

Doing the Southwark walk

Faced with pressure from online retail, competition from national chains and their proximity to central London, many high street traders in Southwark are looking for an effective response.

Southwark Council's Economic Wellbeing Strategy has been developed to promote employment, business investment, town centre vitality and financial independence across the borough. As part of the initiative, the council recently commissioned LSBU to conduct a comparative study of eight high street locations in Southwark.

"To take the temperature on Southwark's high streets, we worked with the council, local traders, LSBU data specialists and a cohort of marketing students to design and undertake the study, with findings then reported back to the council by our students," explains Senior Lecturer, Dr Charles Graham.

"Southwark has areas of extreme affluence and some areas of high economic deprivation where the effects of the recession are still strongly felt, so the competition to attract shoppers has become intense across the borough. Annual business closures have been running above a pre-recession average rate of 1,316 (2004-2008), reaching 1,730 in 2012. Our broad aims were to establish patterns of weekday and weekend footfall on eight high streets; to understand who was using the high streets; how they used them; what drew them there and how often; and what they felt about those retail centres."

Over two days of data collection across the borough, the team completed a total of 684 usable interviews, and made over 100,000 footfall observations. Reports were written up and made publicly available, particularly targeted towards the local traders who expressed a need to see marketing data, with an overview also created for the council's strategic planners.

"The focus was to establish initial pedestrian density benchmarks, identify some potential drivers of increased footfall, and develop insight that could inform discussion of routes to improved customer attraction and conversion in each location," adds Dr Graham.

"It is always a challenge to manage the quality of the data collection in a study like this, but our students remained engaged and keen to take part and rose to the assignment superbly. As a result, and thanks to Southwark Council, they have enjoyed a particularly valuable learning experience while contributing to the community.

"Most importantly though, our findings show that the high street may not be in quite as much trouble as people think. The feedback collected revealed that shopping online is an additional rather than a replacement activity; Southwark's local high streets are not that quiet, with footfall densities on the busiest days matching traffic levels in some bustling west end locations; and when asked which other high streets Southwark shoppers visit, the 10 most popular choices included four other destinations in the same borough. We found that the typical visitor comes to the high street frequently but briefly, and for a very wide variety of reasons, but all gave shopping as the primary or secondary purpose of the visit.

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The success of the study has prompted further academic research into predictable relationships between footfall, retail attraction and conversion rates, and data is currently being collected on high streets and malls in London and the Middle East.

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Southwark study shows there is still life in the local high street

Impacts:

- > Through qualitative studies, LSBU engaged with representatives of its local business communities, especially from Camberwell, the Latin Elephant (association of Latino-run businesses in Elephant and Castle) and Waterloo, to establish and then meet their data requirements.
- > Previously the council had little footfall or formal survey data from these locations, and so needed this data for central strategic planning, while independent traders knew little about the potential customers on the high street. The council now has an extensive collection of reports.
- > The insights should inform:
 - council decisions (for example, as a major employer in the borough, the location of council offices has the potential to have an impact on high street footfall significantly and positively)
 - local marketing decisions by individual traders (for example, in anticipating peaks and troughs of demand, and better identifying and then meeting local needs and wants)
 - local marketing decisions by location (for example, in identifying areas for improvement to the public realm to the benefit of the wider business community and consumers)
 - possible interventions designed to increase local footfall by attracting shoppers from wider catchment areas.
- > As an example of the wider impact of our student-driven learning from live briefs, Lambeth Council has now expressed interest in our research expertise to help them to improve the take-up of their online billing systems for payment for council services.