



**Training Courses for
Independent Businesses
in Market Towns and Villages**

Introduction

The Base (Business and Social Enterprise) Initiative was a pilot programme of training and support tailored specifically to meet the needs of independent businesses and community partnerships in the East of England. Base was created and delivered by Action for Market Towns, it was funded by the European Social Fund (ESF) and it was co-financed by the East of England Development Agency (EEDA). The pilot ran from August 2006 until March 2007.

Base used a unique formula to attract the interest of independent businesses in small towns and rural areas - a notoriously hard to reach sector. 790 people from 402 independent retail and service businesses participated in the programme over in a five-month period.

This report has been commissioned by EEDA and has been prepared by AMT to provide an objective evaluation of the pilot programme. It explains how the impressive outputs were achieved using a sophisticated regional market towns support network. It also highlights the current issues facing small businesses in the East of England to describe why the initiative was needed.

Background

There are over 220 towns with populations of between 2000 and 40,000 in the East of England. The regional market towns network was formed in 2001, in response to the Government's Rural White Paper, to provide a holistic partnership approach to market town regeneration.

It is now a sophisticated yet informal network and in 2006 the network was branded 'Market Towns East' and it was constituted as a sub-group of the Regional Rural Forum. Market Towns East has the following stakeholders: Market Town Community Partnerships, Town, District and County Councils, Defra, Government Office East of England, East of England Development Agency, Federation of Small Business, Business in the Community, Business Link, Regional Rural Forum and Rural Action East.

The East of England Market Towns Network is coordinated by Sally Williams. Sally is employed by Action for Market Towns (AMT) which is a national membership organisation providing small towns, local authorities and others with information, advice and national representation. Since 2002 Sally has sourced in excess of £6million for market towns in the region. She works very closely with the East of England Development Agency and has the following three roles:

Expert Advisor

- Researching issues and policies concerning communities in the East of England and disseminating these to key agencies from National to Local level

Partnership Development

- Informing, supporting, educating and engaging people working in the field of regeneration
- Increasing the capacity of community partnerships to work collaboratively to create sustainable communities
- Enabling town partnerships to reduce grant dependency and increase self-sufficiency by exploring social enterprise as a business model

Project Delivery

- Directing the East of England Asset Development Programme, a £1.5 million initiative to enable communities to purchase assets from which to generate an income for social activities
- Managing the East of England Quality of Place Programme, a £650k initiative providing communities with grant funding and support to enable them to run arts, cultural and environmental activities
- Managing the East of England Market Towns Awards 2004-7
- Devising and running a national events programme



Sally Williams

Base - The Beginning

In 2005 members of the market towns network began to share serious concerns about the health of independent businesses in small towns. Shops and services were closing, commercial vacancy rates were increasing and town centres were struggling to attract new commercial investors. National statistics backed up these concerns.

It is not possible to state exactly how many small businesses fail each year as many of the smallest businesses whose turnovers fall below the compulsory VAT registration threshold of £61,000, fall under the statistical radar. However it is estimated that as many as 50% of small business start-ups fail in the first three years of trading and more small businesses close than start up each year.¹

In 2003 the largest numbers of small business failures occurred in two very rural areas, the East of England and the South West.²

Causes of Small Business Failure

The causes of failure are diverse and in a recent survey the following problems were cited as the most important problems facing small business:³

1) Premises/rates/rents

Small towns provide uncertain locations for small businesses. Unless they have Internet or mail order elements, shops rely on high levels of footfall to be successful and in many small towns this has declined. Tourism can have a positive effect but out of season even the most desirably located towns suffer. Out of town shopping centres and supermarkets provide free and copious parking facilities whilst ancient towns can struggle for the space required to accommodate both shoppers and workers.

Rent and rates are steep and even the most modest rise in overhead costs can eliminate any profit generated by a small business.

Keith Hoskins has been the Town Centre Manager of Hitchin for eleven years. He explains that there is no such thing as a an average retail unit in the town but there are some that are more affordable for independent businesses 'Our smaller units tend to be in the secondary streets and there is not much under £8k for a small unit. If you wanted to rent 800 square foot in a secondary shopping street you would need to find about £16k per annum, if you add another £2k for rates you immediately get a fixed overheads bill of £18k. The first £50 of your takings each day would go to pay these bills and then you have to consider wages, stock, electricity etc. We tell our businesses that they are looking to make £300 a week just to turn the key in the door!' When you also consider that secondary trading centres have less footfall than primary ones it makes it even harder to attract customers.

