

# Ikonography



Arguably the most competitive sector in the UK pub market is for bars aimed at 20-30 year old customers. This group generally has the highest disposable leisure income and pubs and bars that get it right can find themselves with a lucrative business – but this customer group is notoriously fickle.

A bar that once boomed can suddenly find business taking a nosedive and for no other reason than the 'in crowd' has moved on to the next big thing. To make a long term success of a trendy urban bar takes skill and close monitoring of the competition – it also helps if you are an experienced pub entrepreneur like Tony James.

Tony has 27 years experience running pubs and a chain of barber shops but for the last 12 years he has concentrated on his pub interests. Tony is now involved with four houses in the South Staffordshire area including the former Tube bar in Newcastle-under-Lyme town centre.

Tony and business partner Peter Wheelton (who also has 20 years experience in the industry) took over The Tube in 2006. At first the location seemed unpromising as The Tube was sandwiched between two other bars all competing for the same market – but Tony and Peter were not daunted by the challenge...

## The Vision

"I knew The Tube would need a complete overhaul to turn the business around," Tony told ET. "But from long experience I knew that to get the right planning permission would take at least a year. Whilst we prepared the paperwork, Peter and I repositioned The Tube as a sports bar. This kept trade turning over whilst we planned the future."

Careful analysis of the local market revealed that this town centre lacked a venue that could attract different customer groups throughout the day.

"I wanted our new pub to appeal to the sophisticated café customer during the day, the after work crowd in the evening and the dedicated dancer at night. This would give us three bites of the cherry!"

Again Tony and Peter examined the offer provided by the local competition to find a unique selling point for their premises.

"We realised that many of our competitors had no outside space or smoking area so I wanted to incorporate both these features in our new pub," Tony continues. "then, we were able to take over a neighbouring pub. This has allowed us to move the



sports bar business here, which is larger and much more suitable, leaving us with a blank canvas for The Tube."

Having finished the planning process, The Tube closed in July 2007 for a four week refurbishment. Now all that was needed was a new name.

"Gavin O'Callaghan, my Marketing Manager, suggested Ikon," Tony adds, "and the name seemed to say exactly what we wanted to achieve."

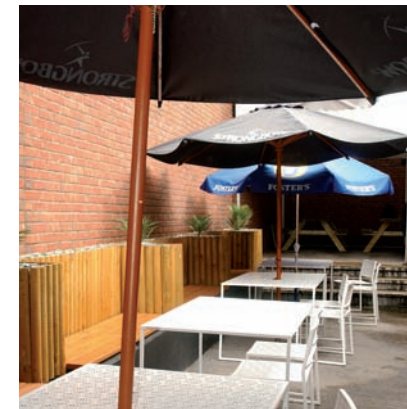
## The Works

One of the problems of old The Tube premises was the layout of the bar which occupied space by the main entrance.

"The old bar's design caused a real bottle neck," Tony explains, "so we remodelled the front door by moving the entrance to the upstairs flat and created an L shaped bar that channels the customers into the main trade areas. It was a simple equation really – more customers means more cash coming over the bar."

Besides the structural work, the old décor was removed and replaced with more modern fixtures and fittings such as contemporary lighting and feature mirrors. Fixed seating was arranged around the walls to create a dance space and new DJ boxes were installed. During the day the open space is filled with café furniture that is stored away at night.

Moreover, Tony did not neglect his outside areas.



"We have a strange situation in the town whereby an outside drinking policy has not been finalised," Tony continues, "therefore the licensees got together and agreed that if tables and chairs are put on a public space only coffee and non alcoholic drinks will be served."

This is a highly sensible approach to a highly sensitive issue but of course the self imposed ban on outside drinking does not apply to private outside areas.

"We've really made an effort with our outside space," Tony says proudly, "we have patio heaters and proper furniture and even a bar to make this not just a smoker's area but an 'outdoor room' that's an integral part of the pub."

In total the building work cost around £170,000 with a further £50,000 allocated for fixtures and fittings.

"And we're still not finished," Tony admits, "we want some outside canopies and more furniture for the inside bar areas."

*"My job should be simple: find the right people for the right pub, but here we had a run down, young persons, town centre bar where business was very poor. The site was not attracting any interest in a highly difficult and competitive market; the pub was going nowhere but when I met Peter and Tony I immediately thought 'entrepreneurs'!"*

*They took on the pub as it was and after 3 months we assessed where they felt that it should be positioned in the marketplace. We got David Pattison, the project manager, and designers together and it soon became clear that the brief would be: be different, be quirky.*

*Instead of trying to compete in the existing overcrowded market, Peter and Tony decided Ikon should create a new market by incorporating music, café culture and design. The main contractors also worked closely with the lessees to deliver a quality development on time, in budget and ahead of our expectations. The lessees were delighted; their customers are offered a unique leisure experience and we have a great site to showcase S&N products."*

John Hughes, Operations & Sales Manager

*"The key to the success of this development was twofold. One: the appointment of a designer who had previous experience in developing the required concept on sites in the Birmingham area; two: the use of a local contractor who built a good working relationship with Peter and Tony. These factors turned their aspirations into reality within the approved budget and within a tight timescale."*

David Pattison, Project & Buildings Manager

## Food & Drink

The plan was to turn a tired night-spot into a sophisticated day/night café bar and naturally food formed a central part of this strategy.

"We do the full range of café food such as paninis, wraps and sweets, all served from a feature bar display. Nothing is frozen, everything is freshly prepared," Tony explains. "We also have traditional favourites like Staffordshire oat cakes with bacon, sausage and cheese."

In addition to the new food offer, Tony and Peter have changed the emphasis for Ikon's wet products.

"We have a full range of coffees during the day," Tony continues. "But in the evening, though we have offers on our cocktails, we don't do discount beers and spirits."

Such a policy may seem to be at odds with current industry wisdom but Tony has planned this strategem carefully.

"We want quality customers who want to come to Ikon for the venue, not for the cheap booze," Tony explains.

## The Future

Tony and Peter's unusual approach has certainly had the desired effect. Average takings for Ikon are up from around £6,000 per week prior the refit to around £10,000 per week after reopening.

"We've only just scratched the surface!" Tony adds happily. "For example we will continue to improve the outside areas and, besides our 2am licence, we plan to open earlier – perhaps even for breakfast."

Clearly Ikon has proved a big hit with Newcastle's café and pub goers, so to what does Tony attribute the rapid change in Ikon's fortunes?

"We are offering something different," Tony says simply. "There are other cafés, other bars and other music spots but we are the only place that offers customers all three venues under one roof."

The improvements mean that Ikon can now offer such features as live music (for small duos and trios) Sunday Jazz sessions and afternoon dance DJs. For this fortunate Staffordshire town, the weekend now starts at 4pm on a Friday – and it starts at Ikon!