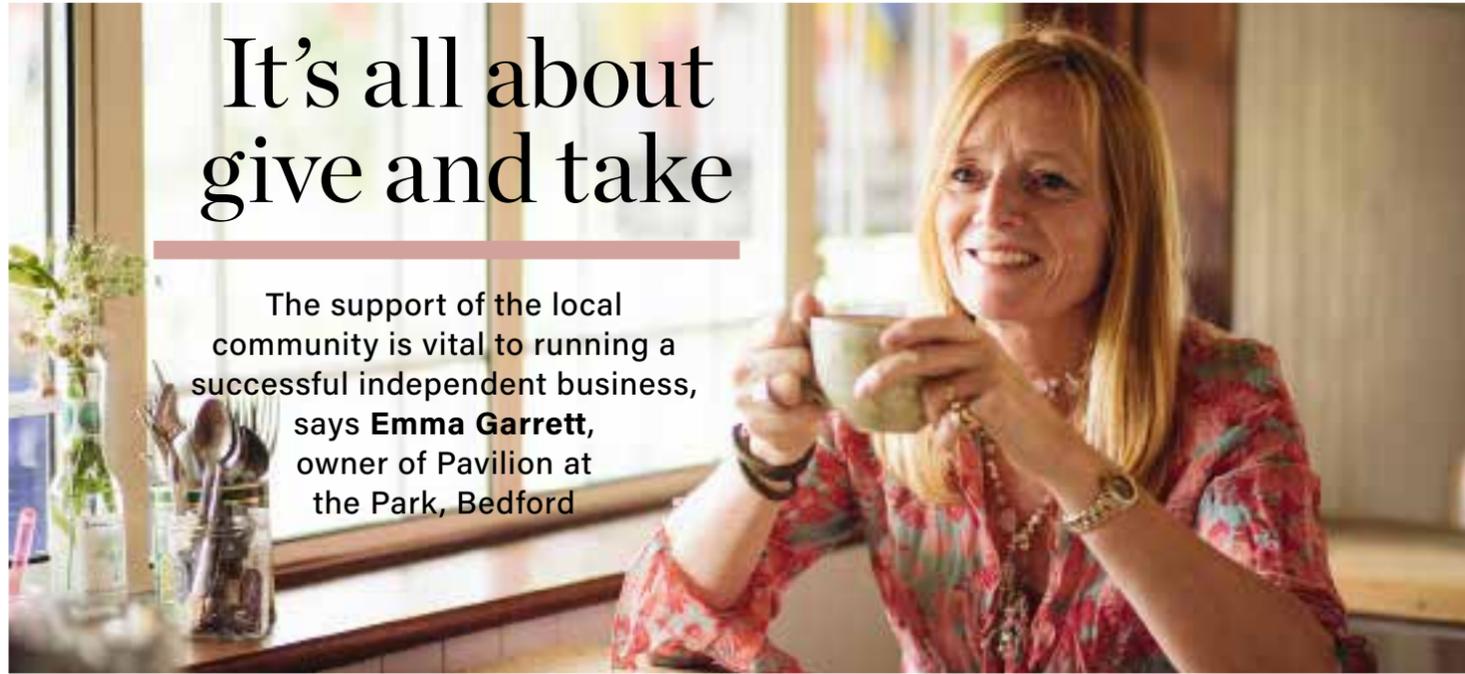


# It's all about give and take

The support of the local community is vital to running a successful independent business, says **Emma Garrett**, owner of Pavilion at the Park, Bedford



THE PAVILION AT THE PARK WHERE EMMA, TOP, WELCOMES THE LOCAL COMMUNITY FOR COFFEE, FOOD AND ENTERTAINMENT

**Setting up my business was always about putting people first, and it still is. The local community are a big part of that,** although our 'catchment area' is growing and our community now extends much further afield – it was amusing to find our cafe mentioned on *The Late Show* in the US last month.

I saw a gap in the market and wanted to fill it by giving the community something that was missing – a beating, loving heart if you like. We welcome everyone – families, dog walkers, fitness fanatics, book worms, artists, wannabe chefs, musicians, photographers, walkers, wine lovers and knitters. We provide somewhere for people to meet where there is always a friendly welcome, free WiFi, biscuits for dogs and a listening ear.

**We took a sad, unloved pavilion building in the park and turned it into a thriving community hub serving delicious coffee and food.** The old Victorian building does pose some challenges, but has also given us opportunities. We have staged open-air Shakespeare for audiences of 350 as well as an al fresco carol service for 400. Our Big Lunch picnic, now in its third year, attracts thousands to the park, and we have held Thai, Indian, Caribbean, French, Greek, Spanish and Italian pop-up supper clubs. We are fortunate to be at the heart

of a truly multicultural town and to be supported by the people who live here.

**Social media has been crucial to our success – especially Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Google reviews.** We have more than 1,500 subscribers, so email newsletters make sure they are kept in the loop with what's on at the cafe. We recently ran a competition on Facebook asking people to tell us why they loved Bedford's independent businesses – it is clear people appreciate what we do and how much we care. Word of mouth is important too and we encourage our customers to share their experiences. We are lucky enough to have won a number of awards and our mention in the *2017 Good Food Guide* really helped spread our message to people who might not otherwise have known about us.

**When it comes to the local community, it's all about give and take.** In our kitchen, we use butternut squash grown by one of our customers on his nearby allotment. In return, his family enjoy a free breakfast now and then. Our web designer likewise gets a free breakfast or lunch whenever he comes in to work on our website. We also like to source local produce wherever possible to support the local community.

We have a good relationship with all our suppliers and have started a page on our

website linking back to them – we hope that they will do the same for us. We talk to people, meet people, sample products and source what we believe to be the very best.

Talking and listening to our community is what makes us stand out – we've always got time for visitors. We support local charities such as Carers in Bedfordshire, The Bedford Daycare Hospice, The Road Victims Trust and The MS Therapy Centre, and all of these charities have their own networks that we can tap into in order to spread the news.

**When we first opened, Mondays were dead.** Our knitting, sewing and crochet group grew out of this. People suggested perhaps it wasn't worth opening on a Monday, but I was totally opposed to the idea of closing. I didn't want to be one of

“I saw a gap in the market and wanted to fill it by giving the community something that was missing – a beating, loving heart, if you like”

those cafes that you never knew whether it was going to be open or not. Instead, I thought creatively to find a solution to the problem. Monday mornings now see us hosting up to 20 people who come in for coffee, cake, social interaction and a bit of needlework. We have undertaken projects like knitting hats for Innocent smoothies (we made 650 this year!), which go to support Age UK.

**Our role in the community is to provide something that was clearly lacking.** That struck home when one of our regulars thanked me for helping her. After her husband's death, she struggled to find the motivation to get out every day. A trip to the Pavilion was just about all she could manage. As the weeks progressed, she would be greeted with a hug on arrival and

the staff would join her on their lunch breaks. She has most definitely become a friend. There are other stories like this – there was an elderly couple who used to visit regularly and then suddenly stopped coming. We discovered the husband had had a triple heart bypass and it was some months until the two reappeared. In the meantime, we found out where they lived, sent flowers and of course they were greeted with hugs when they made it back to the Pavilion for the first time. We like to create happy memories for people, but also provide a support network for those who might need some kind words.

**We were recently described on the TripAdvisor website as 'an important part of life' in the town.** Meanwhile, *The Good Food Guide* described us as a 'thriving community hub'. The people are what makes us: the customers and the team I work with. It's all about collaboration and working with local people to create something successful. ☕