Keith also explains that 400 square yards of space in the High Street would cost about £35k. The larger units are also found in the High Street, and multiples are attracted to the primary locations. He is optimistic though and says, 'We have lost some independents due to retirements and some independents have made way for multiples for example our privately owned tea room has now become a Starbucks, but on the whole business in Hitchin is booming and we currently can't satisfy the demands of any new retailers with high space requirements.'

As independents fail, either commercial vacancy rates rise and towns begin to look tired or medium sized chains move in and towns start to they lose their character. The New Economics Foundation Clone Town Britain Survey Reported that 42% of British Towns are Clone Towns where 'in place of real local shops has come a package of "identikit" chain stores replicating on the nation's high streets. The individual character of many towns is evaporating.'

¹ Barclays estimate that the number of start ups in England and Wales rose to 108,000 in 2003 and the estimated number of closures rose to 113,000

² Barclays quarterly report on small business statistics

³ Barclays quarterly report on small business statistics



Hitchin - Secondary Shopping Street

In some market towns there is a lack of affordable space for new or growing businesses. The Wayland Partnership and the Icenii Partnership in Norfolk and Harwich Connexions in Essex have all identified a need for flexible workspace for both local and incoming businesses. They are just three community partnerships in market towns that have purchased business incubation units, offices and workshops. Richard Colley, Vice Chair of Harwich Connexions explains 'Our partnership offers the only managed small business units in the town. We offer easy in - easy out business accommodation for business start-ups. Affordable workspace is a vital resource to the wellbeing of the area and we could do with more.'

2) Competition from big business

Multiple retailers and out of town shopping centres are replacing independent shops and services. In Feb 2006 the All Party Parliamentary Small Shops Group reported that the big four supermarkets control 75 per cent of the £80bn grocery sector. In 1945, there were 500,000 independent retailers; today the number is down to 30,000 - and more than 2,000 went out of business last year.

Retail parks contain electrical retailers, carpet warehouses, pet emporiums, toy stores and home improvement centres and they all pose a threat to small independently run businesses in town centres. The rise of stores selling cheap clothing and household products like Primark,

Wilkinsons and Peacocks threaten the health of traditional markets. Even estate agents, insurance brokers and financial services are facing new competition as supermarkets move into their territory.

The use of Internet is also an increasingly ominous threat to small, high street businesses. Large Internet stores like Amazon have expanded their product offer and now sell many thousands of product lines. Improved service means that many products can be delivered the next day. As people become more familiar with new technology they are able to design their own business literature and stationery and create their own websites. They can take excellent photographs using digital cameras and print them with home printers. They can also purchase all of these services on the Internet. These technological advances will affect the way that many small service providers operate, they must embrace the changes and reposition their businesses or suffer the consequences.

3) Marketing problems

Small businesses are not always efficient at promotion and they often fail to target correctly segmented customer bases. Mick Dobson, an Advisory Services Manager, for Wenta an enterprise agency in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire believes that the majority of independents fail to prepare effective marketing and business plans before they take the leap into self-employment. Mick says 'we see about five hundred new businesses a year and many of them are frighteningly under-prepared. They often have no idea who they are trying to sell their products or services to, how to price them, how to compete with others in the same sector and no idea how they are going to reach their markets. Quite often people think that a cheap flier and some newspaper advertising will get customers flocking to their door and it just isn't like that.'

In Feb 2006 John Fingleton, chief executive Office of Fair Trading argued that 'Retailers or any other businesses who, for whatever reason, find customers going to somebody else other than them in a free market situation, should be asking themselves questions about why they are losing their customers.'

4) Lack of skilled employees

Rural businesses struggle to find skilled employees to help their business grow. Some of the lowest skills levels in the country can be found in rural areas. In the East of England a recent report⁴ identified that the lowest levels of NVQ level 4 attainments were found in the very rural areas of Norfolk and Essex and high rates of populations with no formal qualifications at all were found in rural Suffolk, Essex and Norfolk.

Self-employed people themselves can suffer from a lack of formal business training. Evidence shows that small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) are the least likely to train their staff. FRESA statistics illustrate that incidence of work related learning is much more widespread amongst employees in larger firms and that encouraging smaller enterprises to provide more work related learning has been a perennial challenge. 'No formal qualifications are required to set up a business and owner managers find it difficult to make time for learning' (FRESA) The low skills levels of owner managers is likely to impact on the overall productivity and

competitiveness of their businesses. There is also a shortage of management skills in the region⁵ and where owner managers of small businesses have employees, management skills will be critical to their success.

