

Association for Cultural Enterprises

15th Annual Convention and Trade Show, March 2014

Charlotte Radford, Warner Textile Archive



With the continued growth of the Warner Textile Archive's commercial arm, and appointment to the new post of Commercial Development Officer, I was delighted to receive a bursary from **SHARE Museum East** to attend the annual ACE Convention, this year taking place in York. The **Association for Cultural Enterprises** (ACE) promotes excellence in cultural trading through training, networking, and the sharing of information and experience.

In attending the ACE Convention in York, I hoped to achieve the following:

- I. Acquire greater clarity in striking a balance between commercial activity and curatorial integrity in the heritage sector;
- II. Assess the Archive's retail offering and consider how the Gallery Shop can support the public programme in securing the Archive's position as an appealing visitor attraction in East Anglia;
- III. Attain new inspiration for the Archive's digital offerings, to assess the best use of an Arts Council England Renaissance Strategic Support grant.

This year's seminars were split into three key areas – retail, trading and publishing, so, alongside the trade show, there was food for thought for those from all areas of the cultural sector. My own interests were rather neatly addressed and satisfied by the following three seminars:

Crown Jewels for Sale? – Jonathan Newby, Science Museum Group

Jonathan Newby certainly addressed the first of my enquiries, discussing the recent commercial undertakings of museums in response to cuts in core funding. In what has proved an uncertain time for many arts and heritage organisations, the best have proved highly entrepreneurial. Often, innovative revenue-generating streams can be integrated within a visit, while keeping the institution's cultural message at the fore. At Chatham Dockyard, for example, a rope-making activity enables (younger) visitors to try their hand at the craft, followed by an opportunity to purchase their creation at the end of their visit. A clear example of culture and commerce going hand in hand!

Edinburgh's Camera Obscura was, and remains, unable to provide a catering offering due to space limitations. However, following the introduction of a day ticket, visitors are now able to return after a tea or coffee break. This simple change has led, at least in part, to a 15% year-on-year increase in visitor numbers, and is also likely to have encouraged higher secondary spend. '*Necessity is the mother of invention*', Jonathan reminded us. On this note, I found the seminar very reassuring, for it can be very simple things which make a difference to visitor experience. For example, the Warner Textile Archive hosts its annual Textile Fair in May, and on this day opens a pop-up vintage tearoom, to cater to its greater number of visitors. The cafe has been very well received and will return in 2014, as it plays a significant role in creating a real day out

for visitors, who come from across the country. This notion of *'more is more'* can be true in many other cases too; in publishing, for example, different guidebooks might be created to appeal to different audience.

Overall, Jonathan's message was incredibly encouraging, as he summarised: *'You don't have to sell the crown jewels or flog the family silver...in my mind, there is no conflict between culture and commerce'*.

Driving Revenue through Creative Visual Merchandising – Neil Ellis, PLANarama

Neil's seminar contained an abundance of ideas for museums considering a shop refit, whatever the scale and budget:

- If space is limited, use height to create 'visual theatre'. Freestanding and portable tiered units can add height and provide an appealing way to display smaller items.
- Header panels above shelving will direct attention and create clearly-defined departments within a shop.
- If items are small, larger 'prop' versions can be created to direct customers' attention.
- Hotspots can be created based on a theme or exhibition; a 'retail story' highlighting products complementing museum events, exhibitions or themes, is likely to increase secondary spend.
- Vinyl transfers provide a cost-effective way to attract attention and are easy to change on regular basis when the shop requires a refresh.

I left Neil's talk keen to tailor some of his suggestions to the Warner Textile Archive, and integrate some of the designs held in the Archive Collection within the Shop's layout. Importantly, a number of Neil's suggestions were manageable and cost effective, which I hope will encourage repeat custom and help to create a 'destination shop' in Braintree, where the Archive is based, used regularly by a local audience,

How to add value through digital – Eamonn Hurley, Vermillion Design and Publishing

Eamonn had a refreshing approach to taking a museum's collection online. He highlighted the benefits of creating an online version of an exhibition, enabling an organisation to reach an international audience, while building its reputation and serving as a record of the curatorial team's hard work, even when a new display has opened. The benefits of digitisation, engagement and conversion rates can be assessed by creating an e-voucher, incentivising a visit to the physical exhibition. Data capture means driver channels, user preferences and landing pages can all be reviewed and responded to in the future, ensuring optimisation of an organisation's digital channels.

The remaining seminars proved complementary, interesting and entertaining. **Stephen Quinn**, Retail Manager at the **National Museum of Australia** and President of the **Museum Shops of Australia Association** (an overseas ACE equivalent) certainly fulfilled the latter. **Cultural Retailing in Australia** identified the key indicators of success for a museum shop, whatever and wherever the institution. He painted a picture of a dynamic institution, directed by consumer pull, and encouraged buyers and retail managers not to shy away from the inclusion of higher value stock alongside fast-moving consumer goods. Stephen highlighted the potential for

a museum shop to become a destination in its own right, to 'educate, entertain and entice', through its stock selection and merchandising.

In **Why Brand Licensing Matters**, consultant **Jo Matthews** made certain we finished the day with 'realistic aspirations' as to the money-making potential of licensing, but nonetheless ensured we left with the enthusiasm to reap the benefits of a well-thought-through and supported licensing programme. She had the following advice for attaining 'revenue, reach and reputation' through successful licensing partnerships:

- Identify brand partners in three key areas to inform product development: core, associated and 'inspired by' ranges.
- Consider brand licensing as one arm of an integrated marketing strategy; elect a 'brand owner' and create a clearly defined brand which can be used to inform all activity.
- A deeper relationship where both parties promote an innovative product is likely to prove the most successful.
- Ensure that trustees are aware of the limitations of brand licensing as a revenue-generating initiative; income is most likely to be made up of a number of smaller contracts.

Bill Lancaster's fabulous keynote on Friday was highlight for me and for many others, leaving delegates in discussion for the rest of the day. Author of *The Department Store: A Social History*, Bill seamlessly linked museums and retailing in an introduction to their competition for the popular gaze amid changing consumer preferences from the 19th century, as the department store came to prominence. The session concluded with a note on the social need for shopping, whether in the luxurious surrounds of a department store, or indeed at a museum shop, strengthening a keenness to make use of Neil Ellis and Stephen Quinn's advice, and refit the Archive Gallery Shop.

As an ACE Convention newcomer, it was really encouraging to have a programme of seminars led by individuals who were clearly experts in their fields, with a wealth of experience from which I'm sure all delegates were able to benefit – whether new to the field like me, or with a few extra years under their belts. As such the benefits of ACE membership became clear, in particular after a few moments of perhaps frantic note taking, as it was confirmed that key ideas and suggestions from each of the seminars would be available online after the Convention. In particular, **Kitty Turner of Farrer & Co. LLP's** summary of key changes to consumer law, likely to affect the print and online marketing and retail offerings of many heritage sites in the UK, is available to ACE members. I am certain that Kitty's consumer law update will become an essential reference tool as we redevelop the Archive's website and online shop.



Further details about ACE membership, including next year's Convention in Brighton, can be found online at www.acenterprises.org.uk; details about attendance bursaries awarded by SHARE Museums East are available from www.sharemuseumseast.org.uk. I strongly recommend you apply!

Highlights from this year's ACE Convention seminars can be found on the Archive's Twitter feed – @TextileArchive, or use #ACECONF14