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ISSN 1754-8241



9 771754 824013

the perfect blend



Across the country Christians are seeing the potential in reaching their community through a coffee shop. But how, asks Jess Bee, do you set one up that's just right for your locality?

Paul Sheriffs describes his job as a 'calling'. The manager of The Coffee House at Presence, Watford, Sheriffs explains his vision: 'I want to pastor my peers and the best place to do that is on their territory. This is about getting to know people and developing a position where you earn the right to speak into peoples' lives.' For Sheriffs, his role is akin to that of an old-fashioned landlord: each day he provides a listening ear as his customers pour out their hearts.

The Coffee House at Presence is located at the heart of Watford's busy shopping district and has been running for a year and a half. Its aim is to provide good quality coffee and food in a space where people feel valued and cared for by friendly, genuine staff. And the feedback, Sheriffs says, is that this is consistently what Presence customers experience. It's a place people return to time and time again because they feel valued and known.

This is certainly no faceless chain coffee shop, but The Coffee House at Presence is open seven days a week, competing with the Starbucks and Caffè Neros of the High Street. Its leather sofas, high quality coffee and free wireless internet connection offer a great space to relax. Staff are salaried and it runs as a profit-making business. Yet its difference lies in the dedication of the staff, who seek to connect with their customers, sharing their lives in a low-key, non-intrusive way.

This is one model for the faith-based coffee shop, but do your research and the approaches are endless. I attended the Baptist Union's Coffee Shop Facilitation Day, led by Terry Jones - who has been involved in community coffee shops for over 15 years - to find out the essentials to consider before setting out on a coffee shop initiative.

Vision

It's important to establish and document the vision for your coffee shop. Everyone involved – trustees, staff and volunteers – should know the aim of the project and feel a sense of ownership.



- 1 What is the primary purpose of your coffee shop? Will it be a gathering place for the local community, a safe place for deeper conversations or competition for the High Street chains?
- 2 Who are your target customers? Try writing a profile of your classic customer, then assess what their particular needs might be.
- 3 Do you want to implement anything extra to the primary purpose? You might consider prayer services, computer classes or creating an arts café or youth drop-in.
- 4 Five years down the line, what do you want your coffee shop to be known for locally? Think and pray about the distinctives of your establishment.



Finance

Most community coffee shops will not run solely as a business. Often churches provide financial backing, or funding is sought from trusts. Whether you run as a charity or business, some serious financial research will be necessary. Get help making a business plan and consider the following:



- 1 Funding – grants are available for community initiatives with social objectives. If your project runs as a social enterprise – i.e. all profits go back into the project, you may be eligible for new government funding. See www.faithworks.info/fundingsources for more information.
- 2 Budgets – both set-up and ongoing costs must be calculated. How much will you spend on kitchen equipment, décor and furniture, heating, lighting and food?
- 3 The cost of legal advice, staff pay and training, insurance, advertising and premises.
- 4 Tax and trading – this depends on income generated and the scale of the project. For a free download on charities and trading visit: <http://www.charity-commission.gov.uk/publications/cc35.asp>
- 5 Employing an accountant and keeping on top of account records.

Food

With so many extras to consider, it's easy to forget that at the bottom line good quality food and drink will draw people into the coffee shop. And if it's good value for money, passers-by are likely to become regular customers.



- 1 Create menus to suit your target audience; assess whether your first menu works with a simple customer feedback questionnaire.
- 2 Food and hygiene standards must be upheld. To obtain a free copy of the food standards agencies' guide *Safer food, better business* for caterers and small retail businesses call 0845 606 0667 or email foodstandards@ecgroup.uk.com.
- 3 Coffee should be of a good standard and fairly traded – Indigo Valley specialise in supplying churches and community coffee shops with ethically sourced tea, coffee, sugar and coffee-making equipment – visit www.indigovalley.co.uk

Tip: To get inspired about the positive impact you can make through buying fairly traded coffee watch Black Gold – a powerful documentary uncovering the realities of the coffee industry. Released on DVD in September 2007 – www.blackgoldmovie.com

The Terminus Initiative Sheffield



The Terminus Initiative community café is located on the Lowedges estate in Sheffield and is run by a partnership of four diverse local churches. The café, based in a shop premises, came out of the need for a space in the community where people could feel safe and connect with others.

From the beginning the initiative has been much more than just a café – it also includes a youth drop-in, credit union and a second-hand goods exchange. It works in partnership with non-church social groups and seeks to partner with the community so that they have ownership of the project.

