

By Iain Nicholson co-founder of countywide business network, OTCN (and friends!)

One of Oxfordshire's great business strengths is the talented and hard-working entrepreneurs that run independent shops in our high streets. The imagination and innovations we've seen through the most demanding economic times that anyone can remember, and the enthusiasm there is for supporting local business, are strong signals of the better times ahead. But don't take my word for it. Listen to some of those independent shop owners in our towns. Do we have a bright future? "Of course we do," say the team at Kismet jewellers in Thame. "We just have to be better about our communication with our target audiences. One can never expect to open the door and have everyone wander in to buy – but we do have to remind shoppers that the price you pay in an independent shop is an RRP – the knowledge imparted by our sales staff is free-of-charge!" Janette Reed at Cotswold Kids in Witney agrees: "My personal view is that we have a future as long as people enjoy shopping! There's no doubt that the growth of internet shopping has had a detrimental effect, so it's only those independents that can offer something different, combined with a great shopping experience, who are likely to survive." Denise Palmer of Presentation Gifts in Faringdon picks up the theme: "One overriding thing customers like is the fact we say hello, goodbye and know when they need help and when to leave alone. Also more and more people like what we sell as we take extra care in what we stock so it's not found in every shop. I have had a tough couple of years but saying that I did manage last year to increase my profit by changing buying habits and that in itself makes it worthwhile, and puts the fun back into it."