

Oxford Town Hall Marketing Plan

August 2013 – March 2014

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1.0 Introduction

This document is intended for use as an initial marketing plan for Oxford Town Hall.

The key to any successful marketing plan is research on areas such as product, market segments, pricing etc and this will be gathered over the coming months. Alongside our own research, organisations such as Meet Oxfordshire will be able to assist with this

In the meantime, this plan is intended to highlight immediate and on-going actions that can be completed while this research is completed. These are generally aimed at raising awareness of the venue and increasing the number of times we communicate with our customers. It should also be read alongside the Sales Plan for Town Hall Events.

The intention is then to produce a more complete, strategic plan by the end of January 2014 for the financial year 2014/15. All actions completed before then will be of benefit to the longer term plan and will also assist in creating immediate demand for our facilities.

1.1 Background

Oxford Town Hall has 14 rooms that are available for internal and external events within the Town Hall complex.

The rooms differ widely in size, quality and character and are used for a variety of purposes ranging from weddings to conferences and trade shows to community and civic functions.

The rooms are generally well maintained and in good decorative state, however as a result of increased income targets with no marketing and sales plan to support them, the department has been failing to reach target for 3 years.

A recent re-structure has introduced a Commercial Manager to lead the Events and Facilities Management Team and this document is the first step in introducing a structured and planned approach to the sales and marketing of events at the Town Hall.

2.0 Research

2.1 SWOT Analysis

The following SWOT analysis has been put together using thoughts from the team and initial impressions from the Commercial Manager.

Some areas were highlighted in more than one category and so have been placed in both. The analysis will be updated as part of the Marketing Plan for 2014/15.

<p>Strengths</p> <p>Heritage, History Not solely an Events Venue Passionate team Flexibility of set ups Central location The venue itself – unique, varied and number of rooms Customer service Size of rooms Flexibility of venue and team Bespoke events Work well together as a team</p>	<p>Weaknesses</p> <p>Access Do people know about the Town Hall facilities Lack of parking Lack of outdoor space Confused offering ref. Museum, Gallery, internal and external Events Audio Visual Services Lack of preferred suppliers for catering and AV Awareness of the facilities Balance between community and commercial events Lack of event management experience Possibly seen as a ‘frumpy’ venue Inconsistent branding/message</p>
<p>Opportunities</p> <p>Further improvements to sales and marketing processes Further development of team and customer service Run our own events Competitive and commercial pricing Customer service Private parties/dinners Weddings – need to define our niche in this market Work better with Culture and museum Hold an open day Networking with colleges to identify business opportunities Make more of/run more tours – open up the rooms to the public more</p>	<p>Threats</p> <p>Technology replacing the needs for meetings 1930’s office development possibly increasing access problems Museum development Economy Closure of Westgate Car Park Competition from hotels on price 3 month closure of Main Hall in 2015 for decoration</p>

It must be stressed that this is just an initial analysis based on a variety of opinions. It will be developed over time and the necessary strategies put in place to build on strengths, maximise opportunities, improve or manage weaknesses and monitor threats.

2.2 Product & Market Segments

Oxford Town Hall currently hosts a wide variety of events including:

- Civil Ceremonies
- Wedding Receptions
- Conferences
- Meetings
- Provision of classrooms for language schools
- Exhibitions
- Christmas Parties
- Charity/Community Events
- Civic Events
- Dinners/Banqueting
- Private Parties
- Music/Concerts

The above are booked by both internal and external customers and produce an income for room hire of c.£300K per annum.

Oxford has numerous other venues of various standards offering facilities for similar events. The size of the market place for these events is unclear as is whether or not this is growing and, if so, in which areas.

The event types listed above are all market segments available for targeting by the Town Hall and it is likely that others will be identified by the research. It is important that this is then used correctly to highlight the key areas for growth, in particular, those which match the strengths of the Town Hall.

While this research has to be completed, it is important to note at this stage that it is accepted that through a more proactive and planned approach to sales and marketing, the Town Hall can increase its share of the above markets.

