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Picture House, Uckfield

A three-screen cinema with restaurant, The Picture House dates back to 1916. Find out more at picturehouseuckfield.com

Uckfield's Picture House Cinema & Restaurant won "Cinema of the Year" at the 2018 Screen Awards and is an exemplar of the real value that cinema can bring to a locality. **Mark Trompeteler** headed to the thriving town in South East England to investigate.

IN THE HEART OF EAST Sussex lies the small town of Uckfield. With the south coast, the local Sussex countryside and good links to London, the town is thriving. Prominently sited on the high street is the independently owned Picture House Cinema with its accompanying restaurant directly opposite. This cinema is proudly independent and its owner Kevin Markwick has developed the business to reach outstanding standards of cinema exhibition excellence – achieving numerous local business, national and European cinema industry awards. And woe betide you should you make the mistake of confusing it with the Picturehouse chain in Kevin's presence.

Know your audience

Kevin learned about the need to programme for your audience as he grew up. The son of the cinema's owner, if a

film went badly that week, he saw the direct effect on what went on the dinner table at home. For him programming is key and he doesn't understand why some cinema owners get others to programme their cinema – he and his team do that, and he regards it as one of the joys of cinema ownership.

The local demographic tends towards the mature and Kevin describes what he offers as "upmarket mainstream", programming the main commercial releases alongside their curated programme of classics and a significant amount of live event and cultural cinema – a staggering 25% of the total number of screenings. Digital cinema can bring the output of the world's big city cultural venues to small towns and his audience love that. All this is integrated to their restaurant which includes such ticket and F&B packages as "Movie Meal Deal" and "Cream Tea Classics", all bookable online.

DCP delivery is facilitated by MPS's LANsat and Unique Digital's MovieTransit with live event broadcasts available in



Independence, constant investment, development and updating

The striking exterior of the building, built in 1916, harks back to its original purpose as a Garrison Theatre which entertained the troops stationed at nearby Maresfield Park Camp during the First World War. It became a full-time cinema in 1920 and was purchased by Kevin Markwick's father Roy in 1964. Originally, with a single screen, stalls and balcony, it had 500 seats. This was reduced to 310 seats in 1967 to provide legroom and comfort. The cinema re-opened in March 1979 after conversion into a twin. The former stalls, now Screen 1, were turned around to face the front of the building with projection from the former proscenium arch position. Upstairs the original projection position and seat direction of the balcony were retained to form Screen 2. A brilliantly designed extension was completed in 2000 which wrapped around the original building adding corridor and storage space on both sides, an office, and a sideways Screen 3. In 2010, all three screens converted to digital at the same time. In 2015 a total refurbishment of the cinema interior took place alongside the acquisition of a substantial restaurant on the other side of the high street. In 2018, refurbishment of the restaurant and its kitchen and the introduction of a £120,000 integrated website, which helps drive the success operation, were completed.

all three screens. Hard of hearing facilities are also available in all three screens. The Rosetta Bridge TMS is used. Servicing for the cinema technology is carried out by Omnex. The Sony 4K projectors were acquired from CinemaNext and are still under guarantee – that, together with the improved lamp life of the new generation of light sources, is saving on servicing costs. The cinema does not screen any content in 3D.

Know your audience

Promotion of the programme and growth of the audience is achieved by a variety of techniques including data analytics. The team is very active at marketing, using attractively designed brochures, in-venue advertisements, weekly emails and social media. Kevin knows that his Facebook following

^ Above: Winner of the 2018 Screen Awards cinema of the year, the Picture House collects accolades from all quarters for its focus on a quality experience

^ Below: Posters of classic feature films line the corridors – this is a safe haven for committed cinephiles

has a high proportion of 30+ females and can promote some content more effectively to that demographic perhaps than by other means. A membership scheme for the cinema has been a significant factor in growing the audience. Currently, the cinema has approximately 2,000 members who pay an annual subscription. The cinema sends out member-specific material as well as a general weekly newsletter to 9,000 email addresses. Last year saw 150,000 attendances, a significant amount of which not only purchased F&B at the cinema, but also used the restaurant opposite.

Reaching the audience online is important and the cinema's website is easy to navigate and not too wordy. There are simple, attractive offers listed on the site, such as "Movie Meal Deal" (two courses and a film for £23.95) and "Theatre Meal Deal" (two courses and an event cinema show for £35).

▼ BASIC SCREEN SPECS

SCREEN & SIZE	SEATS	PROJECTION	SOUND
10m Scope	115	Sony SRX - R510P 4K 7.1Bi Amp	Christie Vive Speaker
5.2m Scope	75	Sony SRX - R510P 4K 7.1 QSC Amp	JBL Speakers
4.7m Scope	99	Sony SRX - R510P 4K 7.1 QSC Amp	QSC Speakers



What exactly makes this cinema so special?

I had the real pleasure of spending a morning with Kevin and looking around the cinema and restaurant and being able to have a good long conversation with him. What struck me was how in a subtle, understated way the whole operation of his business, every aspect of it, exudes a real love for cinema. His team strives to give customers the best possible experience. The attention to detail in all aspects of the operation is impressive. If his father laid down the foundations for an operation that exudes a love for cinema and a great entertainment experience, then Kevin has certainly updated that and ensured it all now operates within effective and profitable business practices. So how can I break down what makes this example of cinema exhibition so special. I'd put it into four distinct categories...

1 Great cinema ambience and attention to detail driving growth and loyalty

Up until recent times my experience of multiplexes has been watching a film in an oblong box, which had little character, and which was part of a larger complex driven by the blatant imperative to buy food and drinks. Mild improvements included playing contemporary music in the screens, in the nondescript foyer and the toilet areas prior to the film starting. Honestly? It felt as if I was in an industrial film-viewing factory.

