Since the 2008 financial crisis, according to property agents CBRE, retail failures have cost around 198,000 and led to the loss of £1.48 billion in rent for landlords. A polarisation of retail centres is taking place, with investment being concentrated in a shrinking number of 'prime' locations.

At the same time imaginative responses are being tested, from events and festivals to 'pop-up' and 'meanwhile' activities. Just as digital technologies are hastening the demise of the traditional high street, they may also help town centres reinvent themselves.

The event was part of a series of events, workshops and networking activities organised for Sheffield Community Network by Sheffield's CIQ Agency. Introducing the day, CIQ Agency managing director

Richard Motley outlined the range of events on offer, from monthly 'lunch plus' workshops to full-day events designed to develop innovative, creative and entrepreneurial approaches to current issues such as retail and the future of libraries.



THE PROGRAMME

The programme was facilitated by a range of expert speakers:

- **Julian Dobson**, director of Urban Pollinators, set out the context and challenges
- **Dan Thompson**, author of *Pop-Up Business for Dummies*, discussed the changing use of physical space and how to make the most of temporary opportunities
- **Daniel O'Connor**, founder of Warp-It, introduced the idea of the 'sharing economy' and explained how patterns of consumption are changing
- **Jane Johnston**, internet retailer, discussed the relationship between online and physical retailing
- **Barry James**, founder of AngelRevolutions, explained how Facebook is transforming the way people interact and use physical places
- **Chris Sands**, co-founder of Totally Locally, explored how celebrating independent local businesses could support the local economy and link producers to markets
- **Joe Barratt**, creator of the Stockport Film Festival and *Seven Miles Out*, described Stockport's Teenage Market and the role of culture and young people in recreating town centres
- **Richard Eyre**, head of city centre management and major events at Sheffield Council, showed how the Bird's Yard concept of collaborative retailing is creating new opportunities for makers and designers

THE CHALLENGES

The event explored four key challenges:

- How can we make the most of changing patterns of consumption?
- How can we benefit from temporary opportunities and interventions?
- How can we use digital tools to communicate better with the people we want to reach?
- How can we link producers to markets?

CHANGING PATTERNS OF CONSUMPTION

The high street as we have known it for the past fifty years is changing beyond recognition. Fuelled by internet technology and the growth of large in-town and out-of-town shopping centres, we are witnessing a polarisation between 'prime' and second- or third-tier centres.

Julian Dobson quoted figures from Jones Lang LaSalle, predicting the end of 25% of high street and shopping centre leases by the end of 2013 and 50% by the end of 2015: this will provide an opportunity for retailers to pick and choose which towns they need to stay in. The internet is changing the way we consume as well as where we consume: in 2011 a total of 12% of all UK retail sales, worth a total of £50 billion, were online.

Alongside these trends, consumption is increasingly taking a digital form. Most music is now a digital rather than a physical product. The number of e-books has now overtaken the number of new hardbacks. And even where a physical product is still required, ownership is no longer necessary.



Daniel O'Connor, founder of Warp-IT in Newcastle, explained how the 'sharing economy' is changing the nature of consumption. The rise of AirBnB, where individuals rent out spare rooms to guests, is changing the hotel and hospitality industry; Zipcar and Avego are two of the many new car-sharing facilities that reduce the need for car ownership; Scratchbikes in Newcastle makes bike-sharing available at low cost without the costly infrastructure of other city-wide cycle schemes. Freogle and Freecycle enable individuals to pass redundant items on to people who want them. Such examples of 'collaborative consumption' are usually accessed via digital tools, from Facebook to smartphone apps.

TEMPORARY OPPORTUNITIES AND INTERVENTIONS

As retailers move away from the high street or fail, a growing proportion of retail space is standing empty. This has given rise to a plethora of 'meanwhile' and 'pop-up' activities, providing opportunities for new businesses to test their ideas and mixing culture and arts with traditional shopping. Dan Thompson explained how new forms of retail are emerging, such as shops that double up as cafes, and how the loss of chain stores is creating opportunities for independent businesses. Such initiatives are characterised by their collaborative approach, the fact that they start small and grow organically, and their use of social media to generate publicity and create momentum.

Stockport's Teenage Market is an example of

how an occasional or one-off event can be used to generate footfall and enliven areas that have declined. Free market stalls enabled young people to demonstrate their talents and gain confidence, and some have found opportunities to sell their work via established traders. The market has also reminded young people of the variety that the town has to offer away from the main shopping centre in Merseyway.

