



# Making hay while the sun shines

Want innovation? Creativity? Smart business? Take a drive in the country, reports business expert **Linda Hailey**

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU CAME ACROSS ONE OF THOSE SHOPS THAT JUST MAKES YOU go WOW!!? You know the type: innovative concepts, fabulous products, imaginative fitout, amazing displays, and owners and staff who are passionate about customer service. I come across them all the time and guess what... they aren't in Sydney or Melbourne malls or suburban strips; they are in small towns hundreds of kilometres from the big smoke.

There is a quiet revolution taking place in regional retail. Small business owners in gift and gourmet retail are showing the city slickers how it's done. In towns that used to be a browsing desert, there is a new breed of business owner that is delighting locals and becoming a tourist attraction in their own right. This is even more amazing when you consider that many of these communities have been facing adversity from drought and closure of major industries, and often lack access to modern communications that city businesses take for granted.

So what makes these regional retailers special? What are the secrets of their success?

## KNOWING YOUR COMMUNITY INSIDE OUT

With the influx of sea changers, tree changers, downshifters, empty nesters and lifestyle retirees the face of most country towns is changing fast. It's easy to get trapped inside your business and assume that your traditional customers are still the ones to target, but smart operators are always looking for opportunities to reach new markets. You'll find these switched on operators at local Chamber meetings, volunteering on school committees

and hanging out at the Visitor Information Centre to get a handle on who are their new markets. They're clever, because even though they cater for the wider community, they really understand that not all customers are equal and there will be high value target markets they can woo with special products and services.

## SEEKING OUT AND FILLING GAPS IN THE PRODUCT MIX

A regional main street has a mix of businesses just like a mall and clever business owners can use their local knowledge to respond to customer demand and fill a gap in the market. This can be as simple as adding a new product line or developing a whole new concept. Adding kitchenware to a traditional gift shop can be a great move if no one else is selling it in town. I've also noticed a growing trend for switched on cafes to add gourmet and gift lines to their range.



“PEOPLE ARE ROLLING INTO REGIONAL TOWNS AND THEN HITTING THE STREETS LOOKING FOR GOOD COFFEE, GREAT FOOD AND INTERESTING THINGS TO BUY”

## ● BENT ON LIFE

A great example of seeking and filling gaps in the market is the award winning store, Bent on Food, in the small NSW town of Wingham. Owner Donna Carrier is passionate about her café and has slowly added kitchenwares and gourmet products to her product mix but had got to a stage where she felt she was moving away from her original vision. So after some research she now has a brand new vision of homewares and gifts with style, and recently opened a new store called Bent on Life.

## ADOPTING MULTIPLE DISTRIBUTION OUTLETS

It's amazing how many successful regional businesses have more than one 'shop front'. When you have a finite market because of your geographic location it makes sense to find other ways of distributing your product; the most obvious way is an online presence.

I conducted an e-marketing workshop for creative businesses in the Lismore area last year and was impressed with a couple of jewellery designers who had joined forces to market their product both regionally and nationally. They had done a road trip four hours in each direction from Lismore and selected one retail outlet in each town, ranging from gift shops to galleries and visitor information centres, approaching them directly to offer exclusive supply for their town. They then set up a website to sell a 'capsule' range of products that were not available through retailers and used this site to promote the retail locations and recruit new retailers outside their local area.

Lastly they decided to set up a separate eBay shop for a couple of their mid-range collections; clever strategies that really helped boost their bottom line.

## DOUBLING THE OFFER

I also love what I call the "two-in-one" concepts that you often come across in country towns. A few weeks ago in Bega NSW, I saw a car wash that also doubled as a dog wash (complete with a walk in dog bath!). In Muswellbrook NSW, a clever retailer has combined a florist and lingerie store. Other more common concepts include café and books, café and cookware, gifts and toys or key cutting, trophies and gifts for men.

## UNDERSTANDING THAT YOU MAY BE IN THE TOURISM BUSINESS (INDEED, WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT!)

City slickers are heading to the country in droves. Whether it be grey nomads on their pilgrimage around Australia, parents showing kids what country life is all about or people on their way to see Aunty May who has gone bush... People are rolling into regional towns and then hitting the streets looking for good coffee, great food and interesting things to buy. Interestingly, these potential customers are often ignored, or worse, treated with disdain by business owners who mutter about tourists taking all the good parking spaces. Clever business owners know that tourists can be great for business and often stock products specifically for these markets. If tourists visit your town you could be missing opportunities for retail. The traditional grey nomads were on a fixed income and very cautious about spending so some retailers have assumed that anyone with grey hair is a tightwad!! In fact the new breed of grey nomad (also known as wanderers) tend to be self-funded retirees or baby boomers testing their retirement and they are happy to spend. In fact a lot of them have 'grandparent guilt' and are constantly on the lookout for gifts to send the grandkids. If you are missing the tourist market talk to your local tourism organisation or accommodation providers to get the low down on the tourist dollar.



