



Merched Medrus –

Animation of a Women's Business Network in Lampeter, Ceredigion



Merched Medrus – Animation of a Women’s Business Network in Lampeter, Ceredigion

This report has been prepared by Helen Howells, Hwylus Cyf for the attention of Meleri Richards, Ceredigion County Council.



Animation activity was undertaken by Helen Howells, Hwylus Cyf.

The animation activity was commissioned by Ceredigion County Council on behalf of Cynnal y Cardi, the LEADER Local Action Group for Ceredigion.

This project has received funding through the Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme 2014–2020, which is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the Welsh Government.



© Hwylus Cyf, August 2017

Contents

Executive Summary	4
Background.....	4
Animation Activity.....	4
Conclusions.....	4
1. Introduction.....	6
2. Background.....	7
2.1 Objectives of Merched Medrus.....	7
2.2 Why Networking? Why Women?	7
2.3 The Involvement of Hwylus Cyf.....	8
3. Methodology	9
3.1 Phase 1 – Face to Face Engagement.....	9
3.2 Phase 2 – Trials of Networking Meetings	9
3.3. Phase 3 – Audio-Visual Case Studies	10
4. Animation Activity.....	11
4.1 Face to Face Engagement	11
4.1.1 Marketing and Promotion	11
4.1.2 Increasing Footfall	11
4.1.3 Townscape and Empty Shops	12
4.1.4 Access to Support.....	13
4.2 Promotion and Recruitment to the Merched Medrus Network	14
4.2.1 Printed Promotional Material.....	14
4.2.2 Digital Marketing.....	15
4.3 Trialling Networking Activities	16
4.3.1 Lean In Circle – 9 th March 2017	16
4.3.2 Breakfast Meeting – 29 th March 2017	18
4.3.3 WiRE Network Meeting	18
4.4 Video Case Studies	19
5. Results.....	20
5.1 Project Outputs	20
5.2 Project Outcomes.....	21
5.3 Evaluation of Different Networking Models	23
5.3.1. Lean In Circle – 9 th March 2017	23
5.3.2. Breakfast Meeting – 29 th March 2017	25
5.3.3 Women in Rural Enterprise (WiRE) Networking Meeting – 11 th April 2017	26
5.4 Comparison of the three different meetings.....	27
6. Conclusions and Next Steps	29
7. Acknowledgements.....	31

Executive Summary

Background

The Merched Medrus project consisted of animation activity undertaken by Hwylus Cyf to develop a women's business network in Lampeter, Ceredigion.

The animation was delivered in 3 phases: face to face engagement; trialling of three different networking activities; and developing a video case study highlighting the experiences of women entrepreneurs in Lampeter.

Networking has been highlighted as an activity that can support women entrepreneurs to grow their businesses. However, there are few opportunities for business focused networking in Ceredigion that meet the specific needs of women.

Animation Activity

Face to face engagement with women business owners in Lampeter revealed concerns relating to promotion and marketing; customer footfall; townscape and empty shops; and access to support.

During the animation activities, Helen Howells, Hwylus, trialled three different networking activities; Lean In, Breakfast Briefing and Women in Rural Enterprise (WiRE). To publicise the events and recruit members to the network, various social media channels were used. These included; a Merched Medrus Facebook Group, posting events on Twitter and Linked In; and building a MailChimp subscribers list. Eye catching leaflets and posters were also pinned around Lampeter and used as social media publishing material.

Following an evaluation of the various meetings, participants favoured the approach offered by the WiRE model. Since the animation activity ended, the Merched Medrus group have evolved into a WiRE network with Helen Howells and Nicola Doyle taking on the role of voluntary Network Leaders. The WiRE group meet every second Thursday of the month at Artisan's Food & Drink Boutique, Lampeter.

Conclusions

Participants valued the meetings, highlighting the advantages of being able to support each other and air shared problems. It was also a good space to spark conversations and develop new ideas for their businesses and for Lampeter; recognising that increasing footfall to the town would depend on collaborative action. Expectations as to what can be achieved through networking need to be managed and can be affected by the participants' prior experience in networking activity.

A format where guest speakers are brought in who can provide advice and guidance on specific topics is valued and sparks wider conversation amongst the group.

Many ideas for developing the economic potential of Lampeter and surrounding areas have been raised that require further support to develop fully. These include: developing Lampeter as a Destination town and supporting a calendar of events throughout the year; introduction of town

WiFi and subsequent analytics; and working together to secure inward investment to improve the townscape.

1. Introduction

This report has been commissioned by Ceredigion County Council on behalf of Cynnal y Cardi, the Local Action Group – a partnership of public, private and voluntary sector organisations with responsibility for the implementation of LEADER activities in Ceredigion.

The project has received funding through the Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme 2014–2020, which is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the Welsh Government.

The animation work was undertaken by Helen Howells, Hwylus Cyf between January and May 2017. The report was finalised in August 2017.

The animation process was designed based on the LEADER Community Led Local Development for Ceredigion, focusing on the following features:

- **Bottom-up** – the animation started from the viewpoint of the individual business owners and activities were driven by the issues they raised
- **Innovation** – trialling three different networking methods in Lampeter
- **Cooperation** – sharing ideas and topics raised in animation activities with Ceredigion Association of Voluntary Organisations (CAVO) and Ceredigion County Council's Regeneration team
- **Networking** – bringing business owners together to exchange ideas, and to benefit from shared learning

The animation activity undertaken as part of Merched Medrus fulfilled the needs of the Local Development Strategy by identifying the following needs:

Objective 2.1.2 – To foster an environment of networking between community and business sectors to share best practice and resources.

The animation was carried out in three phases:

- *Phase 1* – face to face engagement with business owners in Lampeter
- *Phase 2* – trials of 3 different networking activities
- *Phase 3* – video case studies of 3 businesses who had participated

2. Background

2.1 Objectives of Merched Medrus

The Merched Medrus project proposed to establish a business network for women in and around Lampeter, Ceredigion. Networking can provide important benefits for women running rural enterprises, however, there are few opportunities for activities in Ceredigion that are specifically tailored for women, and which are sensitive to their needs.

