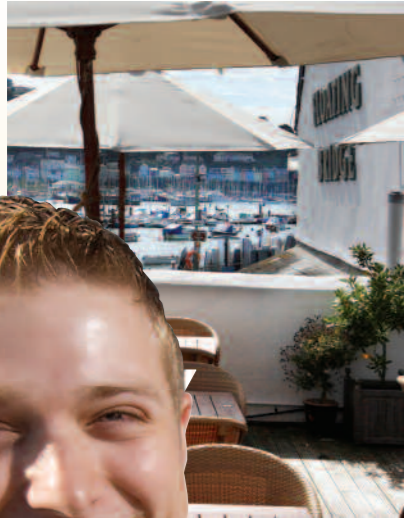


As the credit crunch bites, it's becoming even harder to keep customers coming back. We ask some top retailers how they stand out from the crowd.

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Floating Bridge, Dartmouth New entry 2009 Michelin Pub Guide

Part of the Dart Marina complex, the Floating Bridge has become one of only 10 pubs in Devon and Cornwall to win a coveted place in the Michelin's guide to eating out.

General manager Chris Jones believes the riverside pub is bucking the general decline in trade because the offering is right for its location and appeals to both locals and tourists.

"We're doing better than last year," he said. "It's just a nice local pub that does what it says on the tin. We're not offering 'gastro', but good, wholesome pub-food focusing on locality, freshness and value for money."

The key, says Chris, is offering a small, simple, regularly changing menu with specials based on what produce is available, which keeps diners interested.

"We maximise the potential of our blackboards – so we do a really good steak deal: two rump steaks and a bottle of wine for £24.95. And we do fresh fish and mussels – it's what people want. During the summer, the best-selling dish was cod and chips at £8.95. Having fish on the blackboard means you can change it daily with whatever you buy in and so you keep your purchasing low and have less wastage."

Local flavour

Drinks are also in keeping with the pub's local flavour. On the bar there are three regional cask-ales – from St Austell and Otter – and a range of Devon-made organic soft drinks from Heron Valley and Luscombe.

"If you give people a choice, I guarantee they will go for a local brand," added Chris.

Creating a community feel is crucial even in tourist areas. Manager Ann Firmstone and her assistant Teri Clark

WHAT PEOPLE WANT:
Floating Bridge chef Rob with some of the pub's popular fresh fish offering



BRIDGING THE GAP:
Retailers Ann Firmstone and Chris Jones have established good local and tourist trade

get involved with the regatta and rowing teams, as well as welcoming trade from the naval college.

"Out of season, Dartmouth can be a ghost town and if you haven't got it right you'll be lucky if you have two people sat at the bar," continued Chris. "We're not in the centre of town, so we really have to fight for our customers."

This is where exterior presentation plays a part. "When people drive down the road by the naval college or come across the river on the ferry, the first thing they'll see is the bright white pub looking clean with its flowers and it will hopefully stop them going on to the next one, because what they'll see is good enough," said Chris.

Chris's top tip for beating the credit crunch:

Simplify things, if you want to keep your offer a good standard. And be flexible with your food and drink. Take advice from the customer and put on what they really want rather than what the chef or landlady wants

Castle Inn, Caldicot, Monmouthshire

Morning Advertiser's Wales Pub of the Year and Wales Family Pub of the Year 2008

Retailer Judith Gribble, who runs the Castle Inn with her husband Stephen, puts the success of the pub down to it being "a good all-rounder" which caters for families, locals and tourists.

"The bad weather hit us during the summer but we have done quite well," said Judith. "We've got good staff and all of our food is homemade – we even make our own chips. In the four years we've been here we've spent more than £100,000 decorating the inside and outside and investing in things like our children's play areas and a heated awning for smokers."