2.3 Competitor Analysis

An initial competitor analysis was completed by Fiona Elliot and her findings are provided below with further comments added to the conclusions:

It is clear that there is a lot of high calibre competition within the Oxford City area who can compete strongly against the Town hall on capacity, customer service and price. These can be broken down into 4 categories

2.3.1 Hotels:

In the immediate areas, there are range of medium – high calibre hotels including the Cotswold Lodge Hotel, the Hawkwell House Hotel, the Malmaison and the Four Pillars range of hotels. These all offer civil ceremonies and wedding receptions as well as accommodating a range of meetings and conferences from 10-200.

I do not see the hotels as direct competition to the Town Hall as clients that chose hotel venues are looking for someone to do much of the logistical planning for them. This is not what a unique venue such as the Town Hall offers. However it is important to realise the packages they offer.

Hotels will have a team of sales and operations experts who will upsell all aspects of the hotel offer and be there on the day to ensure all runs to plan. The events themselves will generally run to a set formula and clients will have limited scope for personalisation or creativity.

2.3.2 Unique Historic Venues (excluding Colleges):

As would be anticipated, there are a wide range of beautiful and historic venues within Oxford and the surrounding area many of which are offering spaces for hire for weddings, private celebrations and meetings and conferencing or corporate hospitality. These venues are the main competition to Oxford Town Hall.

Venues such as the Bodleian Library, the Ashmolean Museum, Rhodes House and the Natural History Museum all offer rooms for hire either alongside their 'day role' or out of hours. These venues are generally beautiful and offer a truly unique place to celebrate or entertain. This comes at a price and often with a range of conditions on use. This is where the Town Hall can compete.

Many of these venues offer exclusive use and as such can command between £3,750 (Ashmolean Museum Ceremony and reception from 5pm for up to 150 guests) to £7,800 (Rhodes House ceremony and reception for 140 dining). Others such as Blenheim Palace would be considerably higher but not worth considering for this study. These venues will have a restricted catering list and are likely to have restrictions on type of food and drink that can be served as well as potentially limiting time restrictions as they will have to prioritise public/member access. For example you can only access the Ashmolean Museum after 5pm on a Saturday.

They generally have a small team (potentially only 1 or 2) who will handle all aspects of sales and event planning and will be there on the day to offer a unique and personalised service to clients who are likely to have very high expectations.

2.3.3 Oxford Colleges:

The Oxford Colleges must be considered competition although there are often restrictions on their usage term time) and have to use the in-house catering however they are getting increasingly commercial in their approach. They tend to offer day delegate rates (or 24hr rates including accommodation) or all inclusive room hire and catering packages.

The colleges reviewed in this study were competitive eg Bailiol College (£46.75/head inc VAT for room hire of main college dining hall and 3-course meal).

That said the customer service received during this study was very poor. Most of the colleges have a single person in their events team and as such these individuals appear to be very stretched. In both cases it took over 2 weeks to get a reply which would be very off-putting to most clients.

2.3.4 Other Venues in the Area:

There are 2 other venues of note that do not fall into any of the above categories. Said Business School and the Kassam Stadium offer significant competition in terms of capacity.

The Said Business School offers up to 300 for lecture style seminars and can offer a drinks reception in the foyer area for 300 (evening reception £1,265). It offers a range of smaller rooms which are all presented to a high standard and a high technical standard. It is known that the Town Hall has lost business to Said Business School. Prices range from £1,966 for a full day in the lecture theatre to £200 - £600 for half day/full day meetings in the smaller meeting rooms. They also offer day delegate rates from £51/hr inc a cold lunch.

They have an efficient and professional sales office which gives the impression of knowledgeable and efficient staff.

The Kassam Stadium can accommodate 500 guests and is focussing on the Indian Wedding market which is a lucrative market but is capacity driven. They offer packages of £5,000 inc VAT for a 12hr Indian wedding and have the catering and infrastructure to attract this marketing.

2.3.5 Conclusions on Competition (including additional comments):

Oxford Town Hall has a wide range of competitor venues in very close proximity particularly in relation to the wedding, conference and meeting market. There is very little in the way of competition from concert and music venues other than the O2 venue and a variety of churches but the churches do not compete on visual appeal or grandeur and the O2 is dealing with a specialist music market. That said the Town Hall can offer much to counter the competition if it is clear about what its offer is and the sales team were to approach sales in a different manner.

While the Town Hall may not have the reputation of some of the University buildings, its key spaces can rival many of them on appearance and in addition can offer flexibility in terms of availability and range of spaces. Most critically it can compete on price.

