

CASE STUDY



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# INTRODUCTION

Swimtime has been going through a serious customer experience transformation since they were purchased by Theo Millward in 2016. In that time, they've revolutionised their booking system - with tremendous business results.

Theo Millward and Rachel Brooks entered this initiative into the UK Digital Experience Awards, and they were delighted to be named Overall Winner. Building on this, they attended the International Customer Experience Awards in Amsterdam, becoming Gold Winner in the Digital Transformation Category.

I caught up with Theo and Rachel to learn about Swimtime's journey - and the secrets of their awards success!

# INTERVIEW

## ■ What is the elevator pitch for your initiative?

**THEO:** In the UK, a third of kids can't swim. That's the headline statistic and the thing we use to hook people in. We identified an opportunity to really focus our efforts on the customer experience from start to finish. This isn't just what happens in the water, but everything else around that: booking, incentivisation of children, how parents receive information, and how we move children through our learning programme. And that's what the project has been: to create something that does that. Nothing else was in the market at all: there were incumbent suppliers who did part of that process (fairly poorly). We've created something completely unique which runs through the whole process.

Apart from winning the Awards, what's been exciting for us is it's got applications outside of swimming. It would work for any lesson-based activity, for any business looking to streamline that aspect of what they do.

## ■ And how have you improved the customer experience?

**RACHEL:** Ours is an end-to-end experience. Once a client enters our environment, they stay in that environment. With other suppliers and other software, they only dealt with part of the process. For example, the booking process might be on one platform, the financial data might be on another, the actual marketing might be on another. With our system, everything is combined so the client is, as we say, part of the SwimTime family.

## ■ What obstacles did you overcome to implement this?

**THEO:** It's probably easier to say what hasn't changed! The entire business has been rebranded and we've completely changed the operating model. We've gone from a paper-based business to one that's almost entirely digital - for our customers, our teachers and our franchisees. This has been a huge change, and the amount of support we're able to offer has been unbelievable. To put a specific on it, when I bought the business nearly four years ago, Rachel was spending hours every month compiling management information. That was a backward-looking position: it was only looking at several weeks behind. We've now got live reactive management information that literally changes as children come in and out of our programme. From a management point of view and customer service point of view, that's game changing. We're able to react really quickly to problems, probably before the customer even realises there's something not quite spot-on - and this has transformed the experience we're able to give.

Generally speaking, the experience is pretty relaxed for the customer, but the team's working flat out to keep it that way.

## ■ Could you give an example?

**RACHEL:** A classic example is that it used to take a customer 15 minutes to make a booking with us. We would have the client on the phone for 15 minutes, travelling from multiple screens, trying to capture bits of information. Now, it's about one and a half! It's so quick and consistent with what customers experience booking elsewhere. It's so responsive - a quick, seamless process.

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## INTERVIEW

### ■ When did you realise the initiative was award worthy?

**RACHEL:** Well I was part of the 'old school' (there was a previous owner of the business). When you sit down with someone like Theo, who has the vision, and I was acutely aware that it could be done a lot lot better. So having the operational knowledge and Theo having the vision, and understanding what technology could do to improve that position - that really was the moment when we thought: if we get this right, it can transform the industry.

**THEO:** I've always known that we were doing good work - I must say, I didn't know it was this good! We felt we did a really good job at the DXAs, although we didn't expect to win overall! At the International Customer Experience Awards, with that level of competition, we definitely weren't expecting to win! So to get that recognition amongst those brands and their budgets was fantastic - they were some pretty big scalps! [laughs]

### ■ Any advice for small businesses entering Awards?

**RACHEL:** The best thing about the Awards is it's an even playing field. That's why a small business should consider entering. You compete with Sky, all the big boys, but it doesn't matter - because if you can articulate what it is you've achieved, and be passionate about it, and you can demonstrate the impact it's had on your business, that's why businesses should do it!

It's also really healthy for a business to stop and take stock of what they've done, how they've done it, what it used to be like, where it is now, where you want to go. When you enter an award, that's when you realise how far you've actually come.