5) Cashflow/Debtors

According to John Walker, FSB National Policy Chairman: "Late payment of invoices is a complex issue but in simple terms an invoice that is not paid on time can spell the end for a small business." Despite legislation, small businesses are reluctant to take larger firms who do not pay to court, for obvious reasons. As many small businesses rely on one large contract for its future, the late payment is perceived to be less of a threat than the contract failing to be renewed.

6) Regulation and Paperwork

According to the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) small businesses spend an average of twenty-eight hours per month on compliance and regulatory paperwork alone. Workplace regulation, like taxes, too often negatively impacts on small business in a way not experienced by bigger businesses.

7) Lack of time/capacity

The desire to have more time for family and interests is one of the biggest reasons cited by people starting up small businesses. 21% of FSB survey respondents said that convenience was important or very important for having a home based business, especially for those with young children. The reality however is different and the self employed find they frequently have to work more hours than usual to grow their business, not less.

Mick Dobson at Wenta believes that it is especially difficult for people managing micro businesses to find enough time to do all that they have to, he says, 'In very small businesses with fewer than five employees the owner or manager has to be a real Jack of all trades. Some of my clients work seven days a week, from Monday to Friday they are plumbing, selling, cutting hair or whatever it is they are skilled at and then at the weekend they are preparing quotes, doing their books and attending to other peripheral issues. They very rarely get the chance to stand back from their business and plan its future in objective terms.'

8) General Economic Climate

High Street sales are suffering generally and The Office for National Statistics reported a fall in sales volumes of 1.3 percent in early 2006. E-retailing is growing fast and many small and specialised shops could increase their turnover considerably if they had the knowledge to trade online yet only 32% of all SMEs in the East of England region were found to have a website. The Interactive Media in Retail Group (IMRG) recently reported that UK residents spent £19.2 billion on goods and services using the Internet in 2005 and that this figure was set to rise by 36% in 2006.

⁴ Framework for Urban Collaboration in The East of England - 2007

⁵ Regional Economic Strategy

Providing Support

There are over 2000 business support services in the UK, some are government funded, some are private companies and others are social enterprises and not for profit organisations. Many of these offer business training, counselling and advice and some have been very successful. In the East of England region these organisations were not sufficiently engaging with, or appealing to, independent businesses in market towns and very rural areas.

Sally Bonnett, regeneration Officer at East Cambridgeshire District Council, explains 'The Chamber of Commerce and Business Link East only offer courses in Cambridge, during the day and often there is a fee. Small businesses who are struggling to survive can't afford either the cost or to close the shop for a morning or a day to attend. The only courses offered locally are by the Enterprise Agency and those are for start-up businesses rather than established ones.'

Michael Castle Stalham partnership manager believes his local businesses were reluctant to understand the impact that training can have on their profitability. 'As a partnership we asked local good practice case studies to "go public" to demonstrate the benefits that training has brought them says Michael, 'However most of the available training is in Norwich or Great Yarmouth and few local businesses would travel go that far.'

Kirsty Swinson Co-ordinator of the Chet Valley Partnership believes that the courses provided by Business link in Norfolk were more suited to those at management level and although Norwich City College has a 'Putting Business First' department, which provides business training packages, most small businesses do not have the capacity to pay someone to provide training for their staff.

The Base Formula

Relevant Subjects

During the development stage of Base, market town community partnerships were asked to consult their businesses to identify key training needs. Project manager, Sally Williams, explained that this exercise uncovered general trends but further research had to be undertaken before the subject titles were set, 'The trouble is that businesses literally 'don't know, what they don't know,' she says, 'and they therefore find it difficult to assess their skills gaps. They can also struggle to accept that they need help to improve their business in a number of areas.'

Sally drew up a list of 32 key skills required by small businesses and then whittled them down to just 13, 'The pilot programme needed to be relevant to both retail and service sectors and the course material had to be as generic but as relevant as possible to hook people in at an early stage. It was also important for the courses to work sequentially and so they had to be selected for their ability to be presented in a logical order.

Each town was able to select a programme of six bite-sized courses and two full day courses from the following list: Customer Service, Selling Skills, Marketing, Consumer Law, Employment Law, Health and Safety, First Aid, Visual Merchandising, Leadership Skills, Retail Security, Staff Appraisals, Motivation, Website Awareness. The most popular choices were First Aid, Visual Merchandising, Customer Service and Marketing.'