Thought needs to be given to adjusting the pricing to reflect client need and the sales team need to better understand their competition and to improve their knowledge of events so to be able to upsell the Town Hall in a more effective way. In addition the catering suppliers need to be reviewed to allow the Town Hall to compete in a range of markets both on price and cultural need.

The number of local competitors suggests a healthy local market. At an initial glance, many of these venues, with the exception of the Kassam Stadium and Said Business School, see venue hire as secondary to their main business. While that may also be true of the Town Hall it does offer the opportunity for a focussed and dedicated team to make a difference to the income figures. By promoting and delivering a first class service based upon a structured sales and marketing plan, it appears likely that we can stand out from the competition.

Work has started on an updated competitor matrix to enable pricing comparison with the Town Hall for room hire, weddings, delegate rates and miscellaneous items. One of the actions for this plan will be to ensure that competitor analysis is conducted on a regular basis, both to ensure that we remain competitive in the market place and to identify any new initiatives or ideas that we could be adopting. It will also be a means to encourage members of the team to visit other venues and increase their knowledge of the industry. With most venues advertising events that they hold it is also a useful method of identifying event organisers for the team to approach.

2.4 Further Research

It is important that all of the above points are backed up and expanded upon by further and on-going research. This will be built in to the immediate and longer term action plans.

Likewise, Customer Relationship Management which is an important part of the marketing mix, will be covered in the Sales Plan, with which it is more closely aligned.

3.0 Branding

Branding can be seen as something of a 'dark art' and its value to a venue is not easily measured. Hotel chains invest a lot of time and money in establishing a brand and this has recently expanded to their events offering; with customers promised a consistent experience in terms of facilities and customer experience.

As a stand-alone venue Oxford Town Hall does not have the same requirements and therefore any branding exercise should concentrate on improving awareness of the Town Hall through a consistently branded message.

Due to this, a full blown branding exercise is not included in the action plan but several initiatives are to help promote the Town Hall as Oxford's premier venue for events. These include looking at the signage at the Town Hall and a consistent presentation of the rooms for events. They also include reviewing the branding for the Town Hall Café.

If further research suggests that a more comprehensive branding review is required then this will be considered then.

4.0 Advertising

The most recent summary of spend for online advertising is shown below:

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Company	Type of advertising	Date Last Renewed	Cost
Choose your event	www.chooseyourevent.co.uk ; www.chooseyourvenue.com ; www.christmasvenues.com www.chooseyourwedding.com	Currently due for renewal	£425
UK Bride	www.ukbride.co.uk	07/08/12	£375
Hitched	www.hitched.co.uk Weddings	01/08/12	£449
For Better or Worse	www.forbetterforworse.co.uk	01/04/12	£75
Guides for Brides	www.guidesforbrides.co.uk	01/04/12	£232.50
Venue Directory	www.venuedirectory.com	23/03/12	£575
Venue Finder (Blue and Green)	www.venuefinder.com	17/11/12	£1200
Fynne Associates	www.fyne.co.uk & Publication Pink weddings, Wedding venue	Website paid till March 2013. Publication adhoc	£400 + ad hoc
The Wedding Directory	www.theweddingdirectory.co.uk	25/03/12	£1000
B4/ InOxford	www.oxfordshire.b4-business.com www.inoxford.com	Oct 2012	£4999 18 month - 12/13 spend - £1666
County Registration Service	The Place to Marry - Publication	8/03/12	£695
Wedding Venues	www.weddingvenues.com	2/11/11	£225
Tourism South East	www.visitoxfordandoxfordshire.com	19/08/12	£750

The total cost for the above is £11400.50 – more than is budgeted for 2013/14 for marketing and this is for online advertising only. In addition to the above, advertising in publications and other media has been completed on an ad hoc basis.

Feedback from the sales team is that the number and quality of leads produced by the above varies greatly and this will be considered when each entry comes up for renewal. Return on investment will be measured by monitoring the income produced by the enquiries generated by each source and the same approach will be used for the other activities detailed in this report.

Promotional literature and posters both outside and within the Town Hall are very limited and inconsistently branded. For example, there is no promotional material for the Town Hall in the café which has recently created its own brand distinct from that of the Town Hall. This is a cheap and effective method of promoting our facilities which we should be taking advantage of and is therefore included in the action plan.