### ■ And what were your impressions of ICXA?

**THEO:** We've got global ambitions. For us, it fits nicely into our strategy. At the end of the day, it's about what you feel you're going to get value from. If you feel that international stamp is going to add to your offering, do it! If not, events like the DXAs are just as strong and valuable. It depends what you're looking to achieve!

### ■ What tips do you have for the written entry?

**THEO:** Honesty is a massively important thing. In management generally, there can be a tendency to 'jazz things up' a bit. But at some point, your chickens will come home to roost. Being honest is always important - if not, you're going to get unstuck at some point down the line. Trying to humanise your entry is also something I try to do. I try to be as relatable as I can: if somebody can understand not just the physical things that have happened, but also the emotions behind it, that's half the battle. The judges need to understand what drove the decision.

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## INTERVIEW

### ■ And the presentation?

It is about being real, and the evidence you provide - both good and bad. When you're putting an application in, there's a tendency just to talk about the positive aspects. To talk about a challenge you've faced might be perceived as negative. But every business goes through pain. Every business struggles at some point. Every business has a bad patch. It's what you do and how you get through it. If you can tap into that and present it in a genuine, cohesive way, and back it all up with evidence, you're onto a good thing. Why wouldn't you do it?

### ■ So what's next for Swimtime?

We've launched a product offering. When a client moves on to our monthly plan, they get a free starter box. They get goggles, a towel, a waterproof bag - everything you need to go swimming. We've already shifted over 3000 units in less than 4 weeks, which is just mental! We'll probably enter this initiative into the awards in the future.

# ANNOTATED ENTRY FORM

## International Customer Experience Awards 19

### Entry Identification

Entry Title **Swimtime**

Organisation Name

Category Entered **Digital Transformation**

Organisation Description

**Swimtime founded in 1998, is the UK's largest independent provider of swimming lessons teaching around 20,000 children to swim every week in hundreds of venues. Swimtime provides swimming lessons via a network of franchisees and hundreds of teachers, in every corner of the UK, to a wide range of consumer needs from babies to adults in their 80s. In 2016, Swimtime was purchased by the current owner Theo Millward who identified huge scope for customer experience innovation to improve the quality of lessons, the experience and most importantly empower the next generation to be more active, healthier, and socially engaged with one another.**

Precis for awards e-brochure

**Swimtime has created is a transformative digital customer experience through a bespoke platform that manages every stage of our customer journey from booking through to delivery. It manages all communication, payment, teacher planning, lessons, child attainment, Health and Safety requirements and all our digital marketing and advertising needs. This transformation has lead to greater customer choice, higher revenue and high feedback scores.**

### Criteria

#### Summary

An overview of the initiative that provides a robust, thorough and compelling argument for why this entry deserves recognition (elements of the other 6 criteria should be included). 200 words max

Upon purchasing Swimtime in 2016, Theo inherited an analogue business. Management of thousands of customers was driven by a slow, outdated platform giving customers limited flexibility and choice. The Central Office support centre was overrun with phone calls. Booking a new swimmer took on average, 15 minutes due to a disjointed process.



## ANNOTATED ENTRY FORM

It was clear there was an opportunity to utilise technology to dramatically improve the customer experience. The result of this was Swimcloud, a revolutionary management platform that digitises what is traditionally a labour intensive business model from booking to teacher management. Swimcloud gives clients vastly improved choice and flexibility by enabling customers to choose the location, type of lessons that suits them and then book it by using our beautiful map. Once booked, they receive information by email or SMS and arrive at the venue to start their Swimtime journey. For those who do wish to speak to us on the phone our booking process is now 85% faster taking an average of just 2 minutes.

Since implementing this platform, Swimtime has received outstanding customer satisfaction scores as well as high franchisee satisfaction scores. In 2019 Swimtime was crowned overall winner of the DXA Awards.

