360 Marketing Lab
IMMERSIVE VIRTUAL TOURS

Thinking of a 360 Virtual Tour?

"What to look for in a 360 Tour Provider"

Whitepaper

About us

Why should schools listen to us?

We are a small business, based in the Midlands, serving the UK and abroad by delivering premium 360° virtual tours to independent schools. We specialise in virtual tours in this sector.

We have a combined experience of 28 years working in school marketing, visual assets, digital technology and user experience. We understand schools' audiences, their pain points, their goals and how they interact with families. We also understand the use of emerging technology, on-brand experiences and creative solutions to achieve schools' marketing goals.

Whilst we create immersive, 360° virtual tours to put rocket fuel into school marketing, what we bring is a full understanding of what you need to achieve with this tool.

THIS WHITEPAPER IS A MUST-READ FOR ANYONE LOOKING AT INVESTING IN A VIRTUAL TOUR FOR THEIR SCHOOL. IT DETAILS HOW TO CHOOSE A SUPPLIER AND WHAT TO LOOK FOR TO AVOID DISAPPOINTMENT.

What we cover

A collection of 360° equirectangular images (aspect ratio 2:I) of a facility, building or rooms, built in specialist software allowing the user to control the viewpoint of any space by using keyboard arrows, mouse or trackpad to look around the room and see 360 degrees of it (ceiling and floor included). The user should be able to move from room to room and interact with embedded content in hotspots.

Some call a video a "Virtual Tour". In fact, nowadays many are calling any digital tool used in marketing a Virtual Tour, making it extremely difficult to differentiate between a wide variety of options, so defining what you want from a Virtual Tour is key.

TURNING THIS EQUIRECTANGULAR IMAGE...

INTO THIS. A USER CAN ROTATE THE IMAGE 360°

Do you need a Virtual Tour?
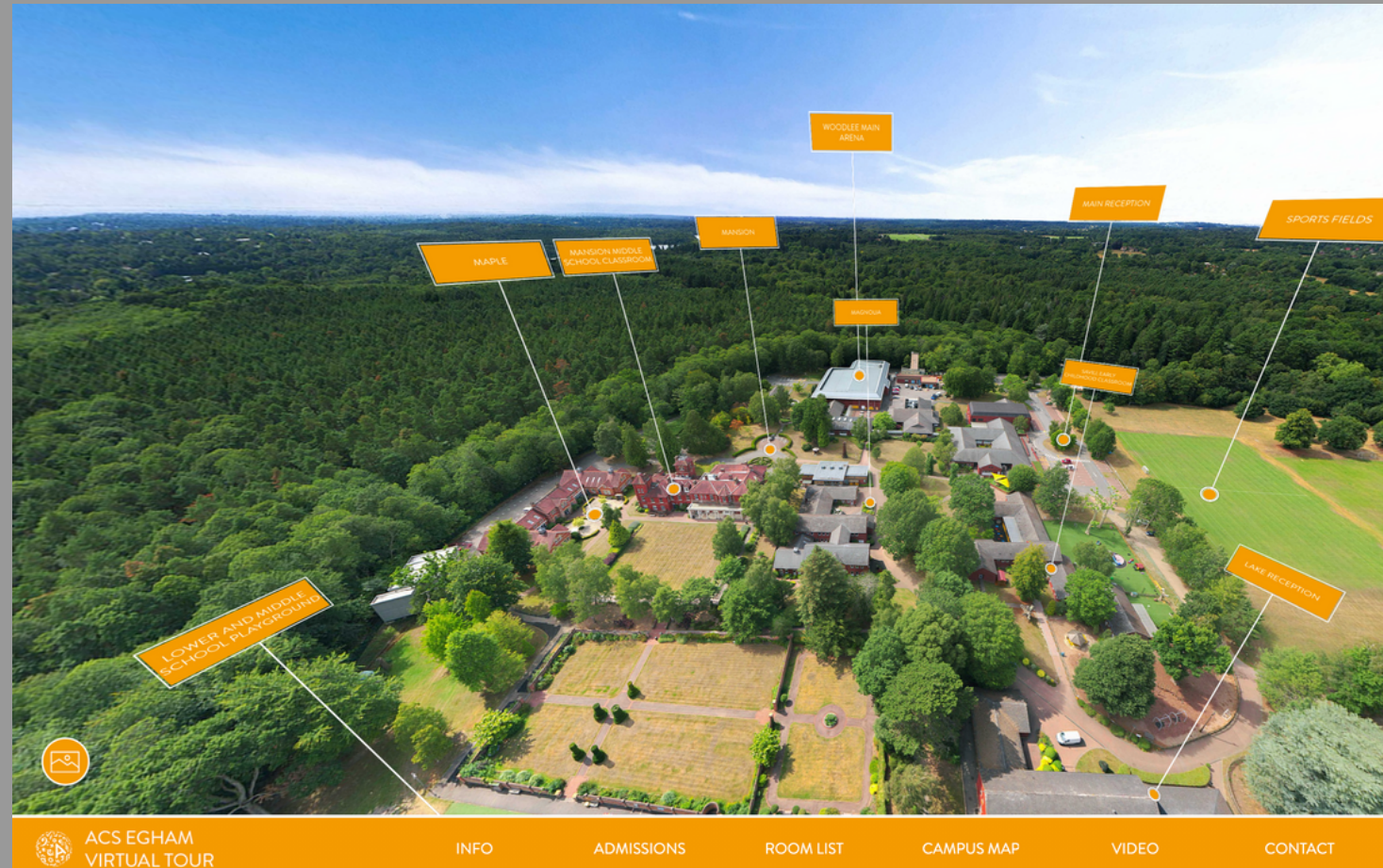
The Virtual Tour's usefulness through the Lockdown Days has far outlasted the pandemic. Demand for tours remains high as the ROI has been proven. The advantages are endless and target many of your audiences.