We also need to identify other advertising that may be required to increase income for Oxford Town Hall and budget for this accordingly.

5.0 Social Media

Social Media is a low cost and an in vogue method of keeping in touch with customers. Currently we have 990 followers on twitter and 590 likes on Facebook. When compared to 1300 Council employees and 8675 followers of the City Council twitter feed, it is obvious that these numbers can be increased.

Both mediums are currently used sparingly and this perhaps explains the low number of contacts that we have on both. By increasing the number of tweets/posts issued we will both increase awareness of the venue and the number of people subscribing to each method.

There is also the risk of a confusing and diluting the message being sent. Currently, Oxford Town Hall and The Museum of Oxford share a facebook page but have different twitter feeds with the Museum have substantially more followers; 4321. A clear and consistent policy on communication via these methods needs to be established to ensure that the relevant people are receiving the relevant message.

The action plan recommends at least 3 communications each week with more if enough 'newsworthy' events occur. There is a danger of posting for the sake of it but simple messages such as ones congratulating couples being married at the Town Hall would tick the boxes for both marketing and customer service.

The Town Hall also has a presence on Trip Advisor which is managed by the Events Team. Whether or not this is beneficial to us as an events venue needs to be determined. The majority of feedback appears to be linked to visitors to the Museum and Gallery.

6.0 Data Capture

For a venue to be successful it is vital that it continually raises awareness of its facilities and the type of events it can hold.

Advertising and social media are two methods of achieving this and both can be conducted at a lower cost if a venue has its own substantial database of existing and potential customers. Therefore, a major part of the action plan attached with this document is the introduction of several simple methods to increase the size of our database.

An additional use of a larger database is that it can be sold as a benefit to organisers of public events. By being able to communicate to a large audience at a relatively low cost we can help them attract attendees to their event. The same applies to increasing the number of people we can communicate with through the social media channels highlighted above. Any data protection issues will be addressed as part of this initiative

7.0 Industry Events& Exhibitions

Another method of increasing awareness of the venue and making new contacts is through attendance at relevant events and exhibitions. These include wedding fayres, venue exhibitions etc. The team attended such an event at Rhodes House in July 2013.

The cost/benefit of each event needs to be assessed separately and this is included in the action plan with a view to increasing our attendance at such events for 2014.

These events need to be distinguished from networking events held by business groups such as the Chamber of Commerce. Attendance at these events is covered in the Sales Plan.

8.0 Communications

Currently, there is minimal, if any, proactive communication with either existing or potential customers.

The introduction of a regular, monthly, e-mail to our database would resolve this and would require minimal cost and effort. The Town Hall has many stories to tell and events to advertise so this communication should be used for both information and sales. By combining the two it will encourage customers to stay subscribed to the communication and hopefully make them forward it on to others.

We have over 2000 contacts on Artifax which will hopefully grow quickly given the data capture initiatives referred to above. While there are concerns about whether or not we are allowed to contact customers in this method without their permission, this should not prevent us from trying this initiative.

The 'What's On' guide for Oxford Town Hall, Museum and Gallery is currently produced quarterly and serves as an information brochure for visitors. Opinions on this within the team are mixed and there is the opportunity to enhance this guide as a sales tool so it is included for review in the action plan.

Again, we also need to establish what communications are sent by the Museum of Oxford to ensure that a consistent message is produced.

9.0 Public Relations

Public Relations is an underestimated method of creating and maintaining a positive image. It is a low cost and relatively simple way to create and maintain awareness of a venue.

Alongside the increased social media activity mentioned above, a more proactive approach to PR will help keep the Town Hall in the spotlight as a thriving events venue in Oxford. By issuing our own press releases and encouraging organisers of events, especially community led, to issue their own the local market place will receive constant reminders that the Town Hall can be used for all types of events.

An increased use of PR is included in the action plan and it is expected that the City Council should also benefit from the positive image promoted by this.

10.0 Website

The Town Hall website is currently useful as an information tool but has limited use as a sales and marketing tool. It has some content which is either out of date or no longer relevant and more prominence needs to be given to income producing sections.

The domain name www.oxfordtownhall.co.uk takes you to the Town Hall section within the Council's own website. Ideally this would be a standalone site which is then replicated in the Council's own website to enable the Town Hall to have its own identity. The same concept has already been introduced for Direct Services.