**Lesson Finder Search Criteria** Use my location

birmingham All Abilities Any Day +10 miles Search

**11 venues**

- Sports Direct Fitness Kingsheath** 3.82 mi  
69 Alcester Road South, Birmingham, B14 7JG
- The Regency Hotel** 6.93 mi  
Stratford Road, Shirley, Solihull, B90 4EB
- Village Hotels Solihull** 7.06 mi  
The Green Business Park, Dog Kennel Lane, Shirley, B90 ...
- Sports Direct Fitness Northfield** 7.24 mi  
1375 Bristol Road South, Birmingham, B31 2SU
- Village Hotels Dudley** 7.74 mi  
Castlegate Park, Birmingham Road, Dudley, DY1 4TB
- Village Hotels Walsall** 8.47 mi  
Tempus Drive, Walsall, WS2 8TJ

**Sports Direct Fitness Kingsheath**  
69 Alcester Road South, Birmingham, B14 7JG  
0121 371 0498  
westmids@swimtime.org

**Available Classes**  
Show Classes with Waiting List

**Fridays at 4:00 PM**

Experience	Beginner
Start Date	16th June 2019
End Date	3rd August 2019
Availability	Spaces Available
First Lesson	Friday, 21st June 2019, 4:00 PM
Next Lesson	Friday, 2nd August 2019, 4:00 PM
Duration	30 minutes
Cost Per Lesson	from £9.25

Book Now

Our booking map that is mobile responsive

## Business Rationale & Context

The drivers and targeted business benefits/aims that provided the rationale and context for the initiative.

Drowning is the 3rd highest cause of death globally and according to Swim England survey in 2017 it was reported that 1/3 of children leave Primary School unable to Swim the government standard of 25m. Something has to be done and we need to teach a lot more children to swim. From both a commercial and social perspective teaching more children to swim is our aim and to do that, a seamless customer experience was needed that removed any barriers.

Swimtime is a franchisor and our relationships with franchisees revolves around trust and transparency. The first aim of Swimcloud was to improve this giving all sides clear, reliable data to make better business decisions.

The other main goal was to recognise the importance of the teacher student relationship and use Swimcloud as a tool to maximise time spent learning to swim. Specially, we wanted to provide far more information to our clients on where, when and how lessons were happening, enabling the teacher to focus on learning.

To give a sense of the impact of Swimcloud on Swimtime, Theo now believes he owns a software company that happens to teach swimming lesson, rather than simply a successful swim school.

## Strategic Planning and Involvement of Key Stakeholders

The Strategic Plan was designed with clear insight as to how to meet business needs, including details on employee/stakeholders engagement as appropriate.

The following were our strategic goals:

1. Reduce administration time
2. Reduce cost base in time and money
3. Scale the business by teaching more children to swim
4. Improve client choice
5. Improve transparency of data for audit and compliance
6. Maintain market leading teaching standards
7. Improve the customer experience by offering more choice and flexibility around booking and payments
8. Empower customers to continue to learn outside of class



## ANNOTATED ENTRY FORM

Stakeholder: Franchisee

1. Early on in the process we formed a focus group of 5 forward thinking Franchisees to understand their needs and wants, this was used multiple times during the planning process
2. Theo met every franchisee in person and undertook a survey of their business requirements more generally with a view to strategically aligning the new project with these concerns.

Stakeholder: Customer

1. A survey of customer needs was carried out to identify trends and patterns including face to face interviews
2. Desk based competitor analysis took place to assess what other operators were doing
3. Attendance at industry events to hear outcome of wider research undertaken i.e. SwimEngland

**RACHEL:** We had to stay incredibly focused. We were just like a broken record. Initially, the franchisees were up in arms, we had lawsuits filed against us, we had all sorts! They were reluctant to change. We could not have been more transparent than we were, but they still threw the toys out of the pram!

That took some overcoming. Having said that, it was the best thing that's ever happened to the business, because it brought the weaker franchisees to the surface. Those that remained were brought further into the business and have benefited a lot from the digital transformation.

The relationships are much stronger now - but oh my goodness, getting there was painful.

In those moments when we were vulnerable due to the sheer amount of pressure, we were able to remind ourselves of the reason why we're doing this and the benefits it's going to bring to the business. There was no way we were going to back down - we stayed true to what we believed in and were not deterred.

## ANNOTATED ENTRY FORM

### Innovative and Creative Solution

The solution to the identified customer need, how it was developed and what made it innovative and creative as an initiative.

