

Walden Online

This is a report compiled by Cllr Fairhurst and Cllr de Vries to examine the online possibilities available to the successfully run Saffron Walden Tourist Information Centre.

The role of the high street and very nature of towns and villages in the future has been rapidly changing for the past decades. What once a shopping platform where residents would find a wide range of products and services has been upended by the increasing dominance of out-of-town super stores and more recently by online commerce. It is a challenge facing thousands of towns throughout the world and Saffron Walden is no exception. Already our efforts to redefine our market and “street experience” are showing positive results in comparison with neighbouring centres. But we still need to reimagine the future of Saffron Walden and what our competitive position needs to be to ensure a thriving and attractive market town in the future.

If anything, the arrival of Covid19 has accelerated a trend towards an online “experience” and has taken most potential customers away from the physical toward a digital model.

As Covid19 restricts physical “access” to Saffron Walden, we can and should use this time to expand the current TIC shop offering to a Platform for People far and wide to access the rich Saffron Walden experience adapting to new audiences and demands with technology that will keep Saffron Walden vibrant and sustainable for times to come.

Objectives:

- Adapt to changing times to draw audiences to Saffron Walden.
- To share its various offerings across a local and a wider audience.
- To adjust its current distribution channels to an increasing share of online delivery without “losing” its authentic character
- To increase revenue and profits for the TIC, with the long-term goal of the TIC becoming self-funded.

Strategic Planning:

We should aim to develop a plan with a series of stages and trigger points allowing us to mitigate any delays or failures and which would not endanger the current TIC revenue stream.



The long-term goal is to develop the current TIC in-house skills sets in managing a more comprehensive eCommerce platform to optimise their web presence and generate greater revenues sales, referrals, and provision of information. Additionally, we can then begin to use some of that increased profit to fund new ideas which will in turn generate profits and eventually enable the TIC/ Walden Online to become fully self-funding.

We can

- Reconceive the role and strategic function of the TIC as part of a new Town vision. That includes all touch points, online, POS and perhaps most importantly by Word of Mouth.

Or

- Continue as before with minor and gradual adjustment.

- Adding an online parallel delivery to augment existing sales and communications.

It is argued that the unique values of Walden are sufficient to differentiate the town from its competitors and offer sufficient value as to place it in an attractive competitive position for the foreseeable future.

Therefore a proposed strategy could be to:

1. Increase TIC revenue and profits using existing resources.
 - a. Upskill TIC staff members.
 - i. eCommerce
 - ii. Social Media Marketing
 - iii. SEO
 - iv. Sales/traffic data analytics
2. Identify if any new agreed ideas could be feasibly added to existing TIC web presence.
 - a. Use funds drawn against profit increase at TIC to develop these ideas.
 - b. Promote new ideas using updated online skills.

Identify agreed new ideas that would not fit within the current TIC web presence.

- c. Define budget and pricing for a new platform – “Walden Online”.
 - d. Source additional launch revenue.
3. Create “Walden Online” platform and launch.
 - a. TIC manages both TIC websites and Walden Online.
4. TIC website, web shop and Walden online potentially merge into 1 entity.

Consideration factors:

Business Environment:

The world of online retailing has seen a rapidly increasing share of markets (particularly retail) and this has been accelerated by COVID-19.

The result has been a shrinking profit margin and ultimately extinction of “traditional” local shops. (Larger retail chains with deeper pockets are faring a little better).

It is often argued that this is a natural progression, and we all need to adapt. But the pace of this transition is exponential, and the real risk is the loss of the “rural authenticity” of picturesque market towns.

Shop closures are accelerating and even “charity” shops are now under threat.

Smaller market towns compete for a smaller slice of retail pie which exacerbates this trend. It is important to be one of the few that remains to retain this character offering.

The role of the TIC:

In this mix, the role of the TIC is arguably heightened as a cohesive rallying point behind which a concerted effort may be made to focus the strategy and lead the competitive advantage.

Currently the TIC carries out an effective traditional role guiding, representing, and showcasing the town to locals and visitors alike from its geographic base in the market square.

It sells a wide range of locally sourced goods and handles bookings for local performances.

It is well staffed and creatively managed through a mix of enthusiastic volunteers and dedicated management. It is wholly funded by SWTC (and therefore the residents of Saffron Walden) and is perceived as a long-term investment in the quality of life in the town.

Although it has not escaped the effects of the Covid19 Virus, it should see this not as a permanent condition, but perhaps an opportunity to regroup, consolidate and prepare for a new marketing environment.

Competitors:

Obviously, the Town must compete for share of revenue with neighbouring towns and villages. It also increasingly needs to compete with online alternatives for both time and service delivery.

But it must also consider substitute offerings from other leisure products. For example, with an increased drive for Stay-cations, should it coordinate its Airbnb delivery?