The café, which is volunteer-run, opens three days a week and serves food to a range of people – the elderly, young parents and their children, the unemployed and others from the estate, many with mental, drug and alcohol problems.

Joy Adams, co-ordinator, says the vision is to show 'unconditional love' to everyone involved. 'We do not expect anything of them; we would love them to come to know Jesus but it is not the initial drive,' she says. Staff are often asked to pray for people – sometimes for issues that they feel unable to cope with, so they refer people to professional services. Adams feels privileged to be part of this project. 'People are open and let you into their lives,' she says. 'These people have a spirituality which has broadened my view of God.'





Location and venue



Presenting an inviting, accessible space is essential for getting customers through your doors. Planning the location of your coffee shop and the style of your interior should be done in synthesis, as you consider what your target customers will want.

- 1 Will your project be located inside or attached to your church building? Or will you choose a local shop or a space within a community centre?
- 2 If you plan to buy and want to refurbish or do extension work remember planning and other permissions may need to be sought. Allow adequate time.
- 3 Your premises will need to comply with building regulations and health and safety standards – see www.businesslink.gov.uk for more information.
- 4 How welcoming is the exterior of your venue? Do high walls, an unattractive façade or the fact that it is a church building reduce the 'come inside' appeal?
- 5 Creating the right interior atmosphere is key. You might not have a budget for expensive furnishings but think carefully about music, lighting and even how your venue smells. Have you considered extras such as wireless internet connection, computer game consoles or interesting artwork?

Sharing your faith



Our faith motivates us to serve our communities, in this case through a coffee shop. As a result, people might ask you about what you believe, so it's important to think about how you and your team might respond.

- 1 Perhaps your approach will simply be to have friendly, approachable staff who help facilitate openness and space to discuss spiritual issues.
- 2 You might want to establish entry points such as counselling services, literacy classes or book groups that create opportunities to share.
- 3 You may wish to be more obvious about Christianity by having suitable books and magazines available. *The Espresso Bible: The Bible in sips* is a slim paperback offering some of the most readable Bible passages in a format perfect for your customers [Lion Hudson / £4.99 / ISBN: 978-0-7459-5288-8].

Tip: Put a book table in an inconspicuous location – perhaps even by the entrance to the toilets. Customers are more likely to pick up some Christian literature for the first time if they don't feel observed.

Open House Café Brentford



St Paul's Church in Brentford opened a café for the local community on its premises around 20 years ago. Open House has a motto of 'Food for the body, food for the soul' and opens for lunch on weekdays. It is staffed by a mixture of volunteers and paid staff including a prayer and pastoral co-ordinator. A 'listening service' from a trained team of volunteers is available daily.

St Paul's is positioned away from the high street, which results in few visits from passing shoppers. Instead there is a core community of customers who regularly visit the café – a mixture of the elderly, young parents and people from local businesses.

One of the aims of Open House is to facilitate volunteering in the local community. The café provides on the job training and an encouraging space for

people to grow and be valued. Denise Collier, project manager, describes the impact that serving here can have on volunteers themselves. 'One woman arrived in a mess – physically and mentally,' she says. 'Within a month of being here she was feeling more positive about life.'





Goal-setting



It's important to have targets so that success levels can be measured.

Concrete evidence outlining achievements is helpful for ongoing morale but also for future funding applications.

- 1 Be scrupulous about recording profit and loss, customer numbers and how many are using extra services you offer.
- 2 As well as financial aims, consider your spiritual and personal goals. How is your café impacting your community?
- 3 Review your project regularly and be prepared to make changes as necessary.

People



From staff and volunteers to supporters and trustees, it's important to get the right people on board to help your coffee shop run smoothly. Will your church run the project or will it be a collaboration of several churches and organisations?

- 1 Will the staff be voluntary or paid? Many opt for a combination, with a paid full-time manager and chef, and volunteers serve in the café. You are also likely to need a volunteer co-ordinator and perhaps someone to manage a prayer and counselling team.
- 2 How will you recruit and train staff? They'll need to be able to serve proficiently but also will need to share your values.
- 3 If you plan on employing only Christians, bear in mind that employment law may require you to demonstrate that this is a genuine occupational requirement.
- 4 Remember trustees – look for a mix of people with different skills, experience and backgrounds. These people can provide essential behind the scenes prayer and support.



- 1 For more on coffee shop facilitation training days visit www.baptist.org.uk, email calder@baptist.org.uk or call 01235 517713.
- 2 For our coffee shop resource page and contact details for the initiatives mentioned in this article, visit www.faithworksmagazine.info

Jess Bee is a freelance writer and editor of Artisan magazine.

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