1. We split the project into stages which was grouped by functionality, starting from a Minimum Viable Product stage, increasing in sophistication over time, following client feedback.

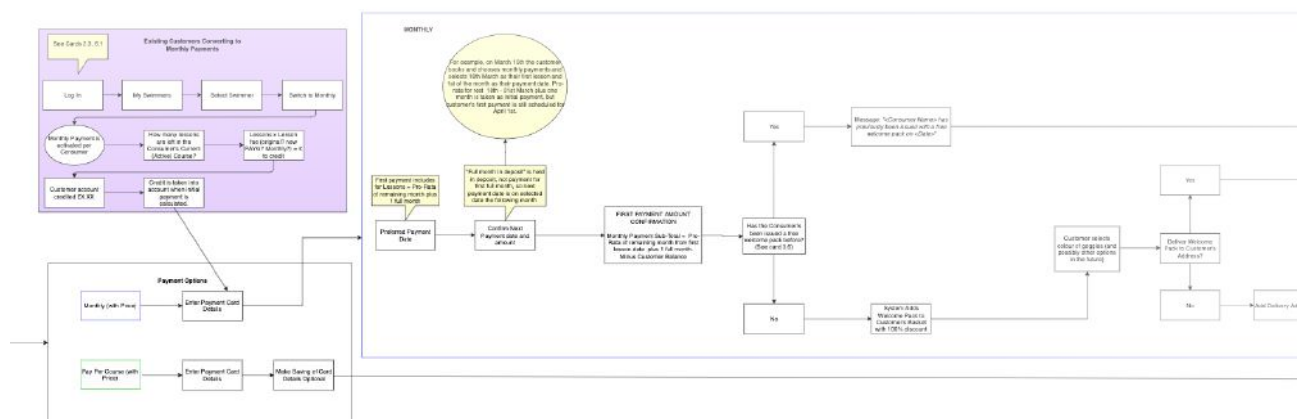
- Stage 1 was what we had in our existing platform as functionality but running on our own platform with increased reliability and speed
- Stage 2 added smart features such as global search, user access templates, etc
- Stage 3 was focused on our teachers, digitised pool side registers
- Stage 4 was integrating the AI / Machine learning aspect

2. By understanding what our end point was, we could work the database tables in Stage 1 that made the later stage easier.

3. We then worked on user journey flows using schematics, testing these with small focus groups of users

4. We commissioned a working wireframe of the UI

5. Finally we split the Stages into sub tasks which were managed using Trello. The project is fundamentally innovative as no product existed at the time of commissioning that could undertake what was required. Since launch we been approached by many other industries to deploy our technology.



### Example part of customer journey plan

The schematic here is not even half a percent of what it actually looks like! The amount of variables that we have to cater for is absolutely eye watering - there's hundreds of API points.

## ANNOTATED ENTRY FORM

You might have 50 different scenarios for just one portion of the process, something that was a bit harder to convey in the written entry.

We did a lot of planning, but we messed a lot up in the early stages. We planned it out, did it and realised it wasn't going to work at all. Particularly with the registration process, capturing core customer data was way too complicated. There's a danger of trying to be all things to all people: you try and cater for every possible user's requirements. Some other software has too many variables - it's enough to drive you mad! If you want something to be simple and easy to use, you have to say to an element of your users: "I'm sorry, that's the way it is."

It takes a lot of courage to do that - you are going to get a kickback. But once you push through that, that's where we ended up in a really special space. We had beautiful simplicity, it's much easier to manage and have knowledge base of, it's easier to train people and you really get multiple benefits.

### Effective Implementation

The implementation of the solution and what made it effective, including customer engagement and management of time and budget.

The implementation followed a 4 stage programme:

1. Internal testing was undertaken using some territories that were being managed by Central Office to ensure any adverse impact would not impact Franchisees
2. A phased roll out was planned focussing on the smallest franchise first allowing for bug fixes and tweaks on the way - the largest areas were left until last.
3. Multiple, video calls and 1:1 tutorials were arranged with each franchise to provide tailored support. The content was broken up into separate calls to avoid saturation.
4. At the same time a support function was created with new dedicated staff, phone numbers, emails and the creation of a Knowledge Base - this gave the Franchisees a specific team to contact who were experts in the system.