You may already be thinking about how to start the process of commissioning a 360 Virtual Tour and how to find and vet suppliers. As the product and service are still only a few years old, the process of sourcing a Virtual Tour will also be new to school marketers, so we're here to help with some key tips and advice.

YOUR GOAL SHOULD BE TO PRODUCE AN IMMERSIVE AND ON-BRAND EXPERIENCE TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT FOR MARKETING AND ADMISSIONS TEAMS.

Convincing SLT & Advantages of a 360 Virtual Tour

Getting Buy-In

The ability to show a family around your school without waiting for an Open Day, without travelling, for time-poor parents is a huge advantage. Consider these potential audiences and uses:

- **Pupil recruitment** – View or show a Tour in advance of an in-person tour to qualify families, use at a recruitment fair, use to seem more 'accessible' to modern-day two-income families. A family can view a tour well before an Open day or physical tour. A tour can be used at any touch point in the admissions journey to set a school apart from the competition.

- **International families** – View a Tour as a surrogate visit to the school when travel is impossible or not financially viable.

- **New staff & interviewees** – View a Tour as a potential workplace environment.

- **New pupils & starters** – View a Tour as a way to ease the stress of new starters by giving them a visual reference of the facilities and the flow of the school.

- **Alumni engagement** – View a Tour to show capital developments and their progress, your historic archives or to facilitate fundraising.

- **Community engagement & support** – Show the facilities that are made available to the public e.g. pool, sports, wedding venue etc.

If a Tour is done well (not just 360 photos, but with added content) it will be an immersive experience, great for storytelling, used for blended open days, and with the right provider and platform, it will also serve as an online live video chat service like Zoom for a Live Guided Tour.

Photography Quality

This is key and is the base layer of every Tour. The Tour will be viewed on all devices, in many browsers and usually fullscreen. The quality of the photography can make the difference between your school looking dingy, dark and uninviting to clean, warm and welcoming. As the key feature of your tour, you should be focussing on sourcing the best photography you can afford and that will all come down to:

1. camera type and how the 360s are shot and
2. the skill of the camera operator and
3. software used and skill in post-production

Specific photography 'tells' are listed in detail in another section. They are useful tricks to spot the type of camera and to identify editing skill levels. A summary list of what to look for in a provider's images are:
1. The image quality itself - sharpness, exposure, colour saturation. levelling, stitching, absence of anomalies, High Dynamic Range (HDR) and
2. The content of the image - the staging of the room, its cleanliness, its tidiness, any useful visual cues, any security issues such as pupil names on display boards.

