

Independents look to join forces in growing business

Martin Green

Importer PLB has called on independent wine merchants to travel round the country, visit each other's stores and share ideas on how to grow their businesses.

Karen Hardwick, who heads up its specialist division, pointed to the example of Cambridge Wine Merchants, winner of OLN's Drinks Retailing Award for Independent Drinks Retailer of the Year.

She said: "I say, go to Cambridge, have a look at what it's doing - what does it feel like to be a customer in its shops? The likes of Corks Out, Latitude and Oxford Wine engage with their customers - they make it a pleasant and involving experience rather than shopping in a bright-lit, stressful supermarket.

"People should visit Cambridge and Oxford and so on and see what these places are doing and share best practices.

"These independents are not competing with each other. You can grow your whole market by learning from each other and sharing ideas."

Ted Sandbach, managing director at Oxford Wine, said he and his opposite number at Cambridge Wine Merchants, Hal Wilson, want to form a group that will share ideas and unite in business ventures.

He told OLN: "I'm extremely interested in exploring this idea and myself and Hal Wilson are looking into forming a small group of top independents to share ideas and explore mutual busi-



Sanbach: looking to form a small group of independents to share ideas

ness avenues. This is absolutely not intended to be a buying group, but more as a way to work together with a number of top-class, emerging companies for our mutual good and to increase our different customer databases.

"By sharing ideas and business plans we hope to be able to learn valuable lessons from each other which we would like to pass on for the general benefit of our customers."

Wilson added: "We need a project that people feed into, and I believe some of this has to be data-led. There are 600 of us not sharing our data, but it would benefit all of us if we did."

Chris Mitchell, owner of new Edinburgh independent Cork & Cask, said he would "definitely be open" to the idea of travelling to places such as Oxford and Cambridge to learn from the best.

He said: "We can all learn from each other by taking elements from different stores and combining them into one shop. It makes sense to help each other out in this way."

New venture

Chris Mitchell opened his new Edinburgh off-licence, Cork & Cask, with funding from the Prince's Trust - a charity which helps get young people into business.

The 26-year-old said: "The traditional model of a wine shop is old and dusty, but I wanted to be more approachable and not daunting. The store will have tastings and samples to help take the complicated nature out of wine buying. Wine should be there to be enjoyed and I want to help educate people about this."

The store also offers a wide range of beers, mainly from Scottish brewers.

Mitchell said: "The Scottish beer scene is booming at the moment and I'm really pleased with the response so far to our selection of beers."