*SAMPLE ENTRY - Tour Operator of the Year*

***100-word overview:***

Celebrating our 25th anniversary this year, Timbuktu Tours is the UK’s oldest and largest operator to Timbuktu. The last 12 months have seen us introduce unique new product in Timbuktu, undergo an exciting rebrand to successfully attract a wider demographic, and overhaul our agent engagement programme, resulting in 15% revenue growth across the business and a whopping 25% growth in trade sales year-on-year. No other African city break specialist has done as much to train and support agents as us!

***1. Innovation in product and marketing***

Product:

* In the last 12 months we have changed the face of travel to Timbuktu, by building a series of exclusive, eco-friendly sandcastle-style accommodation around the city for a more authentic experience. We have also chartered a plane between Timbuktu with Bamako to offer the first twin-centre packages, selling 2,500 pax since launch in January.
* We’ve worked closely with all other hotel partners to ensure special touches for Timbuktu Tours guests for 2017, including goody bags of traditional sweets on arrival and a complimentary cultural tour.
* In response to demand from agents, we have contracted 15 five-star hotels for 2017, and compiled these into a Luxury Timbuktu mini-brochure
* In November 2016 we launched a partnership with CarbonCare and have successfully encouraged 16% of our customers to off-set their carbon emissions (totalling £43,000) since then

Marketing:

* While Timbuktu Tours is well-known with younger travellers (24-35 year olds made up 80% of our business in 2015), last year we recognised significant potential to attract more of the silver market.
* We conducted consumer research last summer, which informed a rebrand in September, with a new logo, brand identity and core messaging which was more inclusive of older travellers.
* To promote our new brand, we invested heavily in consumer advertising in January 2017, spending £20,000 on digital marketing (50% more than January 2016) which resulted in a 400% increase in visitation to our website versus last year.
* We also trialled our first ever TV ad, aired during Channel 5’s ‘Watercolour Challenge’ programme in March, at the cost of £345,000. This resulted in £780,000 of bookings as well as building brand recognition.
* An exciting tie-up with Werthers Originals – the first time the confectionary brand has partnered with a travel company - saw us give away a holiday to Timbuktu, and built a database of 5,800 potential customers, many of whom are aged 50+
* Consumer research conducted in April shows our marketing activity has increased brand awareness by 10% year-on-year, and brand consideration by 7%.
* We relaunched our website in November 2016, representing a £500,000 investment. The new fully responsive website offers Virtual Reality destination content and online bookability for the first time. We have already taken £196,000 of business online; approximately 70% of this business is new-to-brand.
* We have also doubled our spend on trade advertising for 2017, running our first ever Timbuktu supplement with the trade press

***2. Outstanding and improved trade relations***

Supporting agents is at the heart of our business and we have offered price parity from day one. In 2015 agent sales made up 60% of our business but as of May 2017, trade sales make up 75%, thanks to a series of initiatives:

* We expanded our team of on-the-road BDMs from 3 last year to 4 this year, enabling each BDM to conduct more and longer visits. Store visits in the 12 months to May 2017 = 329: a 22% increase YOY.
* We have now equipped BDMs with VR technology which agents love.
* We have won 43 new travel agent accounts since last summer
* In February we ran our first “Timbuktu Month”, partnering with 25 independent stores to hold Timbuktu evenings. This resulted in several bookings at each, with ABCDE Travel winning an incredible £40,000 of business on the night. We also invested £900,000 in prizes in February (our biggest ever prize pot), ranging from holidays to food hampers and concert tickets. Results: February sale revenue via agents was up 60% up YOY
* In September we launched “Tikbuk-to-you” – a unique new agent recognition programme which sees agents earn points towards their own trip to Timbuktu not only by making sales but also by sharing social media content, doing window displays about Timbuktu, sending out email communication about Timbuktu Tours, and learning basic words in Bambara. 3,000 agents have registered for the scheme and 89 have already earned enough points for their own holiday for two people.
* Between June 2016-June 2017 we took 134 travel agents on fam trip visits to Timbuktu - up 30% YOY. Our reputation for doing fam trips “a little differently” means agents conduct the entire fam trip at night time.
* Our new trade-specific Facebook page has attracted 2,200 Likes since launch 8 months ago. 130+ agents tuned in for our first Facebook Live Q&A in April.
* After asking agents what else we could provide for them, in December we launched a new digital ‘toolkit’ containing offers, posters, social media content and other collateral to be white-labelled. To date, more than 3,000 pieces of content have been downloaded
* We know call response time matters for agents, and we recently expanded our call centre team by 3 additional consultants to total 10. We believe we are now the only operator offering agents cash (£10 voucher) if they call us and we don't answer within 25 seconds.

***3. Financial stability and business success***

* For our financial year up to 31 October 16, sales revenue was up 25% and operating profit up 7%. Sales in the first 5 months of 2017 have tracked 16% ahead of budget.
* Passengers carried Jan-Dec 2016 was 212,112, up 26% YOY. Passengers carried year to date are 178,000 – 29% ahead of the same period last year
* Our average selling price has increased from £2,122 in 2015 to £2,355 in 2016 as part of our move towards higher-end product and selling more tours and excursions
* Our repeat customer level currently stands at a phenomenal 71%. We have also retained 85% of our existing agent “customers” in the last 12 months, ie 85% of those on our database have made one or more bookings.
* By working with the Institute of Customer Service we have been able to improve the customer service we offer our direct customers and our agent partners. Our score has grown from 81.2 to 84.8 in the last 12 months – making us “world class”
* We have been able to maintain our outstanding Feefo score of 96% for another year
* As well as recruiting two more BDMs and 3 more call centre consultants, other new positions across the business have taken our overall team from 89 staff in 2015 to 104 today, and in February we moved to new bigger premises
* Total investment back into the company in the last 12 months (including the new website, new positions, the office move, and new VOIP technology to improve the call centre) has totalled £1.1 million. This is reflected in our official accounts on Companies House, ie profit for year ended October 2016 = £312,000. However, with these significant investments now accounted for, we anticipate profit by October 2017 will be in the region of £1.4million.