LOOK FOR HIGH-RESOLUTION, COLOUR-CORRECTED IMAGES WITH MINIMAL CLUTTER TO SHOW YOUR FACILITIES OFF
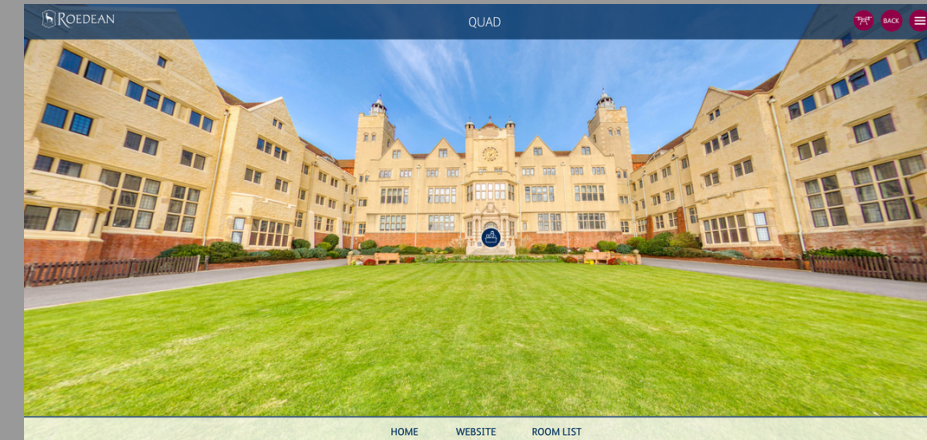
Embedded Content

Look for added content (in 'hotspots' and menus) e.g. videos, photos, stories, text, information on admissions, sports, the curriculum, and marketing assets you use on your school website. This content makes the Tour extremely useful as a 'pure' marketing tool. A Virtual Tour with ONLY 360° images makes it a 'photo gallery Tour of school' and in our opinion, a waste of good assets and a missed opportunity. Your school website already has 'all content/info for all audiences' so any 'pure marketing' to pupils, parents and staff can get lost in your 100+ web pages. However, a Virtual Tour is a 'one-stop-shop' customer journey for your pure marketing content to live, making a Virtual Tour a focused marketing tool that is totally different from your website.

An added point to look for – the embedded content and how it is displayed needs to be on-brand for your school, as well as being interesting and digestible with Call-to-Actions (CTAs) to make the most of your investment.

USE A LAYERING EFFECT
HIGH QUALITY PHOTOGRAPHY BASE + MULTIPLE LAYERS OF MEDIA

What to look for in a Virtual Tour

User Experience and
User Interface (UX/UI)

The Tour should work on all devices and all browsers and the way you move around and interact should be intuitive. If it doesn't work and things are 'broken', it will reflect on your school. You wouldn't accept your website with broken links, off-brand design or confusing customer journeys so why should your Virtual Tour be any different? Things like instructions on how to use the Tour and what you expect your user to 'do' are helpful, especially since some users may have limited prior exposure to a Virtual Tour.

Having the ability to guide your users 'live' in-person via video chat is always helpful and dramatically increases engagement.

The UX will be positively affected by embedding useful, compelling content that influences the user's experience and decision.

Some parents may use your school website or a Tour to make a decision about a 15k-30k a year investment in their child/ren so this experience and how they feel after it is a huge factor in your marketing. Treat it as the powerful tool it is.

**CREATE A BRAND EXPERIENCE
THAT ENGAGES YOUR AUDIENCE.
360 IMAGES ALONE WILL NOT ACHIEVE THIS**

What to look for in a Virtual Tour

Useful Features to Add Value

Look for added value. Are there features that one Tour has that others do not, that you might find useful? Features that add value to your Tour and set you apart from neighbouring schools will help your cause. Examples might be but are not limited to drone 360s (different to drone stills or drone video), video chat or screen share of the Tour for live meetings, day to night transitions, seasonal transitions, ability to interact with media, download media, 3D models for learning resources, tiny planet imagery, fly in-out and Virtual Reality (VR) headset capability will add differentiation to your Tour.

Two years ago, I wrote this statement in this whitepaper:

> " Perhaps in two years, every school or business will have a 360° tour. It may become the new 'must-have' digital tool. There was a day when schools didn't have a website, but they all do now! Just like with websites, your Virtual Tour should not look like every other tour. "

Recent research shows that roughly 50% of schools have a Virtual Tour.

CREATE A VIRTUAL TOUR BRIEF THAT REQUIRES YOUR TOUR TO 'LOOK DIFFERENT 'AND TO HAVE ACCESS TO USEFUL FEATURES WILL CONTINUE TO DIFFERENTIATE YOU FROM YOUR COMPETITORS.

Security Concerns

The biggest security risk is in 'how' a user navigates your Tour. Providing your audience with a Tour that is a floorplan or a true 'walkthrough' Tour could give a would-be opportunist a route through your school which could cause safeguarding and security issues. Our recommendation is to choose a style of Tour that uses 'jump rooms' and minimises the routes through a school as opposed to a true walkthrough.