## ● LITTLE HOUSE ON ROSE

I came across a great example of a two-in-one shop in Wee Waa NSW a couple of weeks ago. In the middle of the main street is a beautiful garden and in a little cottage at the end of a path is a shop called "The Little House on Rose". The owner Shawn Wales has put together an amazing and eclectic range of beautiful furniture, gifts, jewelry and kitchenware that tumbles out onto the picturesque verandah. Out the back, the semi-advanced plants, roses, garden features and outdoor furniture has locals travelling kilometres to shop there. Shawn has no retail experience (except a stint working as a kitchenhand in a friend's café) but always wanted a nursery, so the cottage has provided an opportunity to develop a two-in-one concept that has been a great success.

### CREATING THE 'WOW FACTOR' WITH INTERESTING PREMISES

In regional areas you often get heaps of space for your money. The advantages can be plenty of retail space and a charming environment for creative displays but the

downsides can be run down back-of-house areas

and more commonly, too much space that you can't afford to stock. There is nothing worse than stock scattered so thinly it looks like there is nothing to buy, so putting in a removable wall can be an easy way of reducing the amount of retail space. I have seen businesses in old cheese factories, cinemas, barns and even churches.

### THREE THOUGHT STARTERS FOR REGIONAL BUSINESSES

#### 1. Get out and about

We all know that retailing can be a tough gig. When you think about it, our job is to suck people off the pavement into our store and then keep them there long enough to buy something. And if that's not enough, we then need to make them love us enough to come back again and again. The secret to your success can lie just down the road especially in regional areas. At least once a month go for a walk and really look at what's going on. How many people are at the Visitor Information Centre? Who's got new stock? Then ask what you need to do to maintain your business vision or give you the competitive edge.

#### 2. Remember, it only takes one great business

It's easy to fall into the pit of retail doom and gloom but despite drought and tough times sometimes all it takes is one good business to change the fortunes of every business in town. Business owners in the Victorian town of Tatura jokingly refer to their "vanilla slice-led recovery"... In 2007 their local bakery Tatura Hot Bread won the National Vanilla Slice award and shortly they found a constant stream of travellers were detouring to Tatura to check out these amazing vanilla slices. The business owners were quick to capitalise on their new-found fame and soon started to trade seven days to meet the needs of visitors.

#### 3. Know who's who in town

It's easy to miss opportunities to target new residents if you don't know they exist. It's a good idea to constantly research your market. You can check out the latest ABS statistics or talk to your local economic development officer but to back up your gut feeling, I recommend you find a friend in the know! Real estate and stock and station businesses are always the first to spot changes in population, followed by the Post Office, pharmacy and newsagent. So get gossiping and start talking to other businesses to find out whom you might be missing. 9

*Linda Hailey is a small business consultant, keynote speaker and author who passionately believes it's time to take the mystery and megabucks out of marketing and promotions.*  
[www.lindahailey.com.au](http://www.lindahailey.com.au)

### LINDA'S TOP FIVE TIPS

#### 1. Be true to your original product concept

Never ever copy your competitor's stock and when times are tough don't be tempted to panic buy stock that just doesn't fit the mix. You will confuse customers and lose money in the long term.

#### 2. Sign up for success

Put on your customer hat and visit your own premises. What do your signs say about your business? Do you have signage? Are the signs consistent, faded, out of date, dirty—or fabulous? Check what you can see from across the road and on pavement approaches from both ways. If you can't be seen it's a bad sign.

#### 3. Rotate your stock again and again

Yep, it's chore but otherwise locals assume there's nothing new to see. So every week get rotating... Your reward will be the dollars in the till when that customer discovers that old piece you've been trying to sell for ages.

#### 4. Make your smile reach your eyes

In this day and age customers expect genuine customer service; even more so in regional areas, so ditch the rehearsed scripts and stop focusing just on the locals. You never know when your next long term customer will walk through your door for the first time, so smile!

#### 5. Start a referral chain

Share the love with other businesses that target the same market as you. Recommend other great retailers and they will do the same for you. The whole town benefits because people stay longer, spend more and come back again and again.