

ODEON ORPINGTON: THE MODERN FACE OF A CINEMA BUSINESS ICON

Odeon has been a stalwart of the business for decades — Mark Trompeteler discovered how the company is facing the future when he visited its newest seven-screen multiplex



In my house is a small framed English Heritage archive photograph of a classic 1930s cinema — Odeon Balham. It is a cherished reminder of where I first fell in love with cinema as a youth.

Today, like any cinema business, Odeon has to strive continually to enhance and improve its customers' experience.

Paul Donovan was appointed Chief Executive Officer of Odeon UCI Cinema Group two years ago and launched a transformation strategy to make the company more guest-focused, using many of the training processes, marketing techniques, CRM and other technologies, that are commonly used in other consumer-facing industries. Public press statements from him have stated that the company is making good progress with its strategic changes. Among the developments, there has been a scrapping of online booking fees, the refurbishment of cinemas and an increased focus on staff training. It is a particularly interesting time to visit a brand new Odeon to see how this classic cinema business icon is facing the competitive environment of today. With 959 seats in total, across seven screens and a cinema

featuring Odeon's second ISENSE screen in the UK with Dolby Atmos, its latest site gives an insight not only into the technology of a modern Odeon, but also a sense of the operational and management approach.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The location of this new cinema, in Orpington, Kent, was a pleasant nod to the past, with a central location in the middle of a suburban high street. This was the only physical reference to the past in this impressive, immaculate new cinema. A simple linear, functional exterior leads you through entrance doors to a small entrance lobby with an escalator and lifts to a first floor foyer. Above the escalator is a huge image of an astronaut in space, a kind of visual metaphor that this cinema is going to deliver "out of this world" entertainment experiences. This was echoed beyond the giant image of the astronaut with use of space imagery and "ground control to space" voicetrack recreations in some of the Odeon's new pre-feature on-screen announcements, coupled with eye-dazzling new branding, all underline that message.

The range of refreshments, snacks and foodstuffs available in the foyer was

astounding with an above-average selection of wines and beers to rival any Curzon or Everyman, as well as many other drinks snacks and foods. The foyer also featured an in-screen dining concept with freshly baked pizza, from its Croma Pizza Point counter, with a small café style seating area.

TECHNICAL MANAGEMENT

Just off the foyer is a small server room in which is located a metal cage cupboard containing the 20TB server and theatre management system. All the films and other content (trailers, adverts etc.) are ingested into the TMS and stored and distributed across the screens depending on where they need to play that day or week. They can ingest locally at each screen too if they so wish, but this isn't common as most content goes via the TMS.

Trevor Cavell, the manager, and his team have various methods of DCP delivery and ingest. They have two "electronic" systems whereby they are sent files over a secure satellite or internet broadband network, or they have the features delivered on a hard drive that the management team load into the TMS and ingest. Odeon has its own UK-based internal central playlist managers that build all playlists for the whole of the UK and Ireland. Trevor explained how meticulous these managers are and how they ensure that all screens





play the right content for their market.

Odeon has a Network Operating Centre in Norway, and these specialists support the teams in the cinema with anything that may not go to plan. Trevor and his team work closely with them and their own Odeon engineers to remedy any issues they come across. The remote programming extends to dimming down the lights and bringing them back up. All cinemas' auditoria have been set up locally to react in the right way once certain commands are triggered on the playlist. This is standardised as much as possible with some small local changes, but Trevor stated it works well. Adverts and trailers are received separately from features, usually, but they are all placed together on playlists and run straight through. While the technology and remote planning is excellent, Trevor emphasised that they were also the human check on the ground to ensure everything is running smoothly for every screening.

Servicing is carried out by internal Regional Operations Engineers. They visit sites on a monthly basis performing one full health check on each auditorium as well as checking all the important presentation aspects such as focus, alignment,

▼ The cinema has a state-of-the-art 20TB server and TMS installed (above). The foyer (below) has concessions including the Cromia pizza point



MEET THE MANAGER

I was delighted to visit the cinema and be shown around by its General Manager, Trevor Cavell, who kindly also agreed to chat to me about some of the customer facing aspects of their work.

MT: How is your 50-strong team organised?

TC: I have two Deputy Managers who oversee operations and key decisions when I'm not in the cinema, but we also have five Guest Experience Supervisors who run the day-to-day shifts. They all have individual areas of accountability such as overseeing Health and Safety Checks, Retail Orders, and Local Marketing. All of our Cinema Hosts are trained across all areas of the business (Ushering, Retail, Foyer Hosting and Limitless), but only around 20 of them are trained on the Cromia Pizza offer, as there's some additional fresh food and training required. I'm passionate about developing our people and internal promotion.

MT: Amongst "old timers" of the exhibition industry, perhaps supported by the likes of Mark Kermode and other commentators, there's been criticism in recent years about a lack of showmanship in multiplexes. How do you give customers a special experience?