From a customer point of view, we ran this initiative alongside our existing platform for 2 months giving clients a choice of which process to use. Although we found some clients got confused, it enabled us to fine tune our approach.

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## ANNOTATED ENTRY FORM

Whilst we did our best to remain on budget, we did experience brief slip as a result of client feedback by around 15%. Despite this, the project was still hugely successful.

### An example Knowledge Base article

**RACHEL:** We initially ran focus groups including franchisees, so we had user input right from the very beginning. In terms of customer experience, we had to make sure we were providing software that worked and benefited their business model and doesn't hinder it.

That was quite easy - the previous software was horrendous! So we were coming from a good starting point.

Once we got beyond the focus groups, we phased the implementation. We worked with the franchisees to agree on a timescale, holding their hands through the entire process.

## ANNOTATED ENTRY FORM

They got a huge amount of support throughout the implementation. The IT team were on-hand to correct any mistakes immediately and there was no downtime in the business. There aren't many businesses that implement new systems without having downtime.

We started with a soft implementation in April, allowing us to make tweaks. By September we were ready to start rolling it out in earnest, and by the end of October, everyone was on the software.

**THEO:** It was clear pretty quickly that the implementation went well. The trial phase was about 900 clients, in the following month it was 1300 and then it suddenly shot up 4000 as we brought the biggest franchises on board.

### The Outstanding Customer Experience Delivered

The resultant outstanding customer experience or change in customer experience delivered.

Following the launch of our new digital experience, customers had the following unique benefits:

- A dynamic map showing availability and price to aid choice
- Total freedom to book 24/7
- Vastly improved speed of booking - 88% faster
- Automated issuing of welcome information including venue location, what to bring and what to expect
- SMS and Email communications for early notification of key information
- Visibility of learner progression
- Online Knowledge base with media rich answers to common queries

We measured our success on two metrics, financial sales and customer satisfaction. In terms of financial sales, we have seen a surge in growth as a business seeing turnover increase over 212% in 3 years. With respect of customer satisfaction, we surveyed our clients 2 months ago and had a response from over 900 customers. In terms of the booking process we asked clients to score us between 1 - 5, 5 being the most satisfied. 73% of customers were either a 4 or 5 and 46% of all respondents scored us 5 out of 5. We are delighted with this outcome.

