

Shopping with a conscience

With shopping now regarded as the number one leisure activity in UK, Ian Edwards wonders whether retail could be the next interpretation medium.

Few visitor attractions have resisted the apparent necessity to provide a 'shopping experience' in addition to whatever they serve as their main offer. Larger environmental organisations, and some museums, have gone even further and started distributing mail order catalogues.

This article is not about how to make your shop commercially viable, but about the opportunities that retailing offers to spread ecologically sound messages and demonstrate in a practical way an organisation's commitment to principles of social and environmental justice. I want to illustrate this mixture of message delivery with selling through two examples from England and Wales, though there are examples in Scotland.

I have to confess I hate shopping. The car parking, crowds and queues are guaranteed to put me in a bad mood. So even though I live in the city, close to hundreds of stores, I tend to make most of my purchases through mail order. Currently my catalogue of choice is Howie's of Cardigan Bay. Their range of clothes might be considered a bit trendy for a male pushing 50, but I like the fact that they use natural fibres like organic cotton and merino wool, and that they make things locally rather than in the sweatshops of the Far East. I also like the way they fill their catalogue with wacky stories, unrelated to their products but reflecting their underlying green credentials. They also stick messages inside clothes where only the wearer will see them ('Buy land - they don't make it any more' is a favourite.)

In their summer catalogue 56 pages are devoted to displaying or describing their products; 16 are what might be described as 'lifestyle' images – active young people canoeing, cycling or playing by the sea; and more than 20 are devoted to stories on social and environmental issues, including bison in Yellowstone, watching plants grow, and gentle attacks on pills, deodorants and obesity.

Cynics may see this as just a clever marketing ploy. Certainly Howie's appear to be running a successful business. However, from my dealings with them I feel their concern is genuine, and even though they are growing they still treat their customers as individuals. It is simply refreshing to find a company more concerned with quality and environmental impact than choice.

My 'green shop award', however, has to go to the Eden Project in Cornwall. Again there are cynics who mistrust the phenomenal scale and popularity of this theme park dedicated to plant life, but there is much about Eden that really impresses me. I would encourage Scottish interpreters looking for inspiration to put their scepticism to one side and take the long train ride down to St Austell to see what is happening at the other end of the Celtic fringe.

In Eden's large, modern retail area their uncompromising values come shining through in the goods on display. Their buying principles are spelled out in large letters as you enter the area, and include:

Produced locally, Fair trade, Organic, Recycled, Sustainable

Of course not all their products tick all the boxes, but these are the criteria (along with saleability!) that are being considered when the retail manager is considering what to stock.

Within the retail area I estimate that about 20% of the space is devoted to information about the plants rather than the products. This includes stories about the raw materials, harvesting and production, and about the communities that supplied the products. There are also images, objects (cotton bolls, rubber tyres, etc) and examples of the living plants (coffee, bananas, herbs) growing within the display area. Like Howie's they have succeeded in making much of this interpretation accessible and relevant, and at times amusing ('your most expensive designer suit is your skin').

Again, I have no doubt that the Eden shop is a commercial success. But what seems most impressive is that they have succeeded in getting their messages across with the merchandise. Eden is a very popular destination, and the social spectrum of their audience is broad. Many of their shoppers probably don't buy organic cotton, local honey, fair trade coffee or recycled glasses as a rule: at Eden they aren't presented with less-ethical, cheaper alternatives, and they seem happy to literally buy into Eden's ideals.

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Capital isn't that important in business. Experience isn't that important.
You can get both of these things. What is important is ideas.

Harvey S. Firestone