For example, showing in a Tour that your Computer Lab is the 5th door on the right down a corridor from Reception is not ideal. In addition, valuables 'in-shot' can also be targeted and perhaps easily accessed if an opportunist knows the exact location of them in your school.

In your research phase sourcing a provider, our advice is to consider carefully before commissioning a '100% walkthrough' type Tour, where the user clicks a floor circle to advance every few feet (similar to Google Street View) and hence creates a realistic floorplan of the school. Certain software platforms that 360 tours are built in rely solely on this type of 'movement' in a Tour so do enquire about this feature.

Some Tours add a further feature which presents a 3D floorplan - called a 'dollhouse' - another asset for burglars. Our advice is to avoid this gimmicky 3D tool, as whilst it has wow factor when you first see one, it has no advantage for schools and is a security risk.

USE A 'JUMP ROOMS' APPROACH TO AVOID MOST CORRIDORS AND THE 'CONNECTIONS' BETWEEN SPACES TO DECREASE ANY SECURITY RISK.

What to look for in a provider – pros and cons

Pros and Cons of Different Types of Tours

You will be able to ask questions of your potential provider about budget, timescale and process just as you would from any provider. But where you will get the most useful information to help you make your decision is what type of equipment & software a provider uses and examples of their previous work. What you'll be looking for: Camera type + Software type + Skill and experience + Tour features.

For simplicity sake, there are 3 camera types that put the Virtual Tours into 3 category types for quality and price.

One-shot camera

One-shot Camera

"The Beginner's Camera, fun but limited"

It is a cheaper camera to source (£400-£900). To create the 360s the provider will need many other bits of software to make the images look 'just ok', which is what to expect from a supplier using a one-shot camera (e.g. brand names - Ricoh Theta, GoPro, Insta360).

One-shots are great for real estate Tours which are a short-term product needed for a limited number of smaller spaces. But they are a poor choice for a fee-paying school, business, museum, hotel etc. In our opinion, no one with a one-shot should be charging more than a few hundred pounds for a Tour. Schools, businesses, etc deserve to be shot with a DSLR or Matterport Camera to look premium. The only concession to this is state schools whose budgets may be limited.

The Megapixels (MP) on one-shot cameras are about 8-20MP. Unfortunately, when those pixels are spread across an equirectangular image, even a 20MP camera can produce a grainy, soft image. One-shot cameras also suffer terribly with chromatic aberration, which can be identified by purple or green fringing in your final imagery.

PROS: CHEAP, GOOD FOR PERSONAL USE OR SMALL 'DISPOSABLE' TOURS
CONS: POOR QUALITY FOR BUSINESS USE, LOW MP, CHROMATIC ABERRATION, WORKFLOW DIFFICULT, EXPENSIVE, TIME-CONSUMING AND REQUIRES SKILL, HAS LIMITED EDITING CAPABILITIES.

DSLR or Mirrorless Camera with Specialist Lens

"High Quality, High Skill, Higher Cost"

This is your typical professional photographer's equipment (Canon, Nikon, Sony etc) but with added components (fisheye lens and pan head) and they need the skill to photograph and stitch the images. The cost of the equipment can be a few to many thousand pounds depending on the brand of the camera. Once set up in a room, the photographer will likely take between 4 and 30 photographs which will then be stitched into a 360° image, HDR'd and edited in post-production to create an equirectangular image that will be between 24-100+MP.

This method provides the most flexibility during post-production editing and most anything can be done with Photoshop and Lightroom to alter how the images look, objects can be edited into and out of the photograph and the quality is exceptional with 24-100+MP images. From experience, schools tend to want many things edited in and out of a photograph (paint peeling, pupil names, scuff marks on walls, adding blue skies, green grass etc) so having that ability is critical to the appearance of the end product.

A downside of DSLR is, depending on the lens and lighting, the outcomes may vary and there is always a small risk of a minimal amount of chromatic aberration (purple and green fringing), poor colour grading/editing skills and experience in pre-production, production and post-production. Not all photographers are creative or have the skills to take and create 360s. 360s ARE different from normal photographs so vetting a provider means asking for their 360 examples, not their normal creative photography.

PROS: EXCELLENT PHOTOGRAPHY, HIGH MP/RESOLUTION SO ZOOM/DETAIL IS EXCELLENT, POST-PRODUCTION EDITING FLEXIBILITY, SOFTWARE CHOICES ENDLESS AND WITH THE RIGHT SOFTWARE WILL ALLOW FULL BRANDING OF THE TOUR.

