

# THE PANTRY, SOUTH BRENT

## Side-stepping the competition

By Beth Whittaker



South Brent is a large village on the southern edge of the Dartmoor National Park; it's a thriving community with a number of shops, a café and takeaway and is close to Shipley Bridge, the start point for the route up to Avon Dam, a local tourist attraction. Marmalade-making classes are just one of the ways in which Stephen and Carol Fogg help raise the profile of their shop in the Devon village of South Brent on the edge of Dartmoor. Three years ago, the couple took over The Pantry, their first joint business venture. What attracted them was the very real sense of community in the village, illustrated by the existence of a lively 'Sustainable South Brent' group. Although Stephen had previously owned a coffee shop in Plymouth, wife

Carol is a solicitor – and they soon found that working together 24/7 was not the only challenge to running a successful village shop! As South Brent has a successful Co-op supermarket, a Londis, a bakery and two tea rooms as well as a huge Tesco store just five miles away, it was essential for the couple to quickly suss out the competition, spotting the gaps in order to offer their customers what the other retailers weren't.

"We quite quickly weeded out the stock which other local shops had on their shelves; we wanted to offer something very different, and, in particular, source as much as we could from very local suppliers and producers," says Stephen. It is that combination of astute business sense and the Foggs' own determination that has helped the small business thrive – despite being what Stephen describes as 'beautifully chaotic'. "This is a very supportive community; we have very loyal local customers because they know we have things they can't get at the other stores. But we're also a bit quirky; there's a great atmosphere in the shop, it's a bit chaotic – but beautifully so! The business flies by the seat of its pants and we work gruelling hours, but we love it," he adds. "Sometimes we're packed with people who seem to just be chatting and catching up with the latest news; but actually, that's all part of what makes The Pantry different. People love coming in here – and that's really important. "We're passionate about stocking locally-produced goods and we're keen to support local entrepreneurs: two local ladies went through the expense of getting their home kitchens registered in order to supply us with cakes. Others have done the same in order to make pies and quiches for us – because they've made that investment, they are showing their commitment to us as suppliers. Some have gained so much in confidence that they have gone on to supply shops in other towns and villages. "Our suppliers will often ask us if we would help them test market new products which we are happy to do. We're very much in partnership with our producers – it's a symbiosis, and you have to learn to work with and trust each other," says Stephen.

It certainly helps that South Brent is a very lively, involving village. "It's common in rural communities for people to talk about wanting a shop, but then they don't actually use it. So it is very much a partnership in terms of a shop owner making sure they offer a range of products which are really appealing, coupled with the customers making a conscious decision to buy. South Brent really works." With local produce at the heart of the Foggs' ethos, sourcing the right suppliers was vital. "Initially we went to regional trade fairs to source producers, but we were really looking for 'local local' and we soon realised that means word of mouth, and keeping an eye and an ear out," says Stephen. "We even stock vegetables from the village allotments in season – but that can cause its own problems if there is a glut! "With regard to pricing, obviously there is a formula, and a margin – but it's also about a gut feeling about what the product will sell for. It's a bit of a nightmare sometimes getting it right, but we're usually pretty confident – and you can soon tell. It is a matter of making sure you have the right products though to start with."

The small shop is has a big range, with organic fruit and seasonal vegetables, local fish, meats and cheeses, organic salads, homemade pies, quiches and cakes, along with olives, patés, organic pulses and other wholefoods. The Pantry even stocks local Dartmoor water.

Stephen and Carol also organise marmalade and soup-making classes to encourage people to cook more for themselves, and raise money for the local school's garden project at the same time.

Putting the customers' needs first is also key. "You have to listen and be flexible to meet customers' needs," adds Stephen. "Where we can score against our competitors is, for example, by selling eggs individually, or a single banana, or a couple of potatoes. A lot of our elderly customers, and young singles, only want one or two eggs; they don't need a half dozen."

The couple continuously monitor their competitors in the small town. Stephen recalls: "When we found one of our suppliers was selling to the Co-Op cheaper than to us, we were able to negotiate back to a level playing field thanks to the rapport we have with our suppliers. But you really have to keep an eye on your lines; guard any new ones, regularly check what the competition is up to."

The shop stocks freshly baked bread daily, offers a weekly delivery service and even provides outside catering.

In summer, The Pantry, which is run by Stephen and Carol with two part-time staff, is open seven days a week, which drops to six in the winter.

Like most successful rural retailers, the Foggs understand the importance of community involvement. They are very supportive of 'Sustainable South Brent', a group looking at ways in which the village can attract more custom from tourists to support its local traders.

"We're looking at ways to promote the whole village, to try to tap into the tourist trade around Dartmoor," says Stephen. "We've already got good ties with local rental cottage owners and supply hampers, and we could easily develop a picnic basket service for day visitors!"

With a successful business and spare capacity within the shop, the Foggs have been tempted to expand, but are a bit wary. "Bigger is not always better," says Stephen. "We feel we're just about at optimum at the moment. We love the shop and our customers, and neither of us can imagine doing anything else!"

### **The RSA View**

Large villages like South Brent pose a particular set of challenges. Often they have more shops than current trade can readily sustain; they are large enough to have several shops but still serving only a fairly limited population. In the case of South Brent, the competition includes a good Co-op convenience store. Stephen and Carol have addressed this problem by going full out for their part of the overall market, complementing the other stores. This was a high-risk strategy – there was no fallback position if it did not work – but it does show how even in a relatively small market a good fresh food offer delivered with commitment can work really well. Their shop is not huge; it is an approach that many village shops have the space to adopt alongside their mainstream offer. But it really won't work without the commitment!