Steve Peters, town centre manager of Bury St Edmunds believes that many other business courses just aren't that relevant for smaller businesses, he says 'Base provided courses and content that were directly geared to help owner operators or managers of individual businesses'. He continues, 'By offering these courses, someone other than themselves were taking an interest in their survival and profitability, to ensure the continuance of independent businesses within the locality. It shows that not everything is geared to multi-nationals. Base really added to the profitability, uniqueness and vibrancy of a town such as Bury St Edmunds which has a high degree of independent shops.'

As well as managing the Base project Sally Williams, who is a professional business trainer, also did much of the training. She says 'for me the success of Base was wholly reliant on not just the quality of training staff but on their style and manner. I wanted trainers to be fired up and to be experts in their own fields but more importantly I wanted them to read the audience properly and adapt the pitch of their material to fit the mood of the day. This is not easy to do, sometimes you might have a room full of young, inexperienced retailers from a very rural area and the very next day you might have a mixed group of highly professional sales managers or financial consultants from a commuter town just outside of London. They will have different expectations and even though you are teaching the same subject you will need to use different language and different frames of reference to connect with them all in a meaningful way. This requires trainers to have a deep level of understanding of each subject, to have done their background reading and to be prepared to go off on a tangent to meet delegate needs.'

Sally built up a small stable of trainers with expertise in selected subjects and with experience of running small businesses. She found it one of the most difficult aspects of running the programme, 'I spent time meeting and recruiting trainers that had been recommended to me. I also used people that I had seen in action on previous occasions. It was important that they were personable and professional and judging by the feedback on the evaluation forms this approach worked well.'

The Base Trainers

Alan Springall and Lyn Jennings

Alan Springall, a visual merchandiser, teaches vocational skills to student merchandisers at Cassio College, Watford. He is a self-employed retail and exhibition display expert and has over thirty years of practical work experience including thirteen years as merchandiser at Selfridges. He worked with Lyn Jennings one of his former students to help retailers to transform their businesses. A series of practical workshops followed bite sized theory sessions. Delegates learnt how to create height and depth in sometimes awkward shop windows, they were taught how to group stock effectively and how to make simple and cost effective props. Alan and Lyn then visited the shops to give them free professional advice on site.

Alan explains, 'I used a very straightforward style of training to deliver the two hours of 'theory' to what turned out to be very mixed groups of retailers. A richly illustrated PowerPoint presentation showed current practice and this was interspersed with lively discussion about the

difficulties faced by small retailers on a tight budget. I overcame the entrenched resistance to anything “arty” by delivering brief and easily replicable practical demonstrations. The delegates then had a go themselves using merchandise that they had been asked to bring with them. Handouts were distributed so that delegates could practice when they got back to their shops.'



Caption



Caption

Alan was very careful not to intimidate delegates, 'When I went to shops to discuss their individual needs it was important for me to be diplomatic and give constructive criticism without, in some cases, being overwhelmed by the low base point from which the retailers' had to start.' Alan and Lyn directed the retailers and gave them notes to follow so that they had the confidence to practice their new skills in the future.

First Aid

Karen Winter is a state registered paramedic & director of First Aid Plus Ltd, which is approved by the Health and Safety Executive. Karen has worked as a paramedic in the film industry and has patched up characters from both the James Bond and Harry Potter films! Her team of trainers offers a bright and breezy style of teaching and aim to relax delegates, Karen explains, 'In order to pass their First Aid in the Workplace certificate people have to do practical exercises, like mouth to mouth resuscitation on a dummy, it really is hands on stuff! Delegates perform much better if they feel comfortable and happy and so we like to keep the day as informal as possible. Our courses are fun and we enjoy sharing our real life experiences to make the course material come to life.'



Caption



Caption

Website Development and Management Skills

Amanda Watkin from People Realm has considerable business expertise. She started her own company and then after much success sold it along with its assets, client base and she even transferred eight of the staff to the new owner. Amanda explains 'I believe that I have all the relevant small business experience required to empathise with Base delegates. The fact that I have built a small enterprise enables me to develop course material to meet the real life situations that business owners will encounter, this ensures I am not just delivering text book theories.'

Amanda tailored several of her courses, which included website development, staff appraisals and being assertive, so that she could meet the needs of the target group. 'In each town the mix of businesses was a little bit different so my courses had to have a flexible format to allow space for sector specific questions whilst still delivering the generic concepts surrounding the subject area.'



