



Evaluation and planning guide for Co-operative and Social Enterprises Trade Fair

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INTRODUCTION

Co-operative and Social enterprises (CSEs) face many hindrances in the current market place such as: a lack of public awareness, lack of engagement by council procurement officers, poor networking opportunities and a lack of resource to undertake publicity work to begin to address these needs.

The staging of a 'trade fair' for CSEs not only offers a forum by which to begin to address these needs, but also offers opportunities for new, unpredicted synergies and for other outcomes to be realised.

In May 2003 Cambridge Co-operative Development Agency (Cambridge CDA), with support from Cambridge City Council and the Co-operative Group – central & eastern region, staged a co-operative and social enterprise 'trade fair' as part of the region EQUAL funded 'SSEER' programme. A key part of this was to be an evaluation of the event from the perspective of participating social enterprises. This evaluation and planning document, it is hoped, will be of value to other organisations staging future trade fairs.

Benefits of a 'Trade Fair' for Social Enterprises

There are many benefits to CSEs which participate in a trade fair, all of which are also cited as priorities for this sector by the government in the recent DTI report: 'Social Enterprise: a strategy for success' including:

- ❖ Raising the profile of the sector
- ❖ Introducing council procurement officers to CSEs
- ❖ Networking between enterprises to disseminate best practice
- ❖ 'Mainstreaming' opportunities with other business support agencies
- ❖ Publicity for individual enterprises, which they ordinarily cannot afford
- ❖ Forum for social entrepreneurs and existing social enterprises to meet

Barriers to overcome in staging a 'Trade Fair'

However, despite these benefits, Cambridge CDA experienced significant barriers in the planning and staging of its trade fair:

- ❖ Lack of engagement by CSEs
- ❖ Lack of engagement by procurement officers
- ❖ Lack of engagement by support agencies

These are based on:

Lack of engagement by CSEs: the total cost for an CSE to participate in the event was calculated at £249 per enterprise although this doesn't account for loss of earnings due to key management staff being away from work, travel costs nor the cost of hiring a pitch (Cambridge CDA didn't charge fees). The calculations were only based on; the hourly rates given by those both attending and preparing displays for the Trade Fair and car parking charges. These costs were identified as a problem not only by most of those unable to attend but also by some of those who were.

Lack of engagement by procurement officers: a significant lack of interest was shown by local procurement officers despite targeted invitations and national government policy to encouraging the public sector to develop partnerships with local CSEs. There may be issues around timing, conflicting information from central government versus local government priorities and agendas and a lack of perceived political incentive for councils to engage with CSEs particularly in developing public service partnerships.

Lack of engagement by mainstream support agencies: the only other support agency present at the event (Business Links) was only for there for a short time. Other agencies gave reasons for non-participation as a lack of time to attend; and a lack of interest in engaging with CSEs which rarely have sufficient surpluses to pay commercial business consultancy and support rates.

Solutions to barriers

There are, of course, many solutions to these barriers some of which Cambridge CDA intends to pilot at the next trade fair:

- ❖ Greater inclusion of council procurement in developing the Trade Fair
- ❖ Lobbying campaign aimed at procurement officers / support agencies
- ❖ Discretionary subsidies for participating enterprises
- ❖ Planning of event to attract maximum number of people – i.e. local dignitaries visit, launch of new incentive, etc
- ❖ Lengthen the event over period of more than 1 day to give greater opportunity for target groups to attend who might not have been able to owing to other commitments on the day. However, this may prove to be unfeasible for CSEs, many of whom struggled to take even just 1 day out of the running of the business to be present at the trade fair
- ❖ Include areas for charities and mainstream organisations that are in some way sympathetic to the social objectives of social enterprises
- ❖ Run the event within a local fair or festival
- ❖ Much bigger poster campaign, such as using big bill-boards. This would also probably attract huge additional costs for little reward.
- ❖ Provide refreshments (could a local SE do the catering?)

Event organisation

Through the planning and delivery of its trade fair, Cambridge CDA found that the key factor in ensuring its success is that of securing a suitable venue.

A venue is needed that will attract all target groups, especially '*joe public*' as it is the level of attendance of this group which participating enterprises most readily judge the success of the event on.

