



# THE BUSINESS BENEFITS OF ENGAGING WITH SCHOOLS

## TOUCHWOOD SHOPPING CENTRE

*A brief Case Study of the business benefits to Touchwood of engaging with schools and educational establishments in the local area.*

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# INTRODUCTION

## Introduction

Touchwood Shopping Centre has always had a strong reputation for its work in the local community across all areas of the population, not just our shopper demographic. Touchwood has a specific 'Community Engagement Strategy' which is available separately but this abstract highlights the particular business benefits of working with a local school.

Whilst the benefits to the local school pupils of working with a major employer are often obvious, the benefits to the business are often harder to quantify and many businesses attempt to justify the engagement process under a corporate and social responsibility banner. Whilst this is a perfectly acceptable noble approach there can be no doubt there are additional business benefits and this will be covered in the following few sections.

Working with schools, colleges and educational institutions has helped to secure the long-term sustainability of the Centre and it is hoped that the following sections will help to persuade many other local businesses to engage and justify that engagement to business owners, investors and employees.



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# CASE STUDY – THE ARDEN SCHOOL CHALLENGE

## Case Study – The Arden School Challenge

In June 2016 Touchwood worked with the Arden Academy in Knowle to deliver five days of work experience to fifty of their year twelve students (first year of A-levels). Instead of running the event as a 'normal' work experience with students shadowing an employee a challenge was set to the students.

In September 2016 Touchwood celebrates its fifteenth anniversary of opening and it was tasked to the students to design and deliver an engaging event to our shoppers for a budget of up to £10,000. This budget was a normal expected allocation from the Touchwood marketing budget so no additional financing was involved. Touchwood would then deliver this event as part of the celebrations for the anniversary and the students would be invited as VIP guests on the day to see their planning come to life.

The timetabling of the event was relatively simple;



DAY	SCHEDULE
<b>MONDAY</b>	Health and Safety Briefing Team allocations Classroom Session – About Touchwood Classroom Session – About Event Planning
<b>TUESDAY</b>	Work Experience Rotation across all departments Afternoon Event-Planning drop-in sessions
<b>WEDNESDAY</b>	Work Experience Rotation across all departments Afternoon Event-Planning drop-in sessions
<b>THURSDAY</b>	Mentored Event Planning
<b>FRIDAY</b>	'Dragon's Den' style event presentation Judging and Award nomination

The program was designed to give the students a detailed knowledge of the real day-to-day workings of the Centre and all employees were briefed to educate staff on the specifics of running a marketing event as it applied to their department. The program was also designed to give maximum benefit to the students whilst minimizing the disruption to the Centre operations.

# BUSINESS BENEFITS

## Business Benefits

The following is a summary of the key business benefits, followed by more detailed descriptions in the following sections;

### COMMERCIAL

- Direct interaction with our local shopper demographic
- Design solutions without consultancy intervention and cost
- Free consultancy on what is good and bad about the business
- Focus group results from a long engagement with our core customer

### PERSONNEL

- Increased motivation in the workforce
- Promotes inward reflection of workforce job roles
- Increased performance from the team
- Promotes team interaction between departments
- Promotes interaction across companies within the organization (Facilities Management, Property Management, Landlord and Retailer)
- Improved recruitment and job awareness

### INNOVATION

- Fresh approach to business challenges
- Wide-ranging ideas and innovative event delivery

### OPERATIONS

- Additional eyes on the ground and attention to detail
- Enhanced level of operation and interaction with customers
- Significant research completed for event delivery

### REPUTATION

- Enhanced perception in the local populace
- Increased positive PR and local engagement



# COMMERCIAL BENEFITS

## Commercial Benefits

### THE LOCAL SHOPPER DEMOGRAPHIC

It is easy to forget that the student is more often than not also a key part of the demographic of the shopper catchment for the centre. They are also a hard part of the demographic to interact with from a market research perspective as most research organisations will not interview people under 18 in a shopping centre due to safeguarding issues.

Careful interaction with the school and a strong 'feedback loop' can give ample opportunity for market research as to the wants, needs and preferences of the younger catchment and has opened the eyes of the centre as to the value of listening to a captive audience. For example, we often do 'celebrity visits' to engage with the shoppers and the students suggested Michelle Keegan as a celebrity that would engage well with their demographic and the response we had from an appearance was huge – exactly as they predicted.

### SOLUTIONS DESIGN

The younger demographic, particularly well-educated students, have an amazing ability to deliver real-life solutions 'out of the box' and their imagination is not tempered by age and experience. This can lead to outline solutions for difficult challenges and alternative approaches to traditional issues. This again is about listening to the students and setting them appropriate challenges.

### FREE CONSULTANCY

Students do not tend to be shy in giving feedback of all kinds about the business. Asking the students in a controlled but relaxed environment what is good and bad about the business can bring back a wealth of information and alter priorities. For example, mobile charging is useful to younger students, a great place to be dropped off is important and discrete security is more important than we imagined.

### LONGER ENGAGEMENT AND FOCUS

With the Arden Challenge we had a week of engagement with the students as a large group. This gave the students time to explore all aspects of the business and generate a good group understanding of what makes the business tick. When the marketing events were then created these took in all aspects of the centres management ethos and restrictions but still managed to deliver something above our expectations.



# PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

## Personnel Implications

### INCREASED WORKFORCE MOTIVATION

When a challenge such as this is launched there can often be a slight downturn in motivation as the wider team focus on the potential negatives of having to work with someone they don't know, time spent training the individual and a million other reasons not to look forward to it.