2.2 Why Networking? Why Women?

A report published by the Federation for Small Businesses (FSB) in April 2016, highlighted that women were an untapped potential in the UK Economy. Increasing women's entrepreneurship and supporting growth within women-run businesses could contribute an additional £23billion GVA to the UK economy.

Supporting women's entrepreneurship is an added benefit in rural areas as many have strong links to the agricultural sector – either being farming wives, mothers or daughters. With the many uncertainties facing the sector in the wake of the UK's decision to leave the European Union, supporting businesses such as these is crucial as they have a key role in maintaining the well-being of rural communities.

There are very few opportunities for business networking in Ceredigion. The Merched Medrus project offers an approach to develop an informal network, and hopes to achieve the following objectives:

- providing opportunities for women to promote their businesses, and developing short supply chains within the regional economy
- providing access to business support by bringing in specialist speakers and signposting to other schemes
- sharing expertise and knowledge for businesses at different stages
- mentoring between members
- building new skills
- increasing confidence and support for women to build better businesses
- providing opportunities to collaborate and innovate

Increasing confidence for women entrepreneurs has been highlighted as a key issue by both the FSB and WiRE. It is often seen as a key differential factor when comparing male and female entrepreneurs, which in turn has an impact on the turnover of a business. Informal networking can support increased confidence in women business owners, along with supporting their emotional well-being.

2.3 The Involvement of Hwylus Cyf

Helen Howells, Hwylus Cyf, was awarded a contract to work with business women in Lampeter; to gauge interest in establishing a business network and to identify the key issues facing them in business.

Helen is small business owner herself, a local girl whose family has been in business in the area for over 30 years. This added much strength to the project as she could relate very easily to the business owners of the town. She also has the added advantage of established relationships with some of the women. This could have positively influenced the willingness for businesses to participate in activities.



About Hwylus

Hwylus is a bilingual consultancy offering professional research, engagement and business development services to public, private and voluntary sector clients. The sole director, Helen Howells, has ten years' experience in sustainable rural development, having been involved in LEADER in Wales since 2008.

Traditional Welsh values of kindness, integrity and equality are at the core of the working culture at Hwylus. Hwylus is proud to offer professional services filled with warmth, curiosity and a genuine desire to make a positive impact on the world.

3. Methodology

3.1 Phase 1 – Face to Face Engagement

Three days of face to face engagement were undertaken across the town and through follow-up calls. The engagement consisted of informal chats, and in some cases, a semi-structured interview. The aim was to gain an overview of the specific business, to identify issues of concern and to gauge interest in taking part in a networking group. The following businesses were approached:

- Sioned Allan, DT Fitness
- Angharad Williams, Lan Llofft
- Janice Williams, Duet
- Kate McDermott, Ruby Rose
- Judith Howard, Red Apple Yarn
- Sarah Ward, Y Stiwdio Brint
- Nicola Doyle, Artisan's Food and Drink Boutique
- Nicola Harries, Cascade
- Gabrielle Davies, Cadi & Grace Florist
- Mared Jones, Mwnci Ffwnci and FUW Ceredigion
- Dee Jolly, Lloyds Pharmacy
- Carol Davies, Eryl Jones Insurance
- Stella John, Mulberry Bush
- Mair Hatcher, Gwenog Catering
- Catrin Davies, Dere i Dorri
- Gemma Thomas, Salon Gem
- Anthea Jones, Panacea
- Carys Wilson, AgriAdvisor
- Briwsion Bakery
- Bethan Jones, Gwyn Lewis Carpets
- Angharad Price, Gwilym Price

3.2 Phase 2 – Trials of Networking Meetings

Three networking meetings were held on the following dates:

- 9th March 2017 – 7.00pm – Lean In Circle
- 29th March 2017 – 7.00am – Breakfast Meeting
- 13th April 2017 – 7.00pm – WiRE Network Meeting

To effectively promote the network and gain interest in the events, significant promotional activity was undertaken. Most of this was done using digital platforms, including Facebook, Linked In and MailChimp.

An evaluation exercise followed each event, along with a short survey at the end of the three sessions to gain feedback from participants on the preferred networking model.

3.3. Phase 3 – Audio-Visual Case Studies

Lleucu Meinir was engaged to develop a film highlighting three case studies. Participants of the Merched Medrus meetings were asked to volunteer to take part on the film. The aim was to create an engaging account of their experiences that could be used to share their stories with policy makers, government agencies; and to share learning with other LEADER groups around Wales and the wider European network.

Helen Howells and Lleucu Meinir interviewed and recorded the following business owners on 4th May 2017:

- Nicola Doyle, Artisan's Food and Drink Boutique
- Sarah Ward, Y Stiwdio Brint and Cwtch Camera
- Gabrielle Davies, Cadi & Grace Boutique Flowers

4. Animation Activity

4.1 Face to Face Engagement

Helen Howells visited various business premises in Lampeter during business hours on a number of days, and at different times, during February and March 2017. She asked businesswomen about their businesses, identifying joint issues and gauging interest in establishing a networking forum.

Following consultation with many of the women, it was agreed to trial meetings at 7.00pm on the second Thursday of the month. It was felt that meeting in the town would be advantageous and Artisan's Food and Drink Boutique were supportive of the group meeting at their premises.

The following themes were raised during these initial 1:1 discussions with businesswomen in the town.

4.1.1 Marketing and Promotion

Many business owners felt that they had not truly grasped clear marketing strategies and how to convert these into sales. These owners felt that getting to grips with digital marketing and social media would benefit them as a business.

One of the strengths of the town is the predominance of family-owned, independent shops and the personal shopping experience they offer to customers. Gaining objective feedback, such as through a Mystery Shopper, to assess some of the shops and other businesses on the high street would be beneficial. Building on the 'personal shopping destination' theme would also be useful for branding Lampeter as a destination town.