Ammanda Watkin



Lee-Anne Francis

Business Planning

Lee-Anne Francis, from Crystal Clear Training has much experience of working with small businesses and she is passionate about helping people to fulfil their potential. After fifteen years' experience in Finance and Sales she set up her own training business and she enjoys inspiring and motivating people with her enthusiasm.

Lee-Anne's Base workshops were designed to meet the individual learning needs of each delegate, depending on their knowledge and experience. She preferred to work with small groups of people so she could help them really focus on the content of their business plans, she says, 'I tried to be as approachable as I could to encourage people to get actively involved in the sessions. The more they trusted me the more we could work practically together to solve some of their business issues.'

Timing of courses

The majority of Base courses were two hours long and they ran at convenient times for the target group - largely in the evenings and at lunchtimes. The afternoon start time of 12pm gave delegates the opportunity to combine skills training with their lunch break. In Haverhill

delegates were pleased to have a few hours out of the office at lunchtime and as the venue was convenient enough to enable them to walk to the training it saved them having to get in the car and drive.

Sally Bonnett says the evening timeslot was very successful, 'The evening start time of 6pm enabled our delegates in Ely, St Ives and Huntingdon to cash up after close of business and walk or drive straight to the venue. When people are given the opportunity to go home before a course starts there is the chance that they will not feel like venturing out again!' She also thought that two-hour slots were succinct and yet informative.

Steve Peters believes that the courses could have been longer in Bury St Edmunds, 'There was a feeling that some of the courses were too compact with too much information squeezed into a 2 hour slot, and that it would have been better to offer the same tuition over 3 hour courses rather than 2, which in turn would have offered more feedback and interaction.' Margot Harbour however thinks that two hours was just about right for her businesses in Harleston, 'When delegates have had a hard day at work they find it difficult to concentrate for longer than a couple of hours in the evenings, the courses were fast paced and interactive so that kept their attention, but any longer and I think they would have been dropping off!'

First Aid and Health and Safety needed to be full-day courses as the law requires them to run for a minimum of 6 consecutive training hours. Delegates in Harleston didn't seem to mind that they had to take a full day out of work to attend the First Aid Course, one delegate wrote, 'I don't know where the time went, the course was great fun, I learnt loads and I now have a really useful qualification!'

The Venues

Base used convenient, accessible and familiar venues to hold courses. Sally Williams believes that people working in small businesses are more likely to feel uncomfortable in an overly formal classroom setting, she says 'On the whole delegates feel more comfortable popping in to the local pub or hotel than a college, or an 'official' environment like a civic centre.'

Michael Castle Coordinator of Stalham Community Partnership believed the venue was very important to the success of Base, 'In Stalham, we used the Lighthouse pub and the Town Hall, both were very popular. The Lighthouse has a large car park and they gave us a room just off the restaurant.' In St Ives courses ran from the Bridge Tea rooms, Town Centre Manager Alistair Theobald did a good deal with the owner to secure the upstairs room for the full programme of training, he explains, 'We went for an early morning slot in St Ives from 8.00am until 10.00am. The tea room was happy to let their room for a small charge while they prepared their menus ready for opening at 10.30am.'

Some towns used community, training centres. Merchant's Place is an award winning community building in Cromer Town Centre with a purpose built training room. Manager, Catherine Plewman, seated up to 25 delegates around one large boardroom table but with air conditioning and modern audio-visual equipment it proved to be very comfortable. The Wayland Partnership used Wayland House a renovated former police station to hold Base courses. Partnership Manager, Jan Godfrey, encourages local businesses to feel comfortable using the building, she explains, 'We offer advice and support to our businesses, they can

drop in to use our equipment, send a fax, photocopy documents and we have a series of free business fact sheets to give away, we can even rent them office space on very reasonable short leases! When we ran our Base programme from our state of the art conference room attendance was very high.



Caption

Food and Drink

Because Base courses were run at meal times it was appropriate to provide delegates with refreshments. Occasionally food provided the incentive for business people to attend. Delegates in St Ives enjoyed breakfast at the Bridge Tea Rooms, one delegate wrote, 'The courses have been excellent but I particularly look forward to the croissants and bacon sandwiches!'

In Stalham 25 delegates sat down at 6.00pm for a course on marketing and a fish and chip supper. Coordinator Sophie Goodgame can't definitely attribute the high turn out to the food but she thinks there might be some link, 'Because we used the town hall we decided to buy the food from the chip shop next door to save ourselves time with washing up. When word got out that free fish and chips was on the menu we got loads of bookings.' Trainer Sally Williams thought it was an excellent idea and it added to the community atmosphere 'As delegates sat around a huge u-shaped table munching away the radiators kicked in and the projector heated up so the smell of fish got a little stronger as the evening wore on!'