CONS: SOURCING GOOD PHOTOGRAPHERS CAN BE DIFFICULT, NOT CHEAP, LONGER TO BUILD DUE TO EXTENSIVE EDITING CAPABILITY, IF CERTAIN SOFTWARE IS USED TO BUILD THE TOUR, BRANDING EDITS CAN BE LIMITED.
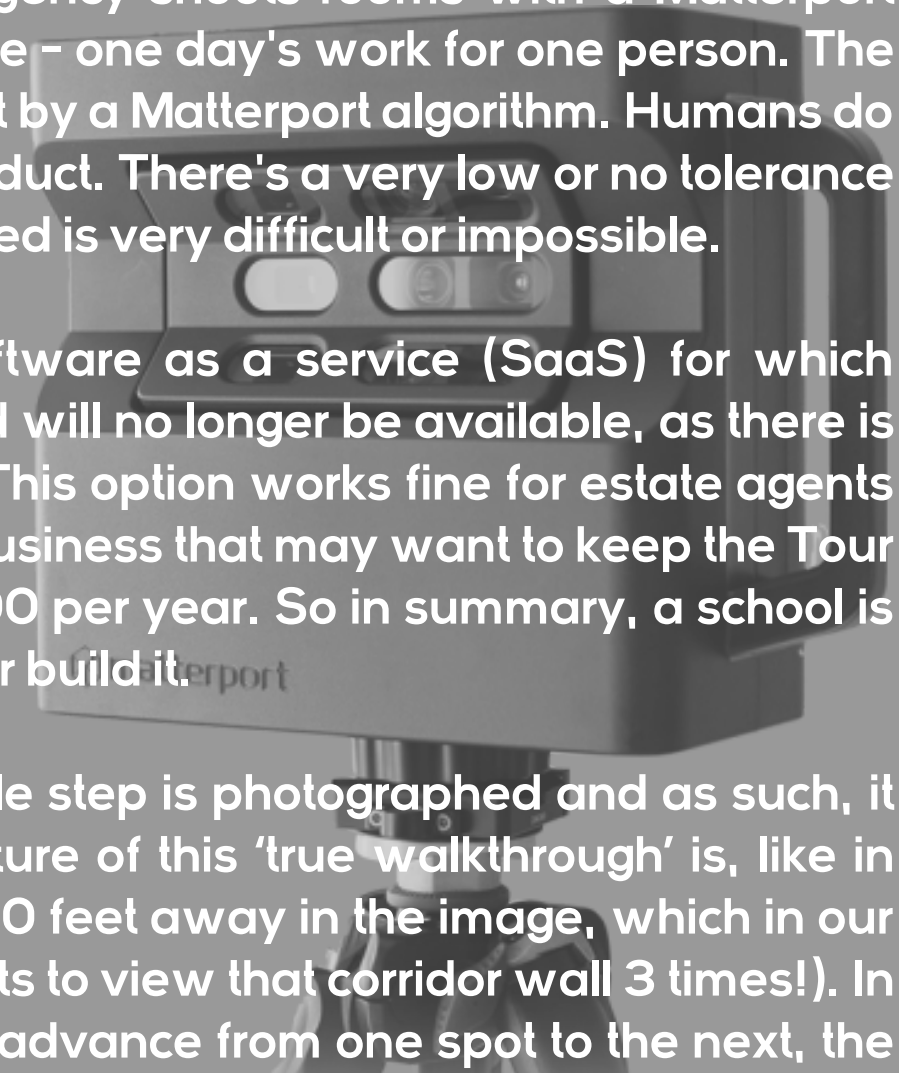
Matterport Camera and Software
"Great for Estate Agents, Terrible for Schools"

Matterport camera and software

The above options are cameras that can be used with ANY software to build a Tour. However, there is an option that is both camera + software. Matterport is a company that offers its software as an annual subscription fee and they also offer three camera choices, one of which is their own camera. Camera choices for Matterport software are: your own 'one-shot', your own DSLR or Matterport's own 134MP camera, at a cost of £3000. Any of these cameras are a cost to the school and/or require hiring a professional photographer who uses Matterport software. Whilst the images are 134MP and can be good quality, Matterport's post-production colour grading leaves much to be desired. Images tend to be over-contrast, under-saturated and very flat.