A significant number felt that they would like to explore joint promotional activities with other businesses to increase footfall into the town, building on the Loyalty Card scheme and capitalising on large events, such as the annual Food Festival. Such events that bring lots of people into Lampeter but not necessarily into the high street.

4.1.2 Increasing Footfall

A recurring theme with business owners in Lampeter is the need to work together to increase footfall. As a small town, there needs to be continuous effort to pull people from the surrounding areas into Lampeter. Many indicate that it is difficult to predict visitor patterns for the town on a day by day basis. A potential market research project looking at footfall, using data that can be gathered from providing a cloud wi-fi portal, could provide valuable information for developing marketing strategies.

As a service town for many rural communities, Lampeter offers everything you may need. The items you can buy range from electrical items, hardware and DIY supplies, garden equipment, paint, a bucket and mop, to ample choices for local food, crafting and sewing supplies, clothes, gifts, furniture and jewellery. Lampeter is therefore a town that provides a wide range of goods and services to satisfy the needs of its rural communities. You can even get photos printed within the hour!

Many of the businesses felt that the future of the town lies in promoting it as a Destination town and linking with tourism activities. A series of events which draw people into the town centre will be key. There are already many successful events hosted in Lampeter, such as the aforementioned annual Food Festival and the emerging Gwyl Golwg festival – launched in 2013 to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of the Golwg weekly magazine. However, these events are hosted at the University and the built-up nature of the campus, with the college wall along College Street, act as a perceived barrier for visitor spend in the wider town economy. Several of the group have indicated a willingness to work together to develop events and learning from other towns such as Llandeilo, Brecon and Narberth. Close collaboration with key stakeholders such as the University and County Council Tourism department will be instrumental in taking this further.

Car parking is repeatedly raised as an issue that affects footfall and customer perceptions of the ease of use of the town. There are still misgivings about the introduction of charges to the 'Cwmins' car park, its name indicating the previous use of the land as 'common land'. This has resulted in negative consequences for minor roads in town, where areas such as New Street are now double parked by vehicles to avoid parking charges; causing congestion for motorists on an increasingly narrow thoroughfare. Car parking charges have also been significantly increased following the Local Authority elections. Many question the value for money and level of parking charges in a small town such as Lampeter, when compared to more reasonable charges in larger towns such as Carmarthen.

4.1.3 Townscape and Empty Shops

The appearance of the town is important for customer and visitor perceptions. It is fair to say that Lampeter as a town looks tired and could benefit from a scheme to improve the townscape. Whilst there has been healthy growth with new shops opening, there are issues with empty shops; many cite landlord expectations of rental income and lack of investment in commercial property as a strong barrier for enterprise. A significant barrier for start-ups is taking up new commercial tenancies for five-year lease terms. Perhaps this is an issue that can be explored further within the rural commercial property sector.

With many large empty properties on the main shopping streets, it can give the perception that the town has little to offer a passer-by but there are several diverse, independently owned shops in Lampeter. There is a feeling amongst local businesses that Lampeter has missed out on development and regeneration opportunities, while other Ceredigion towns such as Aberystwyth, Cardigan and Tregaron have received significant capital investment in the last five years.



The pictures included show the impact of empty shops and residential buildings on the townscape of Lampeter.

Pop-up shops is an idea that was investigated in the context of rural town regeneration by Grwp Cefn Gwlad (the Carmarthenshire LEADER group) through a feasibility study undertaken in 2016. The study, undertaken by Canta, highlighted many advantages and disadvantages to running pop-up shops, with mixed feelings among existing businesses in a town. The main concern for existing businesses is that they can feel at a competitive disadvantage; with pop-up shops getting preferential treatment, with lower overheads and selling mass stock at significant reductions that can adversely impact trade within a small town.

In Northern Ireland, the Brighter Bushmills project injected colour and creativity into the town with art, photography and graphic design installations to 'disguise' vacant properties. They centred on interpreting traditional shops, such as barbers, butchers, greengrocers and a courthouse! They expanded the idea further with a heritage trail for the town, using the installations as a visitor attraction. Perhaps this is an idea that would complement the town's aspirations to become a Destination town and improve the visual appeal of the high street to the average passer-by.

4.1.4 Access to Support

Most businesses in Lampeter are micro-enterprises, run either by self-employed sole traders or as small private companies, under sole directorship or with partners of up to two or three people (normally spouses or family members). Businesses of this scale often struggle to find appropriate support due the nature of their workload.

Many of the businesses interviewed struggled to understand what support measures were available to them. It is felt that websites, such as the Business Wales and Local Government websites, are difficult to navigate and often lack sufficient details of the support available. Government and statutory online services were cited as incredibly difficult to use, and take up a disproportionate amount of time to administer. One issue that was repeatedly raised was the difficulty in setting up the NEST pensions scheme, with a website that was cumbersome and has many 'glitches'.

A significant proportion of business owners had seen courses and workshops offered by Business Wales but felt that they were hosted in locations which were too far away, as even 2–3 hour workshops would take up a whole trading day if they were in Carmarthen or Swansea. For the majority of sole trading retail businesses, taking time away from the business during trading hours is incredibly difficult, and as a result, they don't engage with the support available.

Business rates in town have had a significant impact on the profitability of many enterprises. "The rates have been crippling," is a comment made by Nicola Doyle in the video case study. The recent review of rates has brought with it winners and losers. For those who have seen a decrease in their rates it has meant they are now able to invest in their businesses and look to grow.

A few business sectors – including Floristry and Professional Services – wanted to take on new members of staff and enquired about Apprenticeship schemes. Recruitment and staff retention was an issue highlighted by a significant number of businesses. During group discussions, there were several points noted on work ethics and employee expectations.

