



PRESS RELEASE

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Cotton on to successful strategy

Changes in currency exchange rates can have a major impact on businesses.

A plummeting pound means exporters can find it hard to sell their goods abroad and unless they rethink their strategy it can cause major problems. The good news is that many more visitors are now coming to the UK and spending money in tourist destinations such as Oxford.

Depending on whose currency is the strongest, such as the visiting Koreans, Chinese or Americans, Shirtworks changes the style of its Oxford University T-shirts, clothing and souvenirs to suit their tastes. At the moment, because the euro is strong, the Euro-teens are arriving in their hordes to visit Oxford and are demanding skinny-fit T-shirts, hooded tops and distressed designs with a washed and worn look.

But the tourist trade is just one arm of Shirtworks, a multi-faceted business based in Osney Mead.

The company does screen printing and embroidery, specialising in T-shirts, but also produces uniforms, sweatshirts as well as sports and football kits. Many of the company's largest clients are marketing and design consultancies which rely on Shirtworks to print and pack thousands of T shirts for their own clients' promotional campaigns. These agencies have commissioned Shirtworks to work on projects for Samsung, Virgin and British Airways to name a few.

A second area of business for Shirtworks is charity organisations. The company deals directly with the Oxford based charity Oxfam and Barnado's. St John's Ambulance is another valued client whose uniforms it has supplied for over a decade.

Another valuable business sector is Oxford University itself. Shirtworks has a busy shop on the Cowley Road which services student clubs and societies; everything from rowing clubs to sports teams to societies and even individuals looking for a memento to show that they have studied at in the city of dreaming spires. Students will often personalise their garment with names and numbers too. The company also provides uniforms for staff at the Oxford colleges, for instance cleaners are provided with branded polo shirts for use as workwear.

Shirtworks has also successfully crossed the divide between Town and Gown. Local SMEs such as plumbers and electricians are customers for items such as uniforms and high visibility jackets.

One new growth area for the company is the sale of promotional items such as pens, key rings and mugs. Providing a wider product range, not just in clothing, has proved very popular with many promotional products complementing the branded clothing orders of many Shirtworks clients.

An exciting development has also occurred in the military arena. Troops on operations often want 'tour t-shirts' to reflect their time served away. In 2008 Shirtworks shipped many garments to Kandahar - Afghanistan's biggest military base - with orders being placed through the Internet on the firm's website www.shirtworks.co.uk as well as direct from bases in the UK.

Managing director Arron Harnden, 36, has been involved with the company for the last 13 years. He joined while a student at the Oxford FE College where he was studying graphic design. Arron started out helping with the cleaning and packing and was due to go to university but was asked to stay on as print production manager. The opportunity came up for him to become production director five years ago and in 2006 he became managing director.

Turnover at the end of 2008 was £1.2m and the aim is to reach £2m in the next three years.

Arron said: "When I took over as managing director three years ago, because it was a new role I felt I needed some education and a quick route to finding information on helping the company grow."

Arron used the free resources at his local Business Link to quickly source the information he needed and managed to gain a £5,000 match funded business leaders' grant which paid for a business coach from Action International.

The weekly one-hour chat for six months helped him gain a perspective on how to grow the business and the direction it should be heading. The same coach also trained three of the sales members in the shop. "Business Link pointed me in the right direction for training and my adviser has been very helpful and saved me a lot of time. I could have spent hours trawling through the Internet to find the same information."

Business Link also pointed him in the direction of a £600 match funding grant through Train to Gain.

Arron is currently studying on a Chartered Institute of Marketing course at Oxford College of Marketing. His adviser also provided him with business plan templates to encourage him to write his ideas down.

Shirtworks was originally set up in 1984 and was formerly in the Covered Market in Cowley Road. It started as a small shop, printing low volume materials on a press in the back of the shop. The owners soon realised that there was a market for larger volumes and rented a lock-up in Garsington Road before moving to Aristotle Lane until it was redeveloped for housing, it then switched to its current base in Osney Mead. The business has a 22-strong staff including three directors. A new website is about to be launched and, despite the economic gloom, Shirtworks is certainly thriving.

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Notes to editors

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