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## **Cumbria book and high street retailing**

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### **1. Project description and key findings**

This project set out to identify the issues and a solution for independent traders on the high street face because of the increasing use of the internet by consumers.

The debate on the future form of the Great British High Street is well documented (BIS, 2011<sup>1</sup>; Portas, 2011<sup>2</sup>; Wrigley & Brookes, 2014<sup>3</sup>; Grimsey, 2013<sup>4</sup>; Parker et al, 2014<sup>5</sup> and Great British High Street, 2015<sup>6</sup>). Within this debate it is accepted that providing relevant service that ensures repeat business from today's busy consumers is an essential for the survival of the Great British High Street (Resnick et al, 2014<sup>7</sup>). This project focuses on where the independent retailer's traditional service offer fit into the 21<sup>st</sup> century high street mix (Dessi et al, 2014<sup>8</sup>) and how these high street retailers adapt their consumer services in the face of the increasing use of the internet by their consumers (Yoh & Gaskill, 1999<sup>9</sup>; Gagnon

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1 [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/31823/11-1402-understanding-high-street-performance.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/31823/11-1402-understanding-high-street-performance.pdf)

2 [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/6292/2081646.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6292/2081646.pdf)

3 [http://www.riben.org.uk/Cluster\\_publications\\_&\\_media/Opinion\\_Pieces\\_Southampton\\_Nov\\_2014.pdf](http://www.riben.org.uk/Cluster_publications_&_media/Opinion_Pieces_Southampton_Nov_2014.pdf)

4 <http://www.vanishinghighstreet.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/GrimseyReview04.092.pdf>

5 Parker, C., Ntounis, N., Quin, S. & Grime, I. 2014, "High Street research agenda: identifying High Street research priorities", *J of Place Man and Dev*, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 176-184.

6 [http://thegreatbritishhighstreet.co.uk/pdf/Digital\\_High\\_Street\\_Report/The-Digital-High-Street-Report-2020.pdf](http://thegreatbritishhighstreet.co.uk/pdf/Digital_High_Street_Report/The-Digital-High-Street-Report-2020.pdf)

7 Resnick, S., Foster, C. & Woodall, T. 2014, "Exploring the UK high street retail experience: is the service encounter still valued?", *Intl J of Retail & Distrib Mgt*, vol. 42, no. 9, pp. 839-859.

8 Dessi, C., Ng, W., Floris, M. & Cabras, S. 2014, "How small family-owned businesses may compete with retail superstores", *Jrn of Small Bus Ente Dev*, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 668-689.

9 Eunah Yoh LuAnn R. Gaskill, (1999), "Practitioner Papers", *Journal of Fashion Marketing and Management: An International Journal*, Vol. 3 Iss 4 pp. 324 - 336

& Chu, 2005<sup>10</sup> and Doherty & Ellis-Chadwick, 2010<sup>11</sup> and Edelman & Heller (McKinsey digital), 2015<sup>12</sup>).

This project used the experiences of independent retailers on Carlisle's high street to examine possible solutions to the two issues of the best fit for these retailers in today's retail market place and how they could react to the increasing use of the internet by their customers.

Carlisle is a small city in the North of England on the Scottish border. Its rural location means that Carlisle acts as a sub-regional shopping centre with a retail catchment area covering a larger than expected area for a city of its size (population 100,000) from the West Coast of Cumbria to Hexham in Northumbria and from South of Penrith to Dumfries in the South West of Scotland<sup>13</sup>. The function of a sub-regional shopping centre has led to a wide variety of high street names with large outlets for Marks & Spencer and House of Fraser as well as a covered shopping centre housing middle of the road fashion brands such as Next, BHS and Debenhams. Carlisle also has representation from all the major supermarkets and discounters and is home to a traditional covered market as well as a wide range of charity shops. At the time of writing Carlisle had not attracted many of the high end fashion retailers but had found space for the discount end in TK Max and was still waiting for a viable space for Primark. Carlisle's position between the Lake District, Hadrian's Wall and the Scottish Border supports its claim to be a strong tourist destination and the town centre is home to a cathedral, castle and large museum.

Carlisle independent businesses on the high street cover a range of coffee shops and wine bars; gift shops (including specialist book stores); specialist clothing shops (from ladies wear to outdoor clothing); food stores (bakers, butchers and grocers) and other specialists (such as architects, solicitors etc.).

The Carlisle Retail Knowledge Transfer Partnership brought together key stakeholders involved in the independent sector on Carlisle's high street. These included representatives from Carlisle's City Centre Business Group (independent traders); Carlisle City Council; University of Cumbria; Carlisle College and other high street users (third sector, business groups and a heritage lottery funded project). Our key stakeholders were not experts within social media; they were experts in local retail and over the course of this KTP we have worked with them to identify and offer solutions to where they fit in a retail world that is now heavily influenced by social media and internet shopping.