Preparing for the digital economy was a key issue for several businesses. There were mixed experiences with social media marketing. Many businesses are comfortable using social media to promote their business and are exemplars in driving sales and bringing footfall into Lampeter. Clothes boutique Lan Llofft is a great example of this. However, some business owners had yet to embrace social media, had little grasp of the concept, and relied solely on traditional printed advertising and word-of-mouth for their marketing efforts. The barriers for take up in adopting digital technology is two-fold. Firstly, fast and reliable access to (superfast) broadband is key to establishing the base infrastructure for business. Secondly, there is scope for further training and adopting digital behaviours in the workplace; tailored training support may need to be looked at according to business type e.g. retail, appointment / bookings based businesses, professional services and hospitality.

4.2 Promotion and Recruitment to the Merched Medrus Network

This project aimed to set up a network that was completely new for Lampeter and for Ceredigion. Promotion of the meetings was therefore incredibly important. Whilst we wanted sufficient numbers to engage so that the network was useful for members, we were cautious not to take a blanket approach to marketing, ensuring that we reached out to – and engaged with – a core, target audience.

4.2.1 Printed Promotional Material

Eye-catching promotional flyers were produced by Helen. There were dropped at various businesses in Lampeter to be displayed in their shop front windows. An example of the flyer is shown on the following page.



4.2.2 Digital Marketing

Facebook

We were targeted in our approach to marketing, being mindful to recruit women who ran their own businesses or played a key role in an enterprise. A Merched Medrus Facebook Group was established by inviting business women around Lampeter, and by engaging with those members of an existing WiRE group in Carmarthenshire who are based in Ceredigion. The Merched Medrus Facebook Group currently has 83 members (August 2017). The Facebook Group not only acts as promotion tool for the networking events, but also; hosts information on upcoming events of interest to the women, links to support such as Chwarae Teg and GWLAD, and is used to gauge interest in activities by hosting short online surveys or posing questions. The first event and poster was also promoted on the Be' Sy' Mlaen? What's On Ceredigion and Lampeter Swap Shop Facebook Groups.

Cyfleoedd i Fenywod Busnes yng Ngheredigion

MERCHED MEDRUS

Opportunities for business women in Ceredigion

Twitter

Helen shared information on the meetings along with pictures of the gatherings on her personal Twitter account @HelenGwenllian and on the Hwylus @HwylusTweets company account. The WiRE network host a #WiREhour every Tuesday evening, and they re-tweeted several posts. Re-tweets were achieved by @WiREUK, @ShoutOutWales, @Lleol.Cymru and @BBCRadioCymru which widened our engagement on the platform.

Linked In

Linked In is a social networking platform specifically for professional and business purposes. In reaching out to a target audience, and using B2B (Business to Business) marketing, it is a great platform to find our 'ideal customer'. However, Linked In may not be as well-known and well-used in a rural area such as Lampeter, and the retail business sector may be more inclined to use Facebook and Twitter, where they can target consumers directly. Helen also shared posters and information about the events on her personal Linked In profile.

Mail Chimp

A MailChimp email list was established with contact information gathered from the face to face engagement, as well as via a link to sign-up on the Merched Medrus Facebook page. Several email newsletters were sent out during the project that included information on the support available, events hosted in the area and promoting the various activities of Merched Medrus. There are currently 46 subscribers to the Merched Medrus Newsletter (June 2017) and an example is included in Appendix 1.

4.3 Trialling Networking Activities

4.3.1 Lean In Circle – 9th March 2017

Lean In Circles were inspired by Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer at Facebook and author of the book 'Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead'. Lean In Circles are peer support networks for working women who meet to discuss, share and encourage each other to achieve their career goals. It comprises peer to peer learning and mentoring and can stimulate more structured mentoring within large organisations or within areas where there is a predominant industry cluster, e.g. California's Silicon Valley or London's Financial District.

As this was the first meeting of the group, we also undertook an activity to unearth some of the activities the group would like to focus on, going forward. The session plan included a group activity identifying shared topics of interest. The second session focused more closely on a Lean In circle activity, looking specifically at networking.

Exercise 1 - What are the issues facing you in business?

Participants were asked to write the two biggest issues facing them in business on a post-it note. They were then invited to share these on a large flipchart in front of the room. During a break, Helen grouped the post-it notes into topics and a plenary discussion was held. Below is a table of the issues that were raised by members of the group. During the open discussion, many of the women were encouraged to find that they shared similar issues and felt less ‘on their own’; relieved that they could talk openly about some of their concerns in a group of like-minded women.

Finance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investing in new equipment • Business growth and expansion
Legal Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Company structure advice • Compliance with relevant legislation
Pensions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advice on pensions and savings for business owners • Administration of the NEST workplace pension scheme
ICT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cloud-based services • Upgrading software and hardware
Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing a long-term strategy for the business • Clarity of need
Human Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruiting the right staff for the business • Flexible working policies
Accounting and Book-keeping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being organised with book-keeping • Tax implications and deadlines
Time Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritising workload • Efficient processes and ICT support
Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing new products and services • Promotion of the business • Cost effective marketing for small businesses • Developing a customer focus • Converting marketing into sales

How could a group like Merched Medrus help you in your business?

In an open discussion, Helen asked participants what Merched Medrus could do to support them with the issues raised.

- Sharing skills and accessing training together
- Sharing information about the various activities and events going on in the area
- Peer-mentoring and a safe space to talk about business issues

- Accessing discounts together
- Develop a business show-case of the products and services available in Lampeter and surrounding areas
- Networking and business referrals for each other
- Providing a voice and an influence as a collective
- Collaborating to access funding or to develop projects to bring people into the town
- A hub where all activity can be shared, i.e. Lampeter Town Guide, Mid Wales Tourism, Visit Wales Year of Legends etc.

Lean In Video and discussion

Participants watched a 10-minute video on Networking that was available on the [Lean In Resources section](#) of the website. A discussion followed where the two tables mapped their existing networks and started to identify ways to promote their businesses and widen their support network.

Number of Attendees: 16

4.3.2 Breakfast Meeting – 29th March 2017

Event Activities

Members of the Merched Medrus suggested that the focus of this session would be ‘A Day in the Life of you and your business...’ The session plan consisted of an ice-breaker game and for each ‘Merch Medrus’ to tell their story.