At this small complex, each screen has the feel that it is a luxurious mini-cinema in its own right. The seats are comfortable, the conundrum of consumption of F&B has been beautifully sorted out, the non-synch music is more gentle, the décor and colours, and the carpeting, give a warm, welcoming feel to the auditorium. The magic that cinema lends to the viewing of a film is beautifully reinforced by using curtains and masking in all three screens. It is a level of detail that makes a difference. Curtains reveal something when they open and the whole concept of the "big reveal" is synonymous with magic and entertainment.

The corridors leading to the screens demonstrate the team's love of cinema with captioned and framed posters of classic films from the past displayed alongside forthcoming attractions.

2 A great food and drink experience driving audience and income

Snacks, drinks and confectionery are allowed into these three mini-cinemas and the idea that comfortable upholstered traditional tip-up cinema seats are appropriate for a cinema viewing experience seems to work well here. They maximise capacity for the space. No sleep-inducing full luxury recliners or hot food with its aroma being delivered throughout the film distract you here.

The addition of a fully serviced restaurant with a bar and a more than adequate menu, to the three-screen complex is a masterstroke. You can enjoy a full meal and have additional drinks waiting for you in the cinema, or carry yours to one of the screens. The restaurant is fully integrated into the cinema's operation. Tickets can be purchased for screens at the restaurant or you can enjoy a complete timed dining, drinking and viewing experience, all bookable online in advance. The restaurant also stages party nights, live music, comedy and performance events too – some of which will be directly linked to screenings.

4 An integrated purchasing experience maximising customer satisfaction and income

The recent investment in the cinema's website is another masterstroke. The site integrates three separate systems; Vista ticketing, ResDiary restaurant booking and Braintree Pay Pal Credit Card payment. When a customer books a meal it is recommended on average that a table is booked for 90 minutes before the start of the programme. A customer can book a restaurant meal, drinks and cinema seats in one single transaction, with one confirmation outlining the times of their evening out together with online tickets and QR codes.

3 Programming for audience enjoyment, satisfaction and loyalty

During my visit I spoke with a couple of members of staff, customers and even one or two people in the street, as I had arrived at the cinema early. All gave me the impression that this wasn't the cinema... it was their cinema.

The number of programming strands Kevin provides for the audience is very impressive; current releases, revivals, cream tea classics, cinephile Sundays, a range of cultural and event cinema, Saturday kids screenings, autism and dementia friendly screenings. Screen 2 is even a licensed wedding venue. Add into the mix private hire and themed nights that integrate a new film with an event at the restaurant, and you can see it is all audience focused. A meal and an Elton John tribute act performing in the restaurant coincide with the opening of the biopic "Rocketman", gives just one example of how the restaurant works with the cinema.

The ease with which you can book and pay for your night out makes this operation stand out from the rest.

A thriving local employer

The Picture House Cinema & Restaurant employs fifty people, 10 of whom are full time. Key members of the team include; obviously, Kevin Markwick, the owner and director; his wife Tansy, restaurant manager and chef; Rachel Tout, cinema manager; Katie Markwick, technical supervisor; Nicolette Howard, marketing and development and Loretta Davis, membership co-ordinator. The restaurant contributes three-quarter of a million-pounds' worth of turnover to the overall turnover of £2.5million.

In his local paper, Kevin recently commented "This is a good time for cinemas, the UK industry is showing the way for the rest of the world. It is an expanding market and the way to do it is to make cinemas more than a place showing films, offering a whole night out with the opportunity to have a drink and a meal." In chatting with Kevin you realise that this is someone who has a superb grasp on cinema exhibition.

He has a positive and extremely committed approach to the exhibition industry which he loves. Kevin told me that he often wonders why more cinemas – instead of attempting to compete with adjacent local restaurants on F&B income – don't build one or buy one next door, rather than try to recreate a restaurant experience within the cinema.

Delivering the best possible image

I asked him about his investment in 4K projection in his three relatively small screens when 2K would be adequate – does his audience notice the difference? He told me – rightly in my view – that whatever size the screen, 4K with its improved contrast ratios, HDR etc still gives a noticeably better picture, and as mentioned previously, he has made a saving on projector maintenance.

Kevin is always striving to give his audience the best experience, which includes regular checks on picture and sound in an automated projection environment. He did mention the one big 4K disappointment he has – the lack of 4K DCPs that seem to be available or only in short supply from distributors. We discussed to what extent 4K has been




^ Adding a restaurant into the mix was a masterstroke that has made The Picture House a true cultural hub

just a branding or marketing exercise to impress audiences since they have become familiar with the concept of 4K from domestic TV sets. Without more 4K DCPs being made available, what else has the move to 4K been about?

For the immediate future, Kevin is setting his sights on working on the cinema's membership scheme. Growing both the number of members they have and the range of benefits they receive is a priority. He is also interested in finding perhaps one or two other locations where local conditions might be right for him to repeat his successful cinema and restaurant template – though he did note that he would never want to build such a business venture beyond say three or four sites because it would become too difficult to maintain the quality on offer.

In two recent articles in CT magazine I have written about how cinema and the hospitality and catering industries have moved closer together. I have visited many cinemas over the years and know many of the pressures, pleasures, rewards and developments that are taking place within exhibition.

After I visited Uckfield, I have been finding it difficult to think of an exhibitor that I have seen that can match the perfect array of solutions that The Picture House team have come up with at their venue, and that show so superbly everything that a modern cinema experience can be. No wonder it is such an award-winning cinema. For one year at least, it was voted simply the best. **CT**

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