Walden Online concept:

What is the Saffron Walden Vision?

Experience a wonderful day out in a unique Olde England Town with a picturesque market square richly coloured in history in Saffron, Cromwell, Audley End, its green agenda, diverse cultural offerings. Taste the finest chocolate, the saffron ice cream, the fish. Enjoy the colourful fruits and vegetables and the scent of flowers. Picnic on the Common or stroll through Bridge End Gardens. A day in Saffron Walden is a day to remember.

SW is more than just a Market Town. It is a unique blend of rural market town and modern lifestyle choices.

The town produces quite a wide range of products including ice cream, chocolate, artworks, and handicrafts.

It offers a vibrant local market and crafts shops and various leisure activities. Uniquely, it is also having a world class Music Hall, a museum, art gallery, various theatrical and musical societies and even its own cinema.

Its diversity of offerings is attractive to Londoners and Cambridge residents as a weekend escape and hosting family gatherings and weddings.

Take advantage of Covid19 for online virtual tours of Saffron Walden, videoclips of the artists, the businesses showing them this wonderfully rich Town and enable participation through online activities and offerings.

Stakeholders:

This venture should include as wide a universe as possible but must essentially include all residents, all suppliers of local products and services and perhaps future inhabitants of the town.

By widening this reach, we have access to more funding and a more complete product-service offering.

It has the already-funded BID team to assist with this programme but ought to include input from all stakeholders with any major investment. Ideally, this is ensured by retaining control within the SWTC framework.

Funding:

It has already been proposed that a simple online platform would cost approximately £2000 to set up and a further £2000 p.a. to maintain. It is believed that this may be on the low side and it is suggested that a starting budget of at least £10k p.a. be assumed. However, it is argued that this ought to be fully funded from stakeholders from the outset so as not to burden SWTC budgets for the start-up.

A simple patron-type formula including 8 or more patrons should be able to fund this for good commercial value. It should be stressed that this is a commercial undertaking to ensure the viability of local businesses as well as sustaining the unique character of the town for the future.

Tactical components of the proposal:

These should include an integrated online/ bricks and mortar offering of products and services, where the consumer is encouraged to select SW and its core values over competitive or substitute offerings.

Whilst this should include profitable delivery of local and ancillary products the primary objective is the long-term positioning and sustainability of Brand Walden. What is not being proposed here is a disconnected lattice work of revenue generating ideas, but a comprehensive structure that may be used by all stakeholders to continue to live, work and do business in the town without the loss of its essential character. There is no finite basket of products and services on

offer, but a commitment to the core values of what differentiates SW from other towns and communities.

The online offering:

This will not be a simple “Web Shop” but an extension of SW. The feel and imagery would reflect the image of the town, the **colours**, the **history** and, perhaps most importantly, the **values** of its residents.

Although product providers would remain independent, they would be seen as a part of a “whole offering” and benefit from association with the town adding to the variety of the Town offering.

These would include but are not limited to, for example:

- Sales of specific dog walking products, including pooper scoopers and biodegradable bags (all the bins in town could advertise to get your doggy products here – keep SW tidy!)
- Act as a reseller for local artists – they upload photos/videos of their work (paintings, sculpture etc), set the price and if it sells, SW gets a cut.
This allows SW to promote and support local artists as well as creating some great content for Brand Walden marketing. It also supports our town’s strong arts and culture vibe.
If we already have the site, then this costs us nothing.
- We could attempt the same thing with local musicians, too and take a % of any booking fee.
- Local business advertising – page banners and headers on main and primary pages, sold to local businesses for a fixed and reasonable rate generating annuity income that could fund the start up. (Just 20 businesses at £50 p.m. = £1000)
- Together with BID could discount on coupons from the TIC. Loyalty programmes would generate low margin high volume value.
- Coordinated local hospitality such as Airbnb and B&Bs

- Local or “microservices” such as baby/house sitting, car/bike sharing schemes, dog walking, tutoring, or companion services for the elderly thus empowering local opportunities for entrepreneurship.
- Communities’ page including couponing for local residents and advertisements for local gatherings and functions.
- Local small jobs page, including odd jobs and training.

Accessing the site:

Ideally the site needs to be mobile driven with traditional webpage for older PC users.

The free Wi-Fi service in Saffron Walden could also have Walden Online as its default landing page when people connect.

Recommended steps:

1. Source and implement online training courses for TIC staff members.
2. Explore feasibility of new ideas that could be adopted into the existing TIC website / Web Shop.
3. Start to set out parameters for Walden Online including costs, timing, core product/services and supply lines.
4. Consult with other local organisations (including BID and SWTC and strategic offerors such as BEG and Saffron Hall) to agree a way forward without any conflict of interest.

5. Consider funding sources, list, and include all stakeholders and possibly 8+ patrons for a three-year commitment to provide basic funding.