With the smaller number of attendees, the format changed slightly; all participants sat on a small table, taking turns to talk about their business, followed by an informal discussion.

The main themes discussed at the table included the difficulties the businesses faced around staff recruitment and motivation. We also discussed networking opportunities around Ceredigion and West Wales, which were very limited. Of the few women who attended, the feedback gained was that they enjoyed meeting in an intimate group and felt that they got to know the other women well, which led to more meaningful conversations.

Number of Attendees: 4

4.3.3 WiRE Network Meeting

WiRE is a national business support network; promoting, supporting and developing its membership of rural businesswomen from Harper Adams University in Shropshire. WiRE offers a package of practical business support which includes access to the 50 WiRE networks across the UK where women in business share expertise and knowledge, build new skills, help boost confidence and support each other to build better businesses. WiRE meetings have no specific format, there are no rules as to how a WiRE meeting should run but most take on the format of inviting a guest speaker to share their knowledge on a subject area, followed by group discussion and an update of items of interest.

Guest Speaker – Carys Ifan, University of Wales Trinity St David (UWTSD)

During the WiRE session, Carys Ifan, Creative Industries Lecturer for the GWLAD work based learning project, delivered a talk on digital marketing. The group discussed various social media platforms, gained an insight into digital trends and an increased awareness of the importance of using traditional marketing techniques in a digital context.

Carys also promoted GWLAD, the subsidised training to develop work based skills and many were interested in learning more about marketing and developing a Digital Marketing Plan for their own business.

Number of Attendees: 11

4.4 Video Case Studies

Lleucu Meinir was contracted to develop video case studies for three of the participants in the project. All three participants had taken part in the 1:1 engagement and the networking activities. The case studies highlighted many of the themes raised during the initial 1:1 meetings. The participants included in the case studies were:

- Nicola Doyle, Artisan's Food and Drink Boutique
- Sarah Ward, Y Stiwdio Brint and Cwtsh Camera
- Gabrielle Davies, Cadi & Grace Boutique Flowers

Helen Howells and Lleucu Meinir conducted recorded interviews with participants on the 4th May 2017. The interviews had the following format:

1. Introduce yourself and your business
2. What do you offer to your customers?
3. What are the key things facing you in business in Lampeter?
4. Has being part of the Merched Medrus project helped you in any way?

5. Results

5.1 Project Outputs

The Merched Medrus animation activity resulted in the following outputs to monitor against the LEADER performance data.

- Number of pilot activities supported – 1
- Number of cluster groups / informal networks – 1
- Number of stakeholders engaged – 4 (CAVO, Business Wales, Ceredigion CC Tourism, UWTSO (GWLAD project))
- Number of participants supported – 25 (face to face) – 77 (through Facebook group)
- Number of video case studies – 3 case studies (1 short film)
- Number of reports – 1

List of participants engaged with through 1:1 interviews or attendance at network meetings:

- Sarah Ward, Y Stiwdio Brint
- Gabrielle Davies, Cadi & Grace
- Alwena Evans, JH Roberts a'I Feibion
- Anthea Jones, Panacea – Y Parlwr Pincio
- Kate McDermott, Ruby Rose
- Nicola Doyle, Artisan's Food & Drink Boutique
- Nicola, Cascade Florist
- Judith Howard, Red Apple Yarn
- Julie Grabham, JG HR Solutions
- Philippa Hall, Tartan Turtle Leadership Coaching
- Ann Burns, Stuffing & Springs and Cariad Keepsakes
- Delyth Williams, Swyddfa Del
- Bethan Thomas, ADVE Solicitors
- Bethan Jones Lewis, Gwyn Lewis Carpets Ltd
- Mair Hatchers, Cegin Gwenog Catering
- Carys Wilson, Agri Advisors
- Susanne Ryder, Susanne Ryder Photography
- Donna Smith-Jones, Lili Mai
- Susan Barry, Notch Handmade
- Marian Nixon, Marian Haf
- Angharad Williams, Lan Lloff
- Angharad Price, Gwilym C Price Son & Daughters
- Meleri Morgan, The Falcondale Hotel & Restaurant
- Rachel Stelmach, Ciwbiau Llambod – Lampeter Cubes
- Angharad Williams, Williams & Bourne Solicitors

5.2 Project Outcomes

The rationale for instigating the Animation of a Women's Business Network in Lampeter was to achieve the following objectives:

1. *Providing opportunities for women to promote their businesses, and developing short supply chains within the regional economy*

During the three networking meetings, participants had the opportunity to introduce themselves to 'new' faces and promote the goods and services they have to offer. It is still 'early days' for formally developing supply chains and the networks took an informal approach to networking as opposed to a highly structured and sales driven networking experience, such as BNI International; a format which would have been off-putting for the participants.

In parallel to the Merched Medrus project, a sub-group of the Chamber of Trade have been working on a 'Totally Locally Llambded' Initiative to encourage local supply chains amongst the businesses in Lampeter. The Merched Medrus group provides an opportunity for ideas such as this to be shared, and information disseminated more widely.

2. *Access to business support by bringing in specialist speakers and signposting to other schemes*

During the three networking meetings funded through the Animation, Carys Ifan provided a specialist talk on digital marketing. During all events, participants were signposted to different schemes, including Chwarae Teg's free Institute of Leadership & Management (ILM) training opportunities, GWLAD open days and courses, and the Business Wales Superfast Workshop.

Since the funded meetings, the Merched Medrus group has met twice, bringing in the following two guest speakers: Julie Grabham – providing HR advice, and Sarah Ward – presenting on design principles.

Bronwen Raine, Business Wales also attended a meeting, sharing opportunities and support available.

Helen Howells met with Mel Davies and Bronwen Raine during the Merched Medrus project, sharing information on the issues raised by the group. Business Wales agreed to develop a tailored workshop for the group and support with childcare. This activity is being planned for Autumn 2017. Helen also managed to get the Superfast Business Wales team to host a Digital Technology for Business Growth meeting in the evening (between 6.00pm and 8.30pm) at the Falcondale Hotel on the 14th June 2017.