Initially the project sought a technical solution based on ecommerce and web design. However conversations with a pilot group of businesses (with varying degrees of internet usage from fully functional websites and highly active social media use to no web presence at all) soon indicated that the main concern for these high street businesses was not an ecommerce solution but was a way of highlighting their unique offers to the consumers

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10 Gagnon, J.L. & Chu, J.J. 2005, "Retail in 2010: a world of extremes", *Strategy & Leadership*, vol. 33, no. 5, pp. 13-23.

11 Doherty, N.F. & Fiona Ellis-Chadwick 2010, "Internet retailing: the past, the present and the future", *Intl J of Retail & Distrib Mgt*, vol. 38, no. 11, pp. 943-965.

12 [http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/marketing\\_sales/how\\_digital\\_marketing\\_operations\\_can\\_transform\\_business](http://www.mckinsey.com/insights/marketing_sales/how_digital_marketing_operations_can_transform_business)

13 GVA Carlisle Retail Study (2012)

(from a bookshop with a collection of 10,000 volumes to locally roasted coffee). The increasing stream of consumer directed information meant that small businesses' traditional means of promoting their business were drowned in the internet and social media noise and this coupled with a falling number of high street visitors was leading to a downward spiral of consumers aware of the high streets unique offers. Conversations with the council also indicated that the city was aware of the need to compete with other regional and sub-regional shopping centres. To do this, the city had already embarked on creating a free Wi-Fi area in the city centre and was keen to promote the uniqueness of the independent sector as part of the overall offer.

So the project moved from seeking a solution for a technical problem and evolved into finding solutions to connect individuals and networks together, focusing on:

1. Working with the selected group of independent high street businesses and their network to identify current use and future aspiration for e-commerce within their community.
2. Developing and adapting user friendly e-commerce technology for the city's high street businesses to increase their web presence, footfall and their commercial sustainability.
3. Working alongside the city council to ensure the technology can be integrated with the city centre marketing strategy designed to bring more consumers to the high street and its immediate area.

It was decided to leave the creation of an electronic 'independent department store' offering independents full e-commerce functionality which sat alongside or behind their website depending on their e-commerce sophistication until a later date. The move away from ecommerce increased as the project developed. Over time it became clearer that these high street businesses wanted to create a reason for internet browsers to visit their stores and that an ecommerce solution probably would give the consumer one less reason to do so, we even had a case where an internet based retail business had had to open a bricks and mortar store to satisfy the requirements of their suppliers (who wanted a prestigious physical space for their products as well as the ecommerce shop).

The project therefore looked to increasing the independents' profile through a combination of storytelling (developing the soft skills of the businesses that would be hard to measure) and the effective use of internet communications of social media and web design (creating tangible outputs and hard measurements). Because of the wide mix of internet usage this project also supported the development of the businesses individually through skills training (delivered by Carlisle College) and through development of a collective website ('Your Carlisle' website developed via the University of Cumbria and linked to Carlisle City's 'discover Carlisle' website). The project would also eventually be accessible via Carlisle's free high street Wi-Fi service available from Carlisle City Council.

The collaboration between the various stakeholders has involved a learning process for the individual businesses as they either adopt or improve their social media usage and develop

their own brand story. It has also helped the college and university learn how they can collaborate further in developing support for high street businesses. The KTP has been used as case studies in three of the university's degree modules (covering both Business Studies and IT) helping to bring the issues facing high streets alive for our students. The retail KTP has also helped cement the relationship between the City Council and the Carlisle City Centre Business group.

The project has helped to identify the independents need to raise the profile of their unique selling points (product knowledge and customer care) and is working on solutions for this issue. This is reflected in the main outputs which are summarised in the table below:

| Projects initial aims  | Main outputs   |
|--|--|
| Work with the selected group of independent high street businesses and their network to identify current use and future aspiration for e-commerce within their community.            | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Retail KTP associate site visit and consultation of 35 independent businesses.</li> <li>2. Various stakeholder meetings over the course of the project.</li> </ol>   |
| Develop and adapt user friendly e-commerce technology for the city's high street businesses to increase their web presence, footfall and their commercial sustainability.            | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Website produced: <a href="http://www.yourcarlisle.co.uk">http://www.yourcarlisle.co.uk</a></li> <li>2. Project 'sense checked' by third year business degree students.</li> <li>3. Skills training in social media via the EDGE programme from Carlisle College resulting in increased use of social media by the participants.</li> <li>4. Development of video available at <a href="http://www.yourcarlisle.co.uk">http://www.yourcarlisle.co.uk</a></li> <li>5. Launch of website at Cumberland Show</li> <li>6. Promotional support for Carlisle State Management Story (Lottery funded project supporting local pubs with a historical link to a period when all Carlisle's licensed trade was state controlled)</li> <li>7. Ongoing monitoring of website</li> </ol> |
| Work with the council to ensure the technology can be integrated with the city centre marketing strategy designed to bring more consumers to the high street and its immediate area. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Working alongside <a href="http://www.discovercarlisle.co.uk">http://www.discovercarlisle.co.uk</a> and Carlisle City to promote their free Wi-Fi and developing a collaborative link between the two websites.</li> </ol>   |