In Wayland one of the delegates made the food! The café from across the road supplied locally produced sandwiches and cakes for tea and the owner also attended the courses.

No Charge

Base courses were free to attend and the refreshments were also free to delegates. The participating towns were asked to provide free training rooms as match funding to the project. Some towns also managed to secure good rates on the food and drink. Huntingdonshire and East Cambridgeshire District Councils footed the bill for all food and venues as part of their bid to host Base in four local towns.

SMEs in particular fail to plan a budget for training. Many of the beneficiaries said that they would not have been able to pay for training and one of the key attractions was that it was free of charge. Steve Peters felt that this was a major bonus for businesses, 'In Bury offering courses free of charge to small independents was a massive incentive'. Sue McAllister was convinced that businesses would not have been able to pay for the courses, 'Some of my retailers sent up to ten staff on these courses, if there had been a cost attached it just would have been too prohibitive. The fact that all the food and drink was free too was unbelievable.'

Relaxed Environment

Base courses are informal and non-intimidating. As delegates arrived at the venue they are able to chat to others, eat a sandwich and understand that they didn't have to verbally participate if they didn't want to. The emphasis was placed on sharing experience; views and issues as beneficiaries were encouraged to network with other like-minded people.

Courses were delivered in plain English and really anecdotal subject material was used to illustrate points. PowerPoint presentations were photocopied and distributed at the end of each course to enable beneficiaries to read the notes at leisure and take them back for their colleagues. Delegates were stretched rather than patronised. Nobody was 'put on the spot', they didn't have to make notes, although most did, and no background reading was required although relevant books and articles were highlighted for those most keen to take the learning further.

Promotion and the Role of the Base Ambassador

Small businesses are often accused of having suspicious natures! Businesses can be cynical when strangers approach them with offers of free training and if that person represents a local authority conversation can quickly turn to complaints about business rates, refuse collection and renegade pigeons!

Base used a new approach to reach businesses. Respected training champions were contracted to 'sell' the initiative at a local level. They were named Base Ambassadors because they represented both the interests of Base and the businesses in their town and they acted as the messenger between both parties. Margot Harbour, Ambassador for Harellston explains 'We let businesses know all about Base and encouraged them to attend the courses but we also gathered a lot of information from the businesses about what they would like Base to provide and we fed that back through to the project officer.'

When Base was launched, towns with market town partnerships, chambers of commerce or town centre management initiatives could apply to deliver the programme. Each applicant was asked to state how much time it would take them to promote Base in their towns, how much money they would require to do this and what methods they would use to raise awareness of the programme locally. Some partnerships found this very difficult to do because they had not been used to putting a cost to their time in this way.

Action for Market Towns came to an individual agreement with each town and a contract was issued to formalise the agreed terms and conditions. Project Manager Sally Williams explains how this worked, 'A variety of factors determined the terms of each contract, the largest towns

were given more money because they needed to put more time into the project, but some towns had excellent links with the businesses and therefore could do the job quickly. Most towns were paid about £20 per hour to 'sell' Base.

This money was a valuable source of income for the participating partnerships, 'We want to sell our expertise and services', explains Margot, 'We were delighted to be able to make some revenue at the same time as helping our businesses – it was a double whammy!'

The contracts stated that each course had to have a minimum of 15 delegates and it was the responsibility of the Ambassador to ensure course take up. Ambassadors also had to attend courses to welcome delegates, this was something that Sally was really keen to encourage, she says, 'It was a wonderful opportunity for the Ambassadors to meet local businesses and find out more about their needs. They could also promote community partnership working and encourage businesses to participate in their other activities. The really switched on Ambassadors were saying, 'look this is what we are doing for you, now how can you help us in return?''

The approach was highly successful but Base Ambassadors had to be persistent. Independent businesses are naturally resistant to external 'interference' and it can be disheartening when they don't all rush forward at once to take up offers of help. Steve Peters, Town Centre Manager of Bury St Edmunds, experienced a slow response to Base initially, 'There were comments like 'what's the catch,' and 'that is not appropriate to my business'. But I had some intense discussions during one to one visits with businesses and I discussed the benefits and explained that there was no catch.' Awareness of the courses grew in Bury and the uptake improved. There was a marked increase in businesses wishing to attend once feedback from the first course had spread through the town. Steve explains, 'The last four courses were predominantly full and the momentum would have continued.'