3. *Sharing expertise and knowledge for businesses at different stages*

During the informal group discussions during meetings, it has been clear that many women have benefitted from the opportunity to raise issues of concern, and to receive advice from more experienced businesswomen. Having a mix of businesses has also been useful, where accountants, solicitors and HR specialists have been able to provide guidance on queries for other retail or hospitality businesses.

4. Mentoring between members

A few members of the group are registered as mentors through the Business Wales programme and some mentoring relationships have begun through the group. A lot of the mentoring has been informal, where members have met up for a coffee to discuss an issue of concern.

5. Building new skills

Developing new skills is difficult to achieve through only three meetings, where the focus was on trialing different networking meetings, and not necessarily oriented to developing skills. However, for many participants, business networking has been a new concept and it could be considered as a new skill. Certainly, new knowledge has been gained by hosting the workshops. This includes informal knowledge such as increased awareness of the different businesses in the area, and digital marketing tools and techniques from the talk by Carys Ifan.

6. Increasing confidence and support for women to build better businesses

Helen developed a Business Wheel sheet to monitor people's confidence in different business areas during the first meeting. However, confidence is a subjective measure and this project was not resourced to measure this in detail.

Many have mentioned that coming to the meetings has made them think and question the way they work, or sparked an idea to develop further in their business.

7. Opportunities to collaborate and innovate

The Merched Medrus meetings have brought women together who may not previously have had the opportunity to meet up and discuss business. Whilst the meetings have not had a focus on collaborating for a specific goal, they have certainly provided the foundation for relationships to become established and acted as a 'spring-board' for ideas to be developed further.

Having put in the 'ground preparation' by creating a forum for women who are happy to co-operate, investing in opportunities for Action Learning Sets or resourcing specific Task and Finish Groups to take forward various strands could be an opportunity to add-value to and galvanise the emerging ideas and working relationships.

In terms of the sustainability of the group, Helen Howells and Nicola Doyle have taken on voluntary WiRE Network Leader roles. Merched Medrus has formed into a WiRE group and has hosted meetings on the 11th May and 8th June.

8. Additional outcomes

The initial 1:1 discussion phase provided an opportunity to get to know the issues facing certain businesses. Y Stiwdio Brint were looking to expand their shop area to accommodate a photography studio, as set-up times was a limiting factor for the owners, and they had to host shoots when the shop was closed. Another business, JH Roberts electricals, wanted to lease their

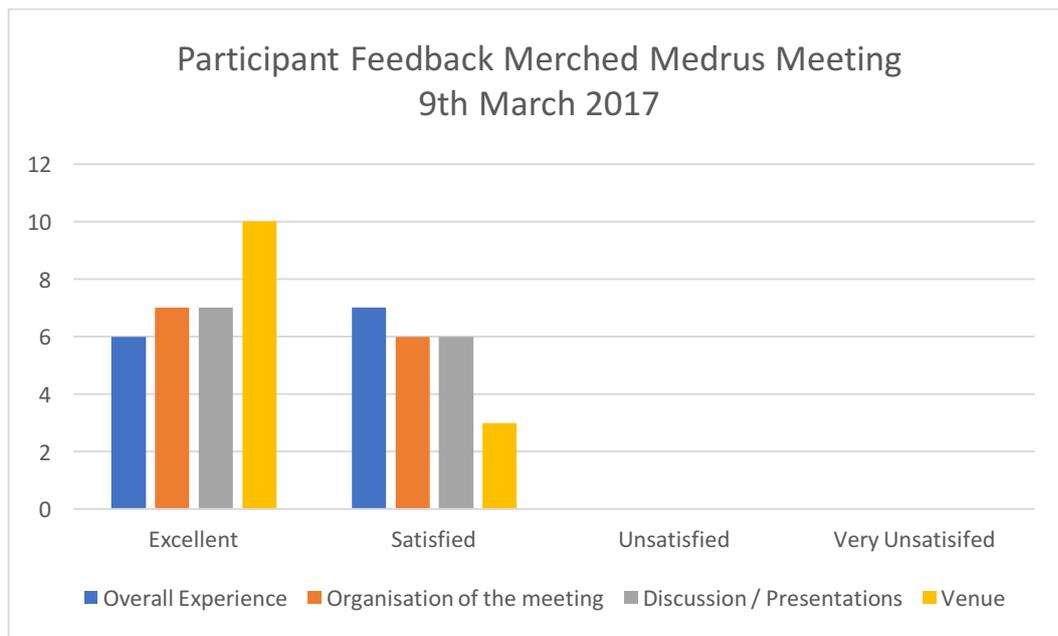
showroom as electrical goods were now able to be delivered next day. Through chance conversations, Helen managed to match-make both businesses and Y Stiwdio Brint's studio is now open for business.