TC: Our strategy is all about transporting our guests to amazing worlds and giving them a great time. This is achieved in a wide variety of ways. People are at the core of it, but technology plays a role too. Last year, Odeon changed the way we operate in our cinemas so that more Cinema Hosts and Guest Experience Managers are front of house providing great hospitality. We are seeing the return of masking to frame the images and auditoria all have ambient music. We are committed to ensuring the cinema experience isn't cheapened and we're seeing the impact in the results of our business and feedback.

Odeon has come a long way since 1930 and our heritage is something I'm proud of. Our passion for film remains the same and the cinema experience is so deep-rooted that it is embodied in everything we do. We pride ourselves on cutting-edge technology and the widest choice of experiences from Film to Live Football and Opera. Being asked to open the brand new cinema in Orpington was without doubt one of the proudest moments of my career – a chance to set the standards from scratch and build a team from nothing was an opportunity I'll never forget. I couldn't be happier with the enjoyable environment we've created and hopefully that comes across to guests when they visit!

MT: Could you give an idea of your weekly cycle of operations as a team?

TC: After 11 years with Odeon and UCI, because of film release dates and weekly timesheets, my work and personal life exists on a Friday to Thursday working week now! For me, the important bit starts with choosing the films and writing the timesheet on a Monday. It's so important to get the choice of films right, looking at what local competitors have had success with and perhaps might have dropped too early. Once we have the times and films confirmed, that's when everything kicks in, we can start programming for sale on our systems, writing rotas to reflect our opening times and business levels and programming our TMS to ensure films show on time!





◀ A clinically clean projection room (far left), is host to the latest projection and audio kit including a 56-channel Dolby Atmos installation (left)

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brightness and stability. He informed me that if they have any immediate concerns, the NOC in Norway can assist remotely. If they cannot correct the issue due to hardware failure then their emergency engineers are called upon.

TECH SPECS

The cinema utilises various NEC projectors in conjunction with Doremi playback servers. Dolby CP 750 and 850 sound processors are used together with LuisWaSSman amplifiers and speakers throughout. The “standard” screens are configured for 7.1 surround using 2K projection, providing more than adequate illumination, resolution and sound quality for the relatively small screens in comparison to Screen 4, the PLF screen. The PLF ISENSE screen is equipped with full 56-channel Dolby Atmos as well as utilising 4K projection.

“Both IMAX and Dolby Vision are very immersive experiences,” explained Trevor, “Odeon has many IMAX screens and I love the format, but we are also proud of our own ISENSE brand. We offer 4K projection with a large, bright, curved, masked screen to present the film in the best possible way. The screen technology is of the highest quality to ensure the image is bright and uniform to all seats. We’ve installed Dolby Atmos with 56 channels for a truly thundering and impacting, immersive movie experience. In Orpington, all 276 seats are Premier Seats with additional leg room and headrests.”

Odeon’s 3D system of choice, RealD requires a high-gain reflected polarised surface and, as with all high-gain screen surfaces, screens must be curved to ensure best possible light uniformity — so they

always use curved screens with 3D. Orpington has Harkness Clarus 170 screens which offer a better uniformity than standard 2.4 silver screens, as well as providing improved image contrast and clarity. All the 7 screens are 3D capable.

ISENSE STUNNER

The first time I visited this Odeon was a pre-arranged visit with Trevor, during which we toured all areas of the cinema and had extensive conversations. The second time was as a cinemagoer with my wife to see *Gods of Egypt* in the ISENSE auditorium. During my first visit, Trevor screened the Dolby Atmos demonstration material that many of us are familiar with in the PLF auditorium. It was the best experience of seeing and listening to this familiar material that I have had to date. With its 18

overhead Atmos speakers, I began to question former ideas of the uniqueness of sound at, say, the Odeon BFI Imax, or even at the Dolby HQ. The presentation of *Gods of Egypt* in just 5:1 at Orpington was still an audio visually stunning experience.

DIGITAL CINEMA COMING OF AGE.

In today’s mainstream cinema exhibition scene it is inevitable that most cinemas will be a multiplex with an array of functional modern oblong box type auditoria that bear no relation to the picture palace experience of yesteryear. Trevor and his team all seem to share a distinct, clear vision of what they think modern cinema exhibition should be and their and Odeon’s position within it. It is as if, after all the doom and gloom of the disappearance of the projectionist’s role and the demise of celluloid “purring” through a projector, digital cinema has now come of age. The technology is only as good as the people who operate it — and here some staff had been liberated from the confines of the projection box and back office functions to go into the light of customer-facing areas.

At just 31 years old, I was struck at how well Trevor, the general manager, was leading a similarly youthful team of nearly 50 staff. The whole operation appeared to run like a well-oiled machine. All seemed so positive about their customers, their work and their cinema.

The technology, management and team at the Odeon Orpington are a brilliant example of how rapid changes of the past decade have produced a newly established digital exhibition industry. This modern cinema seemed as exciting and impressive as the classic Odeon Balham of my youth — in many ways, probably more so. **CT**

THE KEY INFORMATION



ODEON, ORPINGTON

OPENED ON: 26 FEBRUARY, 2016

OWNED BY: ODEON

NUMBER OF SCREENS: SEVEN

PLF FORMAT: ODEON ISENSE 4K PROJECTION

MANAGER: TREVOR CAVELL