**Put the identity back into towns**

In an increasingly competitive 24 hour online society, towns are facing a new challenge in how they make themselves most distinctive and attractive to residents and visitors.In South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse districts that I look after six market towns all facing this challenge. They are battling the changing nature of the high street, the increase in retail spend online, reduced demand for ‘pure’ retail, the changing need for store formats and competition from multi-channel retailing.

While it is an ongoing battle, we are winning this challenge, both by moving with the times and adapting to change. How are we doing this? Well it isn’t easy, particularly when every other town in the country is looking to do the same.

South Oxfordshire realised there was a need for dramatic intervention in its town to halt decline and address the generic threats that market towns face, which include loss of independent shops, conflict between the historic market town context and the needs of modern businesses, the impact of retail leakage, and traffic congestion. We have undertaken work to highlight the unique characteristics of each town and considered how these could be used to develop individual USPs, through a marketing strategy and other mechanisms, and secure agreement to promote town distinctiveness.

There are a number of successes from this work. Community and partner ‘buy in’ has been created, with all working together to create a brand – the importance of this shouldn’t be underestimated. Helping the community and local partners realise that times have changed, and there is a need to adapt, has been a key win. It has been important to help them recognise that residents want different things from the town today, and that they aren’t going to compete with the larger retail centres and out of town parks, but need to look instead at what they can offer. Another key lesson was the fact that ‘visitors’ are people from neighbouring towns and the wider hinterland, who will be keen to come to the town if it has something unique to offer.

Gone are the days of the traditional market town when the street was lined with a butcher, baker, fishmonger and greengrocers. Yes, some of our towns still have these retailers, but they have become ‘destination retailers’ rather than the weekly shop retailers. The councils have actively supported, where appropriate, a more flexible planning policy approach to encouraging A3 and leisure uses on the high street, alongside retail units, increasing dwell time and building an experience for residents and visitors.

**Building a brand**

The need to define a place with a brand has become ever more important. Our towns have achieved this in a number of ways. Firstly, they have a logo and branding that is distinct and recognisable. Secondly, they ensure the town centre offer is clearly communicated. In partnerships with the towns we have employed town centre managers to promote and communicate with businesses, residents and visitors.

Thirdly, there is a strong online presence, with each of the towns having a dedicated website. Fourthly, marketing material, in the form of leaflets and information, is made available to visitors to encourage them to explore what the towns have to offer. Finally, there is a programme of events, as the increasing desire for dwell time fits well with a strong calendar of events, markets and festivals to drive footfall to the towns and encourage repeat visits.

The changing nature of retailing means that chain retailers are not always interested in locating in small towns; they are looking for larger, more flexible space, which isn’t available in town centres. The 2008 recession saw a number of national retailers consolidate or go out of business.

This affected many of our towns, none more so than Wantage, where the town was branded a ‘ghost town’. Through creation of a town team, we have run a successful pop-up shop programme in our towns, encouraging local entrepreneurs to try a business in the town. In Wantage, 26 vacant shops were brought back into use through the promotion of pop-up shops and other campaigns for the town, raising footfall by 30 per cent. This resulted in it winning the town centre category in the 2014 Great British High Street Award.

Attracting and accommodating local businesses is more important than ever; they make a town distinct, whether through quirky independent retailers, antique shops or local food suppliers. It is all about the customer experience and making it unique. Making sure the public realm is of a good standard is also important, with good signage, places to sit and attractive shop frontages.

**Marketing Midsomer**

One thing unique to South Oxfordshire that has helped define, not just the towns but the wider rural district, is the TV programme Midsomer Murders, which is filmed locally. Over the last five years, we have developed the brand of [Visit Midsomer](http://www.visitmidsomer.com/), which has become the district and town’s very own USP.

The Visit Midsomer website attracted more than 200,000 unique visitors last year. The campaign itself fits well with each of the market towns, which regularly appear as the fictional town of Causton in the TV series. By developing walking tours, businesses creating ‘Midsomer ales’ and plaques showing filming locations, there has been a growth in tour operators coming to the district of 500 per cent, and an estimated benefit to the South Oxfordshire economy of more than £1 million.

Creating a brand for a town centre has now become imperative to attracting visitors, to clearly present the town’s offer and to become its differentiator. This is something that we have done in southern Oxfordshire, but need to constantly work on to ensure we don’t lose this unique factor.

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