Shopping Centres are therefore favoured as suitable venues as they have a high volume of passing 'foot fall', are easy to find by all targeted groups and are usually close to parking facilities. They also often won't charge for the display area used if they perceive the event being aimed at supporting 'businesses with charitable objectives'.

However, a shopping centre will impose significant constraints to the freedom of the trade fair, which may not be able to operate as it fully desires:

- 1) The Centre will have its own requirements: namely that the event look 'professional' (i.e. no old trestle tables and dog-earned display boards) – this has consequences for how able some enterprises may be able to attend: as CSEs don't usually have large publicity or marketing budgets, they may be unable to attend due to lack of suitable display and promotional materials.
- 2) Shopping Centres exist primarily to offer trading opportunity for their tenants, and there is usually only a small area available for displays and events within them, again restricting the total number of CSEs able to participate.
- 3) Centres will have a policy that no enterprises exhibiting should be seen to be in competition with any stores already trading within the centre – this may lead to CSEs being excluded, no matter how successful or appropriate they may be for the event.
- 4) Centres may also be hesitant to have large volumes of posters on display (especially if large enough to be 'visible') – this can lead to people not being able to find the trade fair especially if held in a small or little used area in a large shopping centre.

Further, if event is 'static' (i.e. once CSEs displays are up, very little else happens), there is little incentive for people to attend unless they already have a keen interest in local CSEs. Therefore, trade fairs need to incorporate activities into the day: for example a local dignitary visit, launch of new incentive, competitions, etc – actions that will attract the interest of passing foot-fall as well as draw in others to the venue who would otherwise not visit.

Step-by-step guide

- 1) Identify suitable venue: ideally a shopping centre with a clear, large dedicated display area and with very few businesses who trade in similar goods / service to local CSEs
- 2) Mail out to all known CSEs, business support agencies and council procurement officers to invite them to event with an offer to the CSEs of subsidy for travel costs and time away from business. Follow-up these up with phone calls.
- 3) Offer support to CSEs in developing their displays. People will easily walk past displays, unless there is something to draw their attention. Free samples, interactive displays and such like as part of the CSEs displays are very beneficial in attracting attention.
- 4) Incorporate set times for special activities that will draw attention to the fair and encourage people to attend: e.g. visit by local dignitaries, presentations, competition results, new products/services, enterprise launches, etc
- 5) Plan publicity. Poster campaigns and press releases both before and after the event were successfully used by Cambridge CDA.
- 6) Monitoring and evaluation. CSEs are notorious for not filling in monitoring paperwork therefore any forms need to be designed to be easily and quickly 'completable', not to look overly bureaucratic. This feedback can then used to evaluate the success of the event and to plan the next Trade Fair.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the appendices, all CSEs participating in the trade fair staged by Cambridge CDA in 2003 felt the event to be successful.

There are, however, key issues to be aware of when planning a trade fair. The most crucial of which being that of the venue and balancing the benefits of a high visibility location against the constraints it will place on the planning of the event and the ability of all CSEs keen to participate to do so.

It is hoped that Cambridge CDA will stage another trade fair in 2004 and be able to pilot some of the solutions to the barriers encountered. A second report will then be published to evaluate the effectiveness of those methods and tools.

APPENDIX: Feedback from participating CSEs

Reasons, given by CSEs, to attend trade fair

Publicity –	100%
Meet procurement officers –	20%
Meet other support agencies –	90%
Meet with other CSEs –	90%

Other reasons (10% or less) – attract funding, generate sales, support local CSE sector.

Outcomes reported by CSEs

Publicity –	70%
Meeting with procurement officers –	20%
Meeting other support agencies –	60%
Meeting with other CSEs to develop networks –	100%

Outcomes reported by the other participating business support agency (*Business Links*)

“A significant number of CSEs have since been visited as part of developing support services for them. Some very exciting developments.”

Feedback from CSEs to improve event

Greater ‘interactivity’ of displays
Greater number of enterprises present (CCDA’s Trade Fair in 2003 was oversubscribed by 40%, but was physically constrained by its venue)
Funding to subsidise staff time to attend Trade Fair to better man displays

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