Judith's top tip for beating the credit crunch:

Hook on to pulling power of tourist attractions, seasonal events or local beauty spots within the pub's catchment area, and adapt your offer to attract those people, whether locals or visitors

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Continued

Dunn Cow Inn, Old Elvet, Durham

Roger Protz's top 25 pubs

Cited by beer writer Roger Protz's as one of Britain's finest pubs – with “a range of beers as pleasant as its atmosphere” – the Dun Cow Inn is an unspoilt alehouse which sells more of local brew Castle Eden (90 gallons a week) than any other in the country.

Retailer Michael Leonard explains why. “Many cask ale pubs seem to be judged by the fact they have an array of eight or nine ales across the bar. I keep no more than three because the secret to keeping and selling cask ale is throughput. If it's in constant use then it's always at its premium best,” said Michael, who runs the pub with wife Audrey.

Cask ale accounts for 50% of business and Michael tends to stick to tried and tested Northern brands, including Jennings Cumberland Ale and Black Sheep Bitter.

Although a drinking pub, the Dun Cow runs a little sideline of bar snacks that help keep customers in for longer.

“What we do is something to accompany a pint – sandwiches and toasties made fresh to order, and homemade chilli and pasta, all in snack-size portions. So it's still a pub that people come out to for a drink.”

Michael's top tip for beating the credit crunch:

Keep it simple. Good beer, good food and reasonable prices

The Monkton, West Monkton, Somerset

Morning Advertiser's Tenanted/Leased Pub of the Year 2008

“Good food, locally sourced, priced sensibly” is how retailers Eddie Street and Guy Arnold describe their pub.

“Our secret to success is two-fold,” said Eddie. “Number one is doing simple things extremely well. Two is that we offer stunning value for money. We do a two-course lunch for £8.50 and a two-course dinner for £13.50, keeping our margins low but at the same time offering tremendous levels of service – we always have one too many staff on so people are well looked after. And the combination works.”

“Everyone around us is charging more for one course than we do for two. So instead of coming out every two to three months to see us, customers will come out every fortnight, because they can afford to.”

Eddie's top tip for beating the credit crunch:

Shop wisely, be imaginative and give the customer great value for money – and they'll keep coming back



A new free workshop designed to help pub-retailers reassess their businesses in their crucial first year of trading is being hailed as a success.

Winning In a Local Market Area, or WILMA for short, is focused on how a pub can successfully position its offer in relation to its location and consumer.

What sets WILMA apart from traditional training is that it's concerned much more with how its attendees apply the techniques learnt – well after the workshop has finished.

Four months after the initial session retailers return for a second day to look at how they are putting their ideas into practice profitably. Plus they can continue to develop via an online forum, where they can share insights with other retailers and benchmark their success.

Tutor Clinton Horne explained: “The course is practically focused on helping retailers make more money out of their pubs by becoming more entrepreneurial in their approach, and creating a competitive advantage by planning simple, easy to apply actions.”

Tom and Stella Cunliffe attended WILMA having recently taken over at the Lantern Pike Inn in High Peak, Cheshire.

“The tutor had a phrase about working on the business rather than just in it, which means you have to detach yourself from the day-to-day operational stuff – that way you can see what's going on. And it's very true,” said Tom.

“We're looking to employ a full-time barman to free up more time for planning. It's going to take a leap of faith on our part. We're going to have to spend £250-£300 a week on a barman so we can generate more interest in the place.”

Maximise business

The Cunliffes also plan to introduce online booking with the Peak District Tourist Board to maximise their bed and

The course is practically focused on helping retailers make more money out of their pubs by becoming more entrepreneurial in their approach



breakfast business, as well as various business drivers such as a hot beef roll and pint offer, monthly theme nights and a pork pie making competition linked to a charity.

“Another thing we talked about is that it's alright doing these things but you've got to get the message out,” said Tom. “And we intend to shout from the rooftops about our competitive advantage.”

Winning In a Local Market is aimed at retailers who have completed Enterprise's five-day induction programme. If you would like to attend a WILMA workshop, contact your regional manager.

For more information on training courses, call

OUTSIDE THE BOX: Tom and Stella Cunliffe are learning to work on their business as well as in it



location, location, location