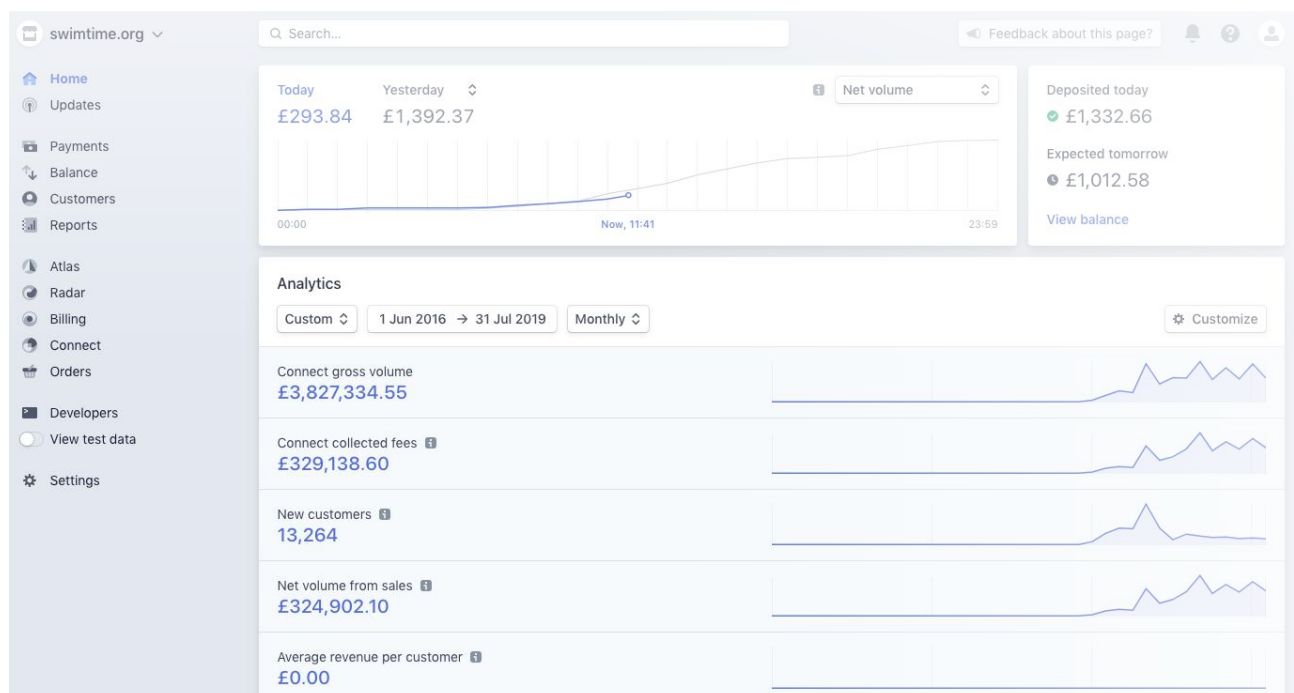
## ANNOTATED ENTRY FORM

### Business Impact and Results Achieved

The resultant impact on business performance and results - linking with original targeted benefits/aims.

The impact has been nothing short of transformational.

1. Since launching Swimcloud, Swimtime has had two record breaking months November 2018 and February 2019 where we sold just under 500k of swimming lessons in one month.
2. The platform processed over £1m of swimming lessons in 2 months of going live
3. Since going live lessons have been sold on every single day including Christmas Day (the offices shut for almost 2 weeks!)
4. The Franchisees have reported huge benefits to their business:"I didn't realise how big the savings would be and how quickly they would kick in"  
FRANCHISEE 1 "Taking payments and bookings so much faster in Swimcloud" FRANCHISEE 2
5. As Franchisor I was able to increase fees and levies by 50% which was universally accepted by the franchisees in recognition of the value of the platform
6. The franchisees have been able to rise prices by 15%
7. Value of business has over doubled since implementing and investment was secured in September 2018 to help take us to the next stage.



The financial overview of the platform since launch.



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# JUDGES' COMMENTS

## WRITTEN ENTRY FEEDBACK

I was impressed by the financial sales figures you reported: a 212% turnover increase in 3 years is impressive. The approach seemed well-structured, hands-on and realistic, starting small and improving along the way. Customer feedback was integrated. Good to hear that other companies are interested as well and that it's a scalable solution. I would have appreciated learning more about the innovative part and what made it so special. Hope these become clear in the presentation.

Very good focus on stakeholders and the pain-points to be improved, also on the planning and process for delivering the final IT solutions. It wasn't about IT but what it could deliver to stakeholders. The KPIs were very well defined and made measurable as well. There were benefits for all involved in the customer journey, speeding up onboarding and planning at the same time due to excellent stakeholder management. Testing in small user groups is the best way of improving and delivering the best solution too. Very good to be helping the UK with swimming lessons and so reducing the drowning ratio!

Nice customer effects and a step up that was clearly visible.

Great customer-centric strategy and execution with good predefined KPIs based on customer experience. I liked the use of data and customer insights, and the implementation was solid, but maybe you should consider the use and testing of prototypes as a result of customer journey insights before starting to develop the MVP.

Great example of digital transformation delivering enhanced customer experience, not only for customers but for franchisors and employees. Well done. A before-and-after measurement would be a nice addition.

## PRESENTATION FEEDBACK

Excellent presentation and an excellent initiative with brilliant results.

Great development, stakeholder management, onboarding and process integration. A good sounding and well thought out roadmap, and perfect tech and social integration.

An authentic and genuine transformation project, executed by a passionate and talented team. I think user-rating would be a good addition. Well done.

A nice story and strong involvement. Congratulations. A dynamic way of presenting. Well done.

# UK Digital Experience Awards



# iCXA '19<sup>TM</sup>

International Customer Experience Awards



# UK Digital Experience Awards

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