What we found in reality is that it created an increased level of engagement in the shopping centre staff as they planned for the week, made sure diaries were interesting, processes and procedures were correct to ensure safety and compliance and a genuine wish to show-off the unique factors in each department. Over the period of the challenge there was a distinct sense of engagement at all levels to the event.

### INWARD REFLECTION

As a result of having to prepare for the arrival of students into the centre and direct job-shadowing there was a great deal of inward reflection from most members of staff as to how their day was organized and what principle foci needed to be during the week. This was a rare chance to step aside from the daily routine and take time to look at their own roles.

### BETTER TEAM PERFORMANCE

Leading on from the two key implications above, performance of the centre during the week of the challenge was enhanced in all areas. The centre saw a distinct change in quality of delivery, focus on operational excellence and adherence to process and policy. This was despite having to mentor students throughout the organisation at all levels of management and operational ability.

### BETTER TEAM AND COMPANY INTERACTION

The large number of students in the centre effectively forced closer interactions not only between team members but also between partner companies and organisations. Touchwood has subcontracted facilities management to Spie and Bilfinger for hard and soft services respectively, along with Workman for property management. The team and inter-company working on the project saw considerable team development and relationship building as students crossed traditional boundaries, resources were shared and knowledge was passed.

### IMPROVED RECRUITMENT AND JOB AWARENESS

With exposure to the business it gives additional opportunity for Touchwood to encourage engagement with the industry, awareness of career paths and direct contact with potential future staff. This has been a practical implication already for Touchwood – enabling us to recruit our Summer 'life-guards'.

# INNOVATION

## Innovation

### FRESH APPROACHES TO BUSINESS CHALLENGES

As previously covered, the open approach of younger students can have an enlivening effect on the organisation and the sheer inquisitiveness of a well-educated group of students entering the organisation caused an inevitable look at the 'why' of many aspects of business operation and learnings were taken from many aspects of the week. The key focus here is to accurately record feedback and then act upon this feedback where relevant and possible.

### INNOVATIVE EVENT DELIVERY

The core focus of the week was for the students to pitch an event to celebrate the opening of Touchwood in 2001 and its fifteenth year of operation.

What was truly refreshing was the huge breadth of ideas and thought that was put into the pitch of the events. With over fifty students taking a week to work up to pitch level throughout the organisation, this equated to somewhere in the region of 1,000 hours of creative input to our centre – multiple factors above what a marketing company could be employed to put in. With such an input of time it was inevitable that a large volume of ideas would be generated, in fact far more than we could use. The winning pitch contained innovation in itself, but what we actually noted was at least two additional events that were driven off of the back of ideas that were not suitable for the main pitch.

Innovation also took large and small forms from the sublime to the blindingly obvious to the subtle. One such example is that the Touchwood team had always focused on the 15<sup>th</sup> birthday idea, this was turned into a 'cystal anniversary' with crystal being the fifteenth wedding anniversary gift but also subtly removing the fifteenth focus as we want to focus on youth and innovation as a centre and not getting older. The use of crystal also opened up a myriad of marketing and event opportunities.





# OPERATIONS

## Operations

### MORE EYES ON THE GROUND AND ATTENTION TO DETAIL

With another 1,000 hours in the business over the course of the week, this has an obvious benefit of more 'eyes' surveying the business, spotting challenges and providing solutions. This increased attention to detail which is enhanced further by the Touchwood team having to demonstrate their roles, has inevitable positive benefits for the centre – forcing a focus towards the day to day items that may not have been observed for some time.

### ENHANCED OPERATIONS AND INCREASED CUSTOMER SERVICE

The customer tended to feel more engaged during the week as they see the positive work Touchwood is doing with the students. This is, of course, a qualitative analysis but a general 'feel-good' factor definitely invigorated the operations, absence was down and staff made that extra effort to offer operational excellence and demonstrate their abilities.



# REPUTATION

## Reputation

### ENHANCED REPUTATION IN THE LOCAL POPULACE

With the challenge Touchwood created at least an additional fifty student advocates of the centre who would defend its reputation going forwards and provide positive reinforcement of messaging.

In addition to this, teachers, parents and customers all saw the direct interactions of the staff with local students and this would have been reputationally enhancing.

With the network of contacts and groups that pervades a town such as Solihull there have been additional benefits through many areas of both the school and Touchwood, from being able to hold up the Arden Challenge as a showcase of employee engagement within Ofsted inspections to enabling production of documents such as this which drive additional PR and learning. There have been many occasions when the challenge has been brought up in local meetings, not by myself or my team, but by third party organisations that have caught wind of the challenge and are questioning the outcomes.

### INCREASED POSITIVE PR AND LOCAL ENGAGEMENT

It is not to be shied away from that this kind of challenge adds significantly to the opportunities for local public relations, press releases, media coverage and awards recognition and we are not ashamed to highlight this angle. Coverage of the event is good for the school, the business and the individuals and this event has a long 'run-time' as not only do they pitch the event but then have interaction in the final delivery of the event.

The event has allowed the centre to be entered for awards such as with the British Council of Shopping Centres and the Chambers of Commerce and has seen local press coverage and regional interest from education.

Local engagement is also key as the message an event such as this sends out is that Touchwood is open to conversations around staff development, charitable causes, career pathways and educational opportunities and this in turn has led to many approaches from like-minded organisations to develop relationships and promote opportunities. At a time when local stakeholder engagement is critical this is a very important aspect of the event.