Opportunities for data capture are missed and there is no facility for special offers to be advertised. A few simple, low cost changes to the website would produce major improvements and these are highlighted in the action plan.

11.0 Action Plan

A recommended action plan covering the areas detailed above is provided below:

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Action	By Whom	By When
<p>Research Keep competitor analysis up to date by checking at 3 of the websites each month and one personal visit to a venue each month</p> <p>Conduct research in to size of market segments in Oxford and identify opportunities for growth</p> <p>Develop SWOT analysis and implement strategies around this</p>	<p>RC, SS, LP</p> <p>RC</p> <p>RC</p>	<p>On-going starting from 12th August 2013</p> <p>31st January 2014</p> <p>On-going</p>
<p>Branding: Review current branding including logo, templates and letterhead</p> <p>Review format used for quotes and events plans</p> <p>Produce branding for venue eg, pads, pens and sweets for delegates</p> <p>Review internal and external branding of Oxford Town Hall and Cafe including signage, appearance of main entrance and a consistent set up for meetings</p>	<p>RC with input from Comms. and team RC & SS</p> <p>RC</p> <p>RC, LP, LPo</p>	<p>31st August 2013 COMPLETE</p> <p>31st August 2013 COMPLETE</p> <p>31st August 2013 In progress</p> <p>31st August 2013 In Progress</p>
<p>Advertising: Review current portfolio and renew as required based upon enquiries received in 2013</p> <p>Maximise use of current advertising by ensuring all entries are accurate and up to date</p> <p>Identify any new advertising to include budget/marketing plan for 2014/15</p> <p>Review promotional literature and opportunities in Oxford Town Hall & Cafe</p>	<p>RC, SS, LP</p> <p>LP</p> <p>RC</p> <p>RC</p>	<p>Review complete by 31st August COMPLETE</p> <p>Renewals – on-going 31st August 2013 COMPLETE</p> <p>1st December 2013 COMPLETE</p> <p>31st August 2013 In progress</p>
<p>Social Media: Clarify positioning of twitter and facebook for Oxford Town Hall and The Museum of Oxford</p> <p>Increase number of followers on twitter from 990 to 2000 and number of likes on facebook from 590 to 1000</p> <p>Send at least 3 tweets and place at least 3 posts on facebook each week</p>	<p>RC</p> <p>LP</p> <p>LP</p>	<p>31st August 2013 COMPLETE</p> <p>31st December 2013 In progress</p> <p>31st December 2013 In progress On-going starting from 12th August 2013</p>

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Review use of Trip Advisor for Oxford Town Hall	RC	30 th September 2013 COMPLETE
Data Capture: Implement data capture on website	RC, ICT/Comms	30 th September 2013 In progress
Devise a method for data capture for visitors to the Shop/Museum	RC, Culture	31 st October 2013
Encourage Council employees to sign up to Town Hall Newsletters, facebook and twitter	RC, Comms	31 st August 2013 COMPLETE
Encourage Oxford City residents to sign up to Town Hall Newsletters, facebook and twitter	RC, Comms	1 st September 2013 for inclusion in November newsletter COMPLETE
Produce name cards to be used at relevant events for data capture	RC	31 st December 2013
Devise a method for data capture for attendees at Christmas parties	LP	1 st December 2013 In progress
Increase number of e-mail contacts in our database to 3000	RC	31 st March 2014
Industry Events/Exhibitions: Identify relevant events/exhibitions that Oxford Town Hall should attend along with associated costs for inclusion in 2014/15 budgets and Marketing Plan	RC	31 st December 2013
Monitor success of wedding fair to be held at Town Hall in September	RC	22 nd September 2013 COMPLETE
Communications: Implement a monthly e-mail to our database	RC, Comms	On-going from 1 st November 2013 COMPLETE
Review 'What's On' Leaflet and communications sent by the Museum	RC, Culture	31 st August 2013 COMPLETE
Public Relations: Ensure at least 2 press releases are going out each month either from Oxford Town Hall or event organisers	RC, Comms	On-going from October 2013
Identify PR initiatives for inclusion in 2014/15 marketing plan and budget	RC	31 st January 2014
Website: Review and update all content of website	RC	31 st August 2013 COMPLETE
Investigate possibility of Oxford Town Hall becoming a standalone domain	RC, Comms, ICT	30 th September 2013 In progress

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