



# The future of local craft shops

Are online retailers and craft TV channels growing the market or harming local craft communities? Steve Barton shares his thoughts

A year or two ago, I read an article about Craftsby, now known as Blueprint. The educational website was accused of taking business away from local shops through its online sales. This in turn was seen to be the cause of many high street shops going out of business. Craftsby countered this by arguing that it had grown the market, particularly at the younger end – surely a good thing for the industry. While I'm sure the website's owner was able to demonstrate proof of market growth, smaller stores may not feel the benefit, and this won't make the shops that went out of business feel any better.

The same could be said about popular craft channels that sell direct to the consumer. The terms can be challenging for suppliers and artists, who take on the stock risk and are charged a significant commission.

What is particularly alarming in all of this is the lack of conversation regarding the impact of fewer local shops upon the craft community.

We take it for granted that crafters will be able to learn how to make an exciting new pattern by attending a workshop at their local store, run their fingers through fabrics before buying and swap hints and tips with likeminded enthusiasts. Local stores have traditionally provided just such a place.

## CONVENIENCE VS COMMUNITY

However, would the craft industry be

growing as it has and connecting with a new generation if not for online innovators?

That's a tough question. Customers are, for example, getting their wadding a bit cheaper and having it delivered directly to their homes. That's a heady mix of value and convenience. Plus, it makes it easier for the online generation to join in.

Local craft shops have been slow to embrace internet innovations that will generate more business, from setting up online versions of their stores to using digital media to drive more footfall.

I feel a need to declare an interest at this point. I am the CEO of justhands-on.tv, a video subscription service providing online workshops for quilting, knitting and textile arts, taught by the UK's finest tutors – think Netflix for crafters. People can watch full 'how to' videos from the comfort of their own home, day or night.

We also have a shop section where we sell products featured in our videos. Our online store is more of a marketplace. We sell through shops, not against them. Local shops tell us which products they would like to list

on the site. The customer pays for the product on justhands-on.tv, we notify the shop of the sale and the retailer fulfils the order. We then reimburse the shop, less a small commission, that is about half the amount online retailers and craft channels charge. We operate in this way because we believe that the community needs a thriving network of local retailers.

Interestingly, we have seen how online workshops help to sell more products. Every time we feature an item, there is a lift in sales on our website. What may surprise you is that shop-owners also see a lift in sales of these featured products in their bricks and mortar premises.

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## BUY LOCAL

Does it really matter if online retailers and craft TV channels are growing the market by taking trade away from local craft shops?

Yes, I believe it does. Just as it makes sense to support local businesses when buying fruit and veg, it makes sense to support nearby craft shops because this

will support the wider community, from artists getting a fair return for their work to ensuring there is a place to make new friends, face-to-face. A bigger market of isolated individuals buying cheaper materials is a soulless future.

Can online giants and craft TV channels live alongside local shops? Yes, there are plenty of examples where this is the case, such as the bookselling industry. However, smaller stores need to raise their game. Perhaps the example of online classes driving offline product sales is a glimpse of the sort of thing that can be done more often. In this way, we can keep growing the industry while retaining the heart and soul of a craft community.



What do you think? Tell us your views via [editor@craftfocus.com](mailto:editor@craftfocus.com)

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