5.3 Evaluation of Different Networking Models

5.3.1. Lean In Circle – 9th March 2017

Number of Attendees: 16

Feedback



Comments

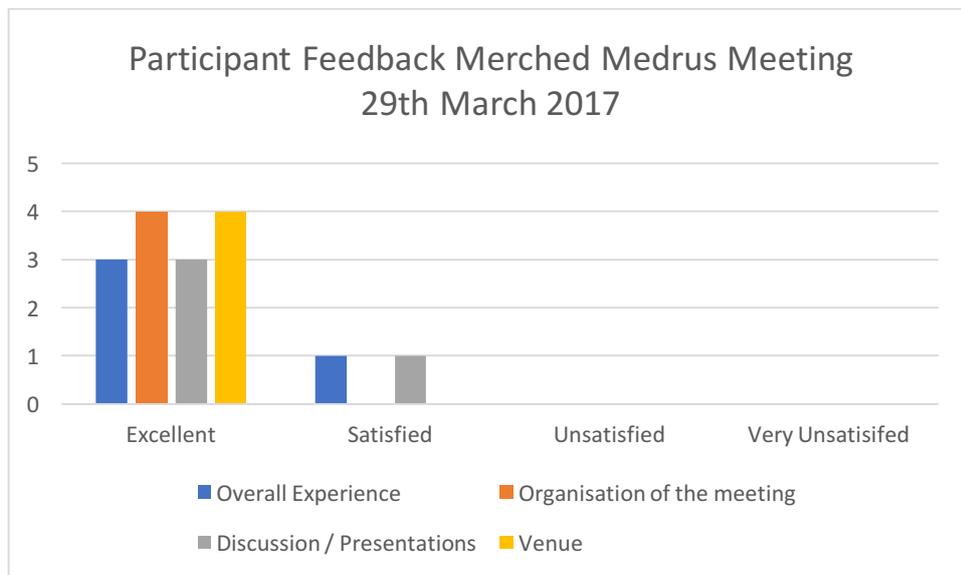
Strengths	Least Useful
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hearing other people's ideas / comments Networking and being able to chat as a group to share ideas Meeting other people in the community and encouraging the sharing of ideas Video – interesting and meeting new people Information sharing within a group Understanding the scope of everyone's networks – the potential for forging useful links. Reassuring to see how diverse we are, and all in need of some business support Cyfle i drafod a merched eraill mewn busnes ac i rannu syniadau 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Video – not really appropriate to this area / type of businesses, i.e. small self-employed / family run None Video was possibly not appropriate for the Lampeter / rural area and how networking would potentially work in this area Would like to hear business stories more Completing forms There was a benefit in all discussion, no quibbles so far The video, not appropriate for this area, more for larger companies I felt None

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting ladies with the same interests, sounds like something I have been looking for a long time, e.g. IT, Instagram, Facebook – understanding more about them, it was nice to hear the ladies explaining how they do things on our table • Purpose of Merched Medrus • Identify core & common issues facing us all. Able to identify common areas of interest & relevance to the group as a whole • Mainly the establishment of a network & seeing how many common issues there are • Communication and input by the persons present and getting to know the different people involved in various industries in the area • Discussions with members of the group – being able to bounce ideas. Will probably spark ideas and food for thought outside of the meeting. Meeting people, starting to build relationships already 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Video didn't feel especially relevant unless you were part of a large organisation • Video – woman was American, felt like it was far removed from small business owners in Rural West Wales where I believe networks work differently, i.e. more informally
--	---

<p>Comments</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maybe an expert to attend on the topic being discussed and sharing advice and information • Moving forward, I think the meetings will be beneficial to myself and my business • Meeting time and format was good and convenient but possibly a more training / informative approach in the future • Good time & organised • Looking forward to more focused sessions, like the digital marketing • Thursday good day for a meeting. Felt as though many people were shy and uncomfortable to talk out loud in the wider group. I suppose this will increase / improve with time and getting to know each other • Time was fine • Looking forward to future meetings and possibly learning new skills • Happy with both • Good environment for the meeting • Great that it's achievable, attending once a month – feels we've packed a lot in tonight but very useful and interesting

5.3.2. Breakfast Meeting – 29th March 2017

Feedback

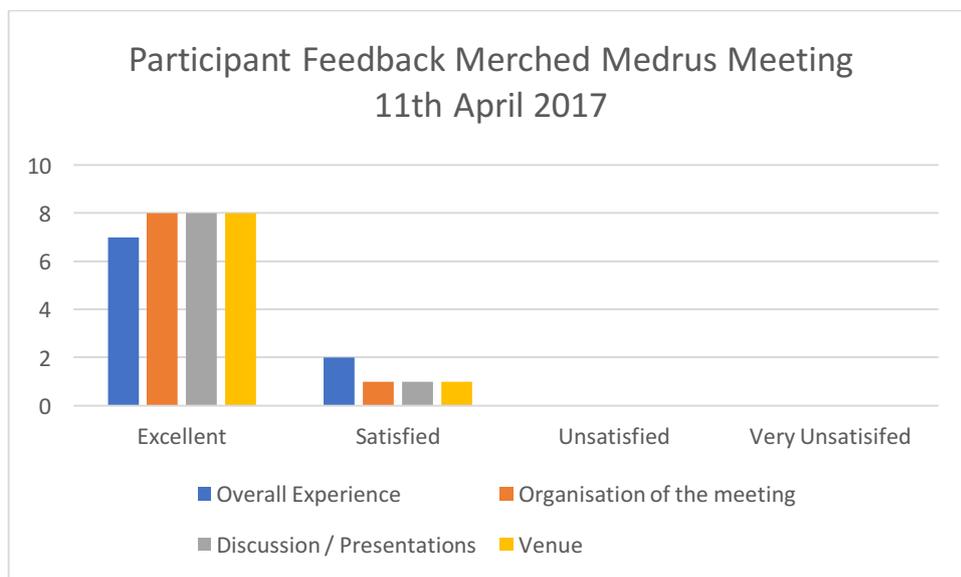


Comments

Strengths	Least Useful
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowing that others were going or doing the same as me business wise. Smaller group was nice – more personal Getting to know other women, with the same business issues Good understanding of issues and positives other women in business are dealing with frequently Relaxed but structured. Open discussion and plenty of support a great opportunity to voice business concerns and get honest answers. Also, great to meet business women in Lampeter area Openness, transparency and support from women that are ready and willing to share experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All was useful Bingo was useful but am not clear about the purpose Need more productive outcomes from meeting – these are for me to think about as well Enjoyed every aspect Fewer women than expected, but not a major problem as it was a nice morning regardless
Any General Comments?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No problem with the time With only four attendees it seems that early mornings are not suitable for this group. I am a clear thinker in the morning but happy to attend at any time I think it's a case of finding a time that works and to introduce a section of 'learning and support', i.e. digital marketing, business planning etc. I'd be totally willing to attend again, even as a more intimate and less structured networking 'event' alongside the main networking evenings 	