## 2. Publications and other dissemination

The collaborative nature of this project has meant that it has been disseminated by its various stakeholders formally and informally, the nature of these outputs is captured in the table below:

| Projects initial aims  | Research reach  | Output Format/ dissemination  |
|--|---|---|
| Work with the selected group of independent high street businesses and their network to identify current use and future aspiration for e-commerce within their community.            | Background research supported by the University of Cumbria's Centre for Regional Economic Development   | Input into degree module  |
|  | Discussions with Carlisle City Centre Business Group (CCBG) on best options to increase the use of the e-commerce within the independent retailers of the city. | Conversations with market traders that resulted in them attending a social media course and increased their use of social media.  |
|  | Background research supported by the University of Cumbria's Centre for Regional Economic Development   | Article produced for the British Library.   |
|  | Discussions with Carlisle City Centre Business Group (CCBG) on best options to increase the use of the e-commerce within the independent retailers of the city. | Renewed interest in a Business Improvement District (BID) for the city.   |
| Develop and adapt user friendly e-commerce technology for the city's high street businesses to increase their web presence, footfall and their commercial sustainability.            | Project group included the CCBG, City Council, Carlisle College and UoC to ensure all stakeholders could offer support and opinion to move the project forward. | Collaboration with Carlisle College EDGE program to offer social media training to those high street retailers that required it.  |
|  | Working with academics and IT students to identify the best available software to support the aspirations of the CCBG   | Launched <a href="http://www.yourcarlisle.co.uk">http://www.yourcarlisle.co.uk</a> (which includes weekly news stories and 'personal introductions' from the Carlisle business owners) at the Cumberland show with a 10 minute video of personal interviews from various Carlisle high street businesses. |
|  |   | Case study used with IT students to develop the website and app, retail students to give feedback on the project and visual arts students to develop the videos for the website.  |
|  |   | Presentation of the work at a CRED public seminar in June 2015.   |
| Work with the council to ensure the technology can be integrated with the city centre marketing strategy designed to bring more consumers to the high street and its immediate area. |   | Work continues on an App and discussions are in place with the City to ensure this work collaborates with the council's website and with the free Wi-Fi now available in Carlisle City centre.  |

|                        |  |  |
|------------------------|--|--|
| Planned future outputs |  | Production of a tool guide for other high streets that will reflect the journey the project is on and will also identify potential solutions for other high streets looking to involve all their stakeholders in collaborative projects.<br>Conference paper at ISBE 2016 and subsequent journal article |
|------------------------|--|--|

### 3. Practical impact

We were delighted to be able to get this project funded by ESRC and aimed at finding solutions for the high street and uniquely we persuaded them to support a KTP that was based on a group of businesses rather than an individual business. This innovation brought together all the stakeholders involved in our high street and we were able to identify their current needs and aspirations of a broad range of high street users. By basing our work on research of current market trends in ecommerce and on the high street and discussing this with a working group of high street businesses we were able to create a conversation between all the stakeholders involved with the high street. The solutions this project has produced and will continue to influence are therefore more far reaching than the visible output of the website and app.

In cooperation with the business group, the city council and the college, we will be producing a tool guide for other high streets that will reflect the journey the project is on and will also identify potential solutions for other high streets looking to involve all their stakeholders in collaborative projects.

The tool guide will include

1. How to approach businesses to involve them in collaborative projects
2. How to involve local colleges or universities in the production of the website and the promotional video available at <http://www.yourcarlisle.co.uk/>
3. The perceived value of the project to the city council and why they committed to the project

We hope that this will allow other high streets to build on the work this project has started and look forward to collaborating with them.

### 4. Academic impact

We have already presented this paper at a public CRED seminar and used the case as live material for three of our degree modules.

To promote the project further than stakeholders involved in the high street we have submitted this article to the ESRC portal in the British Library and will be submitting a paper

to next year's Institute for Small business and Entrepreneurship (ISBE) conference and subsequently a journal paper. We would also be quite happy to present the results of this project to public forums such as those organised by the Public Policy Exchange or the Institute of Place management.

It is hoped that this project will fuel the debate as to whether the internet should be used as a directional marketing tool for the high street or that the high street should become the physical spanner between the ecommerce market and its consumers.

## **5. Next steps**

An app is in the final stages of development and we are looking to link this with the free Wi-Fi the council has made available in the city centre. The city is happy to help promote the proposed toolbox we are developing to councils of a similar size. The business group are using the success of this project coupled with another two projects to help promote the creation of a Business Improvement District for the city and we are actively working with social media in the city to ensure the conversation around independent retail remains visible for current and potential consumers.

As we stated in the introduction the speed of change in retail and in the use of the internet to influence retail decisions has not slowed down and this project would benefit from further work on how independent retailers can keep abreast of future developments in order to maintain their role as a keystone in the retail offer of our high street.