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From the Small Business Network



Why open-house events are good opportunities for creative businesses

How can SMEs capitalise on events like Open House London? Rosie Niven speaks to entrepreneurs who open their homes

Rosie Niven

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Open House London gives the public a chance to see inside landmark buildings, but private houses are also opened up. Photograph: Alamy

Many entrepreneurs might shudder at the thought of inviting the public into their home and workplace, but some are finding it can be good for business. Open-house events can offer a way of showcasing work to potential customers, particularly for creative and design businesses.

Dee Wood has taken part in several of these events including the Leytonstone Arts Trail and Waltham Forest Green Open Homes. Her company ItDoesTheJob is based in her east London home and Wood says that taking part in such events is part of the firm's ethos as a "local and sustainable business".

But she adds that it also gives the company, which sells energy-saving products, greater credibility. "We are very community-minded, but these events also help us because we've found that people like to know that businesses have an actual base.

"Even having an address on the website shows that you are not fly-by-night. It gives an assurance on the e-commerce side of things that we are here and you can visit us."

Wood believes that inviting people into the energy-efficient home and workplace her family created from a burnt-out Georgian terrace in Leytonstone helps the business to get its message across. "It's one of our biggest selling points," she says. "It shows that we are not just talking about it. You are showing people what you are doing.

"A lot of the stuff we have done anyone can do. The fact that we can do it on a Grade II-listed building shows people that they can do the same. It's more difficult to get that message across through a website."

The annual Open House London event offers the public an opportunity

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to look inside buildings such as the Foreign Office and Lloyds of London, but private houses are also opened up. Some architects who have designed their own homes use the event to showcase their work.

Architect James Wright volunteered as a steward at St Paul's Cathedral when he was a student. Now founder of the architecture practice [Macdonald Wright](#), he decided to take part himself.

"When I completed the work to my own house it seemed like a logical progression to approach Open House London. It enabled me to show my work to potential clients, journalists, architects and to meet many people with an interest in architecture."

Wright says that the event has brought benefits to his business, including raising his profile among planners in the London borough of Hackney where he lives and works. He also found that it led to some commissions. "The level of interest it created has led on to many enquiries, two of which became very significant projects for us," he says.

Open-house events can also benefit creative businesses, such as Scarborough-based wood turner [Phil Callaghan](#). He has found participating in [North Yorkshire Open Studios](#) a useful way of making new contacts and building stronger relationships with his customers.

Callaghan, who works from a home studio, created an exhibition in his house to be viewed over the course of two weekends. He says that he believes the intimate nature of an event held in people's homes creates a less commercial environment than a gallery.

"Because it is a person's own home, there is less pressure to buy than there would be at a gallery or another venue," he says. "Of course, it is nice when people buy things, but you know that they are buying them because they really love it and have made a connection with you."

"It's a great opportunity to meet my customers. If you have your work on an online shop or gallery, you do not get the same feedback. Without being too hard-headed, it helps us to learn about customers' expectations and helps me to know whether I am on the right track."

Another business that finds open-house events useful is the architecture firm [vPPR](#), which is preparing to open up the recently constructed homes of two of its directors as part of London Open House 2014.

vPPR director Jessica Reynolds says she sees the event, and those the practice has participated in previously, as a chance to "step back and decide what story we wanted to tell."

Like Wright, Reynolds has found that taking part in open house events has been good for business. "At an open studio event we got three new potential projects from two developers and one private client," she says. "And after we got some publicity from it our website stopped working due to too much traffic. We weren't expecting to have so much interest."

While these events can bring business benefits, they often require paying a fee and can also mean a lot of work. Some participants structure their event so that parts of their home remain private. Others operate policies such as no shoes in the house.

As someone who has taken part in Open House London previously as a volunteer, Wright says he learned a lot about managing numbers. "Private houses are some of the most popular properties to visit and so I wanted to avoid unmanageable numbers in the house and upsetting the neighbours with too many people outside their homes."

"I opted for hourly tours of 30 people at a time with some help managing the entrance list from Open House stewards and friends."

Wright advises printing handouts and flyers to help visitors remember the details of what they saw and to make sure they have your contact details. He also suggests having a plan for unexpected visitors and to let insurers know of plans for an open house.

Dee Wood has her own strategy for managing numbers. "Our events are always free, but we do ticket so we don't get overwhelmed by numbers. We used the ticketing website Eventbrite, because it means that you only get people who are actually interested."

She says that online ticketing has the added benefit of collecting visitors' email addresses. "You should not put them on an email list without their permission, but you can email them afterwards asking if they would like to

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sign up," Wood advises. "When we launched our new website we sent everybody on our mailing list an e-book."

Wood adds that businesses taking part in an open-house event should inform the organiser if they need any help because some will provide volunteer stewards.

While open-house events do have business benefits, most participants get involved because they enjoy doing it.

Phil Callaghan says he found taking part in North Yorkshire Open Studios inspiring, as well as useful. "Having done all that work to set it up, all you have to do is turn up and talk about the thing you enjoy," he says. "That's the easy bit."

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