5.3.3 Women in Rural Enterprise (WiRE) Networking Meeting – 11th April 2017

Feedback



Comments

Strengths	Least Useful
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecting with other business owners • Learning about different ways to market the business • Relaxed but informative view of digital marketing • Meeting others and information about digital marketing • Good summary on digital marketing and ideas to consider • Chance to identify opportunities in marketing through the introduction of strategies by Carys – SOSTAC, conversation prism etc. • Chance to meet / talk / connect with local businesses • General discussion with fellow business people • Insight into social marketing, what is available and what can be achieved 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting to know you 'games' • Don't particularly like the form filling. The ones that are for "my use". I don't see these being useful
<p>General Comments</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Earlier time of meeting, straight from work would be good • So far, all events have been enjoyable. Would be nice to hear what each member does, business etc. • Earlier in the evening 	

- Happier to begin earlier if needed
- Speakers are a great idea
- Schedule / Calendar of events would be useful

5.4 Comparison of the three different meetings

An online survey was circulated following the final Merched Medrus meeting that was supported as part of the Animation activity. It was completed by 16 respondents.

Preferred format for meetings

Of the 16 respondents:

- 10 preferred the WiRE format
- 1 preferred the Lean In format
- 1 preferred the Breakfast Meeting format
- 4 had no preference

Time of meetings

6:00pm was the time noted as most suitable by the majority of the 16 respondents. In previous meetings that started at 7:00pm it was felt that people were getting quite tired nearing the end. It is also fairer for the proprietor of the coffee shop that we meet in time to keep staff on for a shorter period after normal closing hours.

Any other ideas for the structure of the group?

- Think it would be good idea to list the main issues affecting the group, which I think we've done and then split into different project/sub groups to work on them, brainstorm ideas and present back every month with progress with a final presentation at 3 or 6-month stage. For instance, increasing footfall is of concern to some members of group and with a cross section of businesses, people see if can come up with initiatives to help increase/improve this
- Early days for me, all networking and advice is brilliant
- Introduction from members
- I have enjoyed the meetings and am looking forward to our next meeting. Hope it can be in the evenings
- *Dwi'n hoffi'r strwuthyr sy'n cael ei seto mas gan siaradwraig gwadd, ac yna falle trafodaeth ar y testing ar ei ôl. Mi oedd y clonc at diwedd y cyfarfod WiRE yn go dda – pawb yn trafod yn agored, gyda amryw bwnc cysylltiedig yn did i'r ford. Hyn wedi dweud, bydde'n rhaid i fi feddwl am talu i fod yn aelod o WiRE i gael e i ddigwydd eto*
(I like the structure that is set out with a guest speaker, and the discussion that follows. The chat at the end of the WiRE group session was really good – everyone talking openly, with a few shared points coming to the table. This said, I would have to think about paying to become a WiRE member for this to happen again

- I'd like to see the group help each other with the unique issues we are facing within individual businesses. I'd like to create links between businesses that are beneficial to both parties. Possibly also communicate what other groups and associations within Lampeter are focusing their efforts on, and seeing whether support/advice or cross-marketing can be achieved for the greater good of the town
- Not inclusive if you continue to meet same time and day/night.
- Time to share and talk about current issues we are facing in our business
- A more practical approach to everyday problems and how to solve them rather than 'team building' exercises

6. Conclusions and Next Steps

1. Networking means different things to different people. For women who had entered business following a career in a corporate environment, they saw the relevance and benefits easily. For some, business networking was a relatively new concept. Although many business owners undertake networking on a regular basis, few of the participants recognised this as networking activity and as such, some found it difficult to see the relevance and realise the potential benefits of the group. In a rural area, where there is a tendency to adopt gendered roles, networking can be perceived to be something that men do as opposed to women.
2. Managing expectations needs to be done carefully. With such a diverse group of businesses, there is potential for great variation in choosing activities or talks that are relevant to all. Also, in terms of the time spent on the project, significantly more time has been spent in engaging, delivering and communicating to all project participants than was budgeted for.
3. Continue to meet as a Business Network for Women in Lampeter. The Merched Medrus group has evolved into a WiRE group, with Helen Howells and Nicola Doyle taking on the role of volunteer Network Leaders. The group meets at 6.00pm on the second Thursday of the month at Artisan's Food and Drink Boutique.
4. Establishing Action Learning Sets or Task & Finish Groups to lead on various themes, such as developing a Townscape Heritage bid for Lampeter, developing events and joint marketing to draw visitors into town.
5. Gaining objective feedback on business – mystery shopping for businesses in town.
6. Developing monitoring of customer footfall into the town to provide robust data and analytics to help develop a marketing and business campaign – work with other small towns in the area and the possibility to explore digital technology to gain demographical data of town visitors and shoppers – free town Wi-Fi is a key component of being able to gather this data.
7. Work with Business Wales to develop a tailored workshop for the group. Bronwen Raine, Regional Manager Business Wales attended a Merched Medrus meeting on 8th June.

8. Joint learning on digital promotion and marketing – informal workshops with practical skills in developing simple videos for social media.
9. Trial the approach in another rural town to increase female entrepreneurial spirit.
10. Engagement requires resource and continued momentum – many of the outcomes achieved in Lampeter have come through existing relationships between the consultant and the businesses.

7. Acknowledgements

In undertaking the activities and preparing this report, Hwylus Cyf would like to acknowledge the contribution of several organisations and individuals, including:

- The Merched Medrus of Lampeter - for their drive, ambition and collaborative spirit
- Nicola Doyle, Artisan's Food and Drink Boutique
- Sarah Ward, Y Stiwdio Brint
- Gabrielle Davies, Cadi & Grace Bespoke Flowers
- Lleucu Meinir, film maker and photographer
- Meleri Richards and Alison Kinsey, Ceredigion County Council
- The Cynnal y Cardi Local Action Group
- Hazel Lloyd-Lubran, CAVO
- Peter Austin, Ceredigion County Council
- Mel Davies and Bronwen Raine, Business Wales
- Carys Ifan, UWTSD