Base Ambassador Case Study

Sue McAllister is the Coordinator of Newmarket Community Partnership. Sue was contracted to promote Base in Newmarket and the 21 surrounding villages.

The Newmarket Community Partnership, (NCP), led in setting up the Newmarket Town Centre Association (NTCA), a group of business people from local service providers, including banks, building societies, pubs, clubs and retailers. NTCA is supported by the local Town and District Councils and their aim is to work in partnership to achieve new ways of increasing business in Newmarket.

Sue was convinced that she could use this network to make Base work in Newmarket, she said, 'Before Base there were very few opportunities for small businesses to get advice, training and support, possibly none considering that small business owners have to work 6 days a week with no time off during the day to attend courses. Also they would probably have had to travel to Cambridge which can be a slow drive in busy traffic.'

Sue tested the water by discussing Base at the next NTCA meeting, 'Most were very excited at the prospect of a free sandwich and an opportunity to network with others and when I showed them the list of courses available they wanted them all!'

Sue then approached the Rutland Arms, a large hotel in the middle of the High Street, to request their help, 'I knew Simon the manager from the NTCA and I popped in to see him one day to ask if he would support Base. He was very keen to help and he agreed to supply a room for seven consecutive Tuesday evenings that would hold 30 people free of charge. He gave us free orange squash and stationery and he even let us have tea, coffee and sandwiches at cost price.'



Caption

Once Sues tender for Base delivery had been agreed with the project manager she leapt into action. Sally agreed that I could claim for 40 hours of time spent promoting Base, of course I knew that I would do a lot more than that but I was prepared to give some time to the project as match funding. The partnership received £25 for each hour and this money was a very useful and unexpected income. Sue began to visit local businesses almost immediately, I walked up and down each street in Newmarket several times! Without making appointments, which would have taken for ever, I popped into each business and asked to speak to the manager or owner. In a kind of chatty way I asked them questions about their staff and their skills gaps and then I explained what Base was and how it could perhaps help them. Some of the courses acted as hooks and got more attention than others for example, the fact that businesses could do a First Aid course free, when it was a legal requirement and they would most usually have to pay for it, was a very attractive proposition for some.

Sue also found that if the manager wasn't available to speak to, other staff were very responsive to the initiative, she explains 'I soon found that this wasn't going to be a case of managers making staff attend courses, the junior and part time staff were very keen to sign up without being pushed into it.'

Eventually Sue had distributed 1000 training prospectus by sending some to the village businesses and handing the rest out personally or at business meetings in the town. She also sent a press release to the local paper and they gave quite a few column inches to the story. The telephone then literally didn't stop ringing for several days as people began to ask questions and make course bookings. Sue explains 'as people booked a course I would write their name and contact details on a spreadsheet that I had prepared. I didn't send them any other details but on the day before each course I rang them to check that they were still intending to come. Most were but some had forgotten about it and my call acted as a timely reminder.'

Newmarket did not suffer from large drop out rates and all of the courses were well attended, 'We had over thirty delegates for visual merchandising and our lowest number was just six for Being Assertive,' Sue explains, 'however we managed to get about 15 people on average for the other courses, we even had to run First Aid twice because it was so popular.'

Evaluation of the Ambassador Approach

Base employed fourteen Ambassadors and some covered more than one town. The most successful of these were well connected to their businesses, they were confident, persistent and had excellent communication and social skills. Many had previous business experience and could talk the language of the private sector, they also spent time discussing other issues with businesses to win their confidence and gain rapport.

Branding

There are over 2000 business support services in the UK and it can become very confusing for small businesses to differentiate between them. For this reason it was important for Base to have a strong identity.



The logo

The logo was professionally designed and used for all marketing literature, the website and training materials. For the pilot programme it was accompanied by the ESF branding and yet it happily stands alone since the cessation of European support.

Wording

Base is an acronym for business and social enterprise and this is emphasised in the logo. Base is the predominant word in the logo to encourage delegates to become familiar with its use as a brand name. Because Base offers training and support services it was felt that the word 'Initiative' was a good addition to the title. It is less intimidating than words like 'Academy' and it provides the opportunity to increase the suite of services at a later date without compromising the logo.

The Font

The font is modern and bold and the underscore adds energy and an element of informality. The logo is simple and easy to replicate in small places.