USING DIGITAL TOOLS TO IMPROVE COMMUNICATION

A striking feature of most of speakers' presentations was the way people's approach to high streets and shopping is being completely transformed by digital technology. Anyone under the age of 25 today will have no memory of life before the internet, and will be most likely to use Google to research and find products they want, and Facebook to arrange their social life. Their use of the physical space of town centres will be driven by their online connections and information.

Barry James explained how Facebook could drive footfall to high street outlets, using the power of trust and personal relationships. Two-thirds of the population use Facebook, and AngelRevolutions' research suggested each has an average of 170 friends, 35% of whom live within the local area. Similarly, the approaches to 'collaborative consumption' outlined by Daniel O'Connor use digital tools: one consequence is that part of the economic benefit may go to a company based outside the UK altogether, such as AirBnB.



New retailers, limited by a shortage of capital and resources, will begin life online using cheap tools such as Wordpress to build their websites and Mailchimp to generate customer mailing lists. Jane Johnston explained how Amazon provides access to new markets, enabling start-ups to reach customers worldwide at a cost of 20% of sales receipts, while Google's Adwords enables retailers to research gaps in the market. Internet retail is ideal for new businesses in poorer communities, she argued, as start-up costs are low and access to local facilities such as post offices is essential.

Using social and digital technologies can reduce costs, enabling new businesses to reach their markets and supporting local events and festivals. The Valley of Lights festival in Calderdale was staged on a marketing budget of only £1,200, yet attracted 12,000 people.

LINKING PRODUCERS TO MARKETS

The recent horsemeat scandal has demonstrated the weaknesses of long, unaccountable supply chains subject to a constant pressure to reduce costs. Is it possible to shorten supply chains and link local producers with local consumers? The response from presenters was that it is difficult, but possible.

Totally Locally, which encourages people in more than 19 towns to shop local and keep money circulating in the local economy, has helped small-scale local suppliers such as Pextenment Cheese in Todmorden find new outlets for their produce.

Triangle Emporium, in a former post office near Sowerby Bridge, works with 37 local suppliers. But Chris Sands, co-founder of Totally Locally, pointed out that small suppliers need to understand the demands of retail too, delivering the right quantity of produce when and where needed.

Bird's Yard in Sheffield is another experiment designed to create new outlets for budding makers and designers. Based on a similar concept in Leeds, it was supported by Sheffield City Council in order to bring activity and footfall into Chapel Walk in the city centre. Craftspeople and designers can use anything from a shoebox to an entire section of the shop to display their wares, and must also help with the retail side of the business in return for display space. As well as creating opportunities for apprenticeships, the project also involves training and support for other local retailers. So far 40 retailers have been involved and four apprenticeships have been created.

Stockport's Teenage Market demonstrates how high street locations can also be used to support cultural entrepreneurs such as musicians and film-makers. As the Seven Miles Out festival has demonstrated, it is possible to use a celebration of a town's cultural history – in this case the Strawberry Recording Studios – to create a platform for new artists and performers.



DISCUSSION AND RESPONSE

Participants at the event divided into three groups at the end to discuss which ideas had most inspired them and what could be done in Sheffield to link producers and consumers; make the most of empty and temporary spaces; and use new digital tools and technologies.

Linking producers with markets: participants were particularly inspired by the Teenage Market and Totally Locally campaign. They suggested businesses should display information about their local suppliers to maximise the goodwill generated by local connections; this could be assisted through QR codes on products providing more information on their makers.

Making the most of the temporary: participants thought the 'sharing economy' (e.g. hiring out personal parking spaces or tools) presented important opportunities to maximise local value. These ideas could be tested in temporary or 'pop-up' shops, which could also be used to showcase local cultural talent. It was felt there should be more information about landlords and property ownership to enable people with ideas to contact owners quickly; this could be done through a landlord register and by displaying contact information in the windows of empty shops. Social media could be used to generate ideas from the public about the kind of activities they would like to see in vacant premises.

Using digital tools: participants were impressed by the way cheap or free-to-use communication

could help to level the playing field between big businesses and new entrepreneurs. They recommended the development of more open-source technologies with an emphasis on widening access – one idea was to store digital information on bus passes, which could then act as local reward cards.

ISSUES FOR THE FUTURE

The decline of the traditional high street has been under way for more than 30 years. Retailers, residents and local institutions are only just beginning to consider how town centres will need to change in future. Ideas such as local loyalty, pop-up businesses and the sharing economy are still in their relative infancy: this presents opportunities for residents, local authorities and social enterprises to set a new agenda of local benefit.



The Sheffield Community Network is funded by the European Regional Development Fund and brings together key local partners to deliver a programme of interventions and investment in infrastructure that creates a seedbed for community-based growth, enabling the creation of new businesses and jobs.

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