



## Observations of Parallels in Customer Motivation and Behaviour between The Arts and Independent Retail

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## **From the arts to independent retail**

In 2010, after seventeen years in arts marketing, having worked my way up from publicity assistant on Edinburgh's Fringe to senior manager in a major arts centre, I thought that I had the skills and resilience to take on a new challenge. So, obviously, I opened a greengrocer shop in Broughty Ferry.

My good friend became my business partner and we invested our savings in creating Clementine of Broughty Ferry ([clementineofbroughtyferry.com](http://clementineofbroughtyferry.com)). All those years in arts marketing and management had equipped me with the tools to create a business plan, design the logo, make a website and run the accounts in this brave new world of independent, niche retail.

However, I soon realised that it wasn't all that much of a departure from my life in the arts. When it comes to customer attitudes and behaviours there are some striking similarities between the arts and independent retail.

My observations are based on my experience of working in my small shop. To put these in some sort of context, in Clementine we deal with an average of 250 transactions a day. That's 1500 a week (or 78,000 a year). Our customers come from the widest possible demographic. The youngest was a day old on her first visit and one of our oldest is ninety four. We have people who need to use food vouchers and others who live prosperous lives in mansions. Some are educated professionals and some have learning difficulties. There are marathon runners and there are people who live with chronic, debilitating ill health. And, of course, there are a heck of a lot of people who are somewhere in between all of these extremes.

## **Time travel and frequency**

There is a big gap between what people think they do and what they actually do.

It's a pretty cool lifestyle choice to avoid the big supermarkets and buy your groceries at local farmers' markets and shops. In the same way, we know that many people aspire to arts attendance and participation but don't manage to get along to our galleries and theatres as often as they'd like.

In the arts this means that when we ask people how often they attend our shows they'll say four times a year and, when we look at our databases we can see that they've come twice in two years.

I once had a conversation with a very unhappy customer at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh who had missed a performance because we'd moved the theatre without telling them. Despite their assertion that they were a regular and passionate attender, they hadn't noticed that the theatre had, in fact, changed location eight years before.



At Clementine we produce two new recipe kits for soup every week. Our Soup in a Bag is extremely popular (15,000 last year alone) and people swear that they adored last week's soup when they're actually talking about a recipe from 6 weeks ago. To test this proposition we introduced a loyalty card. Every Soup in a Bag purchaser is offered a stamp on their card for every bag bought and 8 months later there were people who 'always buy the soups' receiving a stamp on their card for the first time.

### **Feel the Fear**

When people don't know how to behave it worries them. What if they look stupid? This is a common attitude that I was especially keen to overcome when I worked in contemporary visual art, which some people find especially intimidating. I've noticed this in independent retail too. People often don't know if they're allowed to touch the produce in my shop. Should they take a brown paper bag for their tomatoes? Can they take those strawberries out of the window display? Sometimes they'll literally run out if I don't have a chance to ask them if they'd like some help. But it's lovely to see new customers relax and engage with us when we walk out from behind the counter and talk to them.

### **Patronage and support**

The motivations to attend the arts are very similar to the motivations to use independent retailers. The 'because it's good for you' reason is a major reason for people participating in culture and, more obviously, for eating fresh fruit and vegetables. But fresh produce is easily available in the supermarket, so some people choose to shop with us because it's also good for the local economy. Some people like to be obvious about it extolling the benefits of shopping local to whoever will listen while others are happier showing their support by consistent and regular patronage.

It will always be easier to stay home and watch TV than it is to get out and go to the theatre. And it would be easier for my customers to get all their food from the supermarket so we have to keep rewarding them with free tasters on the counter, exclusive access to special products, our loyalty cards, opening a bit early just for them or by remembering their names. All the common sense rewards we also offer our customers in the arts.

### **High expectations**

This is linked to patronage. If we're going to keep our customers coming back we have to be better than what's available the easily accessible mainstream.

First and foremost is the quality of the offer. Many people have the perception that the arts and independent retailers are expensive. It's up to us to encourage custom by adding value where we can, whether we're putting ingredients in a bag to create a complete recipe. Or by running a workshop alongside our show.

In Clementine we can compete on price because our customers don't need to buy vegetables in bulky multi packs and in the arts we can compete by offering free events and clever, customer focussed pricing models. Most importantly we need to be confident in the quality and downright specialness of what we can offer. Chanterelles are rare, difficult to find and wonderful so they are more expensive than a button mushroom. The artists we work with are no less wonderful and the experiences we are offering are often priceless.

### **Proximity to the creatives**

There are lots of people who don't want an anonymous, generic life. One of the major attractions of independent retail is that you get to meet the people behind the products you love. Farmers markets are especially good for this kind of experience. Who doesn't like to meet the person who baked our loaf of bread or the craftsperson who knitted the alpaca mittens? In Clementine we're constantly being complemented on our recipes and hosting impromptu, heated discussions about food.

It's obvious that our customers relish the opportunity to engage with passionate, knowledgeable and creative people. It's a two way process – we get to hear what they've got to say too. In the arts we know that some of our customers are desperate to attend workshops with artists and meet the cast events but, even more importantly, all our customers want to deal with knowledgeable, passionate and friendly front line staff.

### **Everybody loves a swan**

People are attracted to the unique and special products and experiences we offer in the arts and in independent retail. They do it because it makes them feel special. Just because we're working on a fairly intimate level with them, sharing this experience, it doesn't mean we're not professionals.

When we're tired, stressed or simply not in the mood we must remember that it's not the customer's problem. They've gone out of their way to choose what we have to offer, often overcoming financial, social or physical barriers so they should be rewarded with service that appears effortless.

We've got to remember that whether it's independent retail or an active interest in culture, our patrons' actions define them as people and affects how they see themselves. We're tremendously fortunate to be trusted with their aspirations.

Another thing the arts and independent retail sectors share is a distinct lack of substantial financial reward for the people who work so hard to make them happen. So, surely, understanding our customers and sharing the love of what we do must be one of our own key motivators?

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