Colour

Research shows that blue is a colour that evokes feelings of trust, it is often adopted in the branding for financial and insurance companies. The logo is available in a black and white version.

Promotion

Training Prospectus



Figure 1

The process of providing a training prospectus for 19 participating towns was logistically challenging. A generic prospectus cover was designed with a cover image, (see figure 1) an introduction to Base and the contact details of the central Base office. (Fig 2)

The bright red cover and the word 'Free' attracted the attention of busy business people who might habitually discard unwanted promotional material. The colour tab on the right hand side of the brochure provided a suite of pantones for future editions of Base training prospectus.



Figure 2



Figure 3

A template for the internal course brochure was also designed generically. To enable the beneficiary to relate easily to the course content, a short and relevant description of each course was written in plain English. The descriptions were then illustrated with a light-hearted, business cartoon – see figure 3. The cartoons served to emphasise the informality of the courses to encourage take-up.

When each cluster of towns had selected seven from a list of thirteen possible courses to run locally, the internal template was customised with the dates and locations of the courses. The local Ambassador's name and contact details were also included along with course booking details. See Fig 4

The central Base office designed and printed each prospectus 2000 times for each cluster of towns. These were then sent to the Ambassadors for local distribution.



Figure 4



Case Study

Stephen Boddington bought the Harleston Bookshop in August 2006. The business was set up in 1999 and is a well-established concern in the town but it faces the same pressures that most independent bookshop in the country have to deal with. Stephen explains, 'It is difficult to be in the book business when Amazon, the supermarkets and chains heavily discount products. However we have some really key strengths, we know our subject and have great knowledge of the book trade, we also offer excellent customer service, we talk to people to understand what their interests might be and generate that community spirit which can be lacking in the multiples. We can also order books incredibly quickly so that gives us great depth and diversity of stock too.'

Stephen first became aware of Base when his local Ambassador paid him a visit, 'Margot popped in to see me with one of the Base brochures. As this was my first business venture I was pleased to see the choice of courses offered by BASE. They focused my thinking and helped me to consider how I was going to maintain my existing customer base at the same time as expanding it.'

Stephen attended a number of courses including selling, visual merchandising and e-commerce. He found all of the course to be very informative, with useful hints and tips that could be used immediately in his business. He says, 'The visual merchandising course was extremely good. I put the theory into practice when I returned to the shop and it has massively improved the look and feel of the shop, both internally and in our window displays. The previous owner had a very muddled window display with stock and point of sale! The course enabled me to understand the basic principles of displaying my stock and how to maximize the use of the free advertising space that is my shop window.'

Stephen found all of the courses to be professional, he says, 'Base was well organized, very well presented and very well focused on the needs of small retail businesses.'



Case Study

Audrey Cutter makes homemade Jams, marmalades, chutneys and pickles and she has been trading on the market at Ely for just over three years. Audrey was visited by Base Ambassador, Sally Bonnett, one afternoon in August 2006, 'Sally gave me a brochure and explained that all the Base courses were free and when I got home I sat down and read it thoroughly. It all seemed so simple, I just had to pick the courses that I wanted to attend and then telephone Sally to let her know. I wasn't sent any further details by post but on the day before each course Sally rang to check that I was still intending to come, this served as a good reminder for me.'

Audrey booked a place on four courses which were held at the Lamb Hotel in the Centre of Ely, 'I was a little nervous before the first course but I shouldn't have been. The session was very relaxed and there were lots of people there in the same situation as me, I enjoyed meeting and talking to them all.'

Audrey found the courses very useful, 'It is really difficult to display jam and pickle to make it look enticing and different. During the marketing course we did an exercise to show us how competitive our markets are, I wrote a long list of people that sold a similar product to me, you can even buy jam on the Internet! It was therefore really important that I got the look and feel of my stall right to make people want my product.'

Audrey had a one-to-one session with Alan Springall the Base Visual Merchandising tutor and was able to help her save money immediately, Audrey explains 'I was just about to purchase some professionally made signage for my stall, but Alan advised me to keep things rustic and natural. I asked my husband if he could help and he made me some fantastic boards out of materials he had in his shed!'

Alan also suggested that Audrey created a stepped display on her stall so people could clearly see the back rows of produce rather than stacking them on top of each other, 'It was a simple solution to an issue that had been on my mind for some time', says Audrey, 'It just shows how useful it is to have somebody else to speak to about these things.'

Audrey enjoyed attending Base courses and the advice she got actually saved her money, 'It was a good experience and I would definitely recommend the courses to other businesses.'



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