2017 ACE convention – Edinburgh

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I have been lucky throughout my career and have attended the ACE convention on a number of occasions, at a variety of locations across the Country, with each show bringing a unique feel to the event.

As in the past, this convention did what I expected; it bought new and exciting thought and discussion to the growing-in-importance world of heritage commercial activities.

I find that Ace conventions provide me with a range of opportunities to expand my horizons, personally and professionally. Primarily the convention provides opportunities for networking. This includes reinforcing old networks and relationships with suppliers and colleagues, but also the ability to grow and increase the pool of contacts with exciting ideas and hard earned advice.

New ideas come in the form of programmed events such as the speakers and plenaries, all of which are excellent value and find you making notes to ensure every morsel of opportunity is captured. Through to the trade show, which provides a much more focussed and relaxed experience when compared to the large shows like the Spring Fair. Finally you should not overlook the informal networking that takes place, either when queuing for lunch or dancing the night away at the gala dinner.

It was good this year to the see the trade show grow again in size and the range of suppliers is getting better. Yes there are a number of regulars there, but these companies always bring something new to catch the eye, and each has a story of its own. I particularly liked the story of a new range of bathing products, all made with herbs taken from the owner’s garden.

For me this learning is expected from the convention, and I always look to maximise my opportunities. I also try and take advice and future proofing by looking to see if I can understand any emerging themes, both from the speakers and also the traders and for this year’s event one word stood out to me, authentic.

Authentic as a word had a variety of meanings to me before the convention. I had visions of product that are officially licensed to be authentic, however it is clear that this is correct on one level, however within our world of cultural activity it needs to take on a deeper meaning. Authentic should come to mean a label for everything from the origination of the design, the manufacturing process, through to the presentation and finally to the needs of the purchaser.

It is clear that society’s wants are changing. In the area of choice based, non-core purchasing, people are now demanding more authenticity from their suppliers. This trend can be seen across the high street, from supermarkets and their high end range of finish at home meals that include detailed information about the provenance of the product, e.g. Tesco’s Finest Rannoch Smoked Duck Pate, through to Rewind offering high end, pre-owned designer handbags that aim to give the purchaser a curated range of products, verifying their originality, but making the link to high quality that stands the test of time.

This gives the purchaser 2 benefits. One it is the quality of the materials involved, but also the ability to own/consume something that is either in limited supply or unique.

So how does this relate to the world of Cultural Enterprise?

It has long been recognised, and oft repeated at the Convention, that when planning purchases we need to understand our customers and to look at providing a range of purchasing solutions for all our visitors, a lot of whom will not have had to pay to enter the site, so that there is an opportunity for everyone to purchase something. This will then lead to higher conversion rates and better income for the site.

However what I have been hearing is that although the selection of products remains key, in addition we should look for more authentic products to meet the growing customer demand for products with a provenance that cannot be purchased anywhere else.

As shopping is moving more and more on-line, once staple products of museums, e.g. the mug, are able to be sourced and purchased online, quickly and cheaply. There are more and more companies that are now offering the customer the ability to bespoke their purchase, all from their armchair. This is something that we just cannot offer or compete with.

However what the online retailer cannot do is to offer the purchaser the ability to purchase a one of a kind, authentic product, linked to a visit they chose to make. There will always be products that are licensed but the best of the best products can only be purchased from carefully selected outlets.

Our authenticity comes from the ability to engage with the collections or the building, the artist or the maker, from the memory of a place or object that has excited your emotions. For a cultural/heritage site to achieve this will mean that they will be able to deliver what the customer is looking for, with an ethos that is second nature to us.

By adopting this approach we will also enable the purchaser to inherit the story of the item and pass this on to others, making their purchase an extension of the mission of most cultural and heritage organisations, to inform, to educate and to inspire.

There will always be a place for branded products and off the shelf purchases, as these will form part of a considered product range, but for those people wanting a truly authentic experience there is a need to provide authentic products.

In summary what I have gained from this year’s convention is that the customer is on a journey, they are looking for authentic products that remind them of their day out, maintaining that emotional connection. They want to know the history and the provenance of their purchases; they want more than a financial connection to their purchases and through the use of local makers and artisans, cultural enterprises have the opportunity to provide this form of attachment better than any other organisation, as we constantly strive to deliver authenticity as our core mission.

As my role covers 3 museum’s I will be ensuring that I will incorporate the learning I have gained from this opportunity by building this into the development of the retail buying policies and commercial development opportunities, such as incorporating a local makers space to provide an outlet for local artisans to showcase their work for sale, based around a modest commission basis for sales.

I am also aiming to provide my insight into the SHARE East retail forum, by taking an active role in the group and thereby supporting all museums across the region. I think it is important that as a lot of smaller museums are unable to fund or release their staff to attend the convention, any learning I have can be passed on to them, helping the whole region benefit from the bursary provided for me, and I hope this paper is the first step on the road to passing on my experience.