Typically design or photography agencies buy the camera and offer their services to shoot and 'build' (aka send files to Matterport for a computer to build) your tour. It's a formulaic 'plug and play' process, where the agency shoots rooms with a Matterport camera, usually without any staging them and then leaves. That is effectively their job done – one day's work for one person. The files that are generated (images) are uploaded to the Matterport Cloud and your Tour is built by a Matterport algorithm. Humans do not build the Tour. When the Tour is built it is emailed back to your agency as a finished product. There's a very low or no tolerance for amendments to the images, the colour grade, or anything in shot that needs to be removed is very difficult or impossible.

The provider (the agency used and by default,a school) is tied into the Matterport software as a service (SaaS) for which Matterport charges annually. If you decide to cancel the service, your Tour goes offline and will no longer be available, as there is no option to 'keep' the Tour files (or images!!) without paying an annual subscription fee. This option works fine for estate agents when Tours go offline as quickly as they go online (once a property sells) but for a school/business that may want to keep the Tour live for longer than a few months, it's not viable. Subscription fees are approximately £1000 per year. So in summary, a school is £3k investment +£1k per year in debit before they've even hired someone to photograph it or build it.

Another feature of a Matterport Tour, it is usually a 'true walkthrough' meaning every single step is photographed and as such, it provides a full floorplan of your school, for everyone to see (see Security, above). A feature of this 'true walkthrough' is, like in Google Street View, it could take you 4 clicks to get from a current viewpoint to one that is 10 feet away in the image, which in our opinion, is poor UX, takes too much effort and delivers too much irrelevant detail (who wants to view that corridor wall 3 times!). In this 'true walkthrough' you can also get something we call 'tile pulling' meaning when you advance from one spot to the next, the small tiles (there are 100's of them) that make up a 360 image either pull or stretch or temporarily go black so the image can distort quite dramatically.

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Matterport Camera and Software (cont'd)

Also be aware that every interface, menu, icon, text box and photo gallery will look the same as EVERY other Matterport tour. See images on this and next pages taken from two tours – they all look like this and there are 1000s of tours as Matterport software is very popular for its automation for estate agents who don't sell the brand, they sell property! Look at the exact same thumbnail menus across the bottom, turquoise and pink hotspots with white centres, circles on the floor (and so many of them!), Matterport branding bottom right (required) and floor plan/dollhouse and measuring tool (not useful in schools!) icons bottom left – always, every tour. Not even a sign of a school logo in terms of the school brand.

Matterport tours are automated off-the-shelf tours – great for other sectors, not for ours. There's very little scope to personalise to your own brand. There is an option to change text colour but it is limited in its range. Fonts cannot be changed and logos cannot be added except in certain pre-determined areas. The 'Tripod Cap' you sometimes see when you look down in a 360 will always be the Matterport logo or a blurred tripod or floor.

In terms of brand experience for a school, Matterport is not the right solution for a Virtual Tour. When shopping around, be sure to ask your agency what they build in, although their portfolio would give it away instantly,everytour is heavily Matterport branded!

Matterport Camera and Software (cont'd)

Matterport camera and software

As there's little to no scope for adding brand colours, fonts, logos, designed documents, designed photo albums, personalised galleries or how your video content will show, it makes it quite an 'off the shelf' tool, with features that are useful in real estate but not in school admissions and marketing, Matterport software is well-known for its 'measuring spaces tool' and the 'Dollhouse effect' features, features that are useless in schools.

Overall it means it's a very useful tool for other sectors, but perhaps not the best one for education, unless brand doesn't matter to the school. You would be paying a premium for features you will not use and getting a templated, same look and feel tour as every other Matterport user, a tour without any personality or brand story and when you stop paying the subscription fee, you've thrown away all the assets.

Parents ARE buying into your brand so your Tour needs to reflect as a 'Brand Experience' and not templated or looking like your neighbouring school's tour. We strongly believe that having the content and interface on-brand and relevant to your marketing is key. We don't think any school would commission a website that did not have its brand colours, logo, fonts or styling present. So why choose this very important marketing tool that doesn't allow personalisation, especially if you'll be paying mid-to-top-tier prices and an annual subscription fee?

Having said this, the Matterport Camera can create a detailed photograph and look premium. At 134MP, it is slightly more MP than DSLR or Mirrorless, and so much more than a one-shot or iPhone can achieve, but as mentioned above, you pay the price for the equipment investment, the software's annual fees and the biggest price you pay is the unbranded tour.

Matterport camera and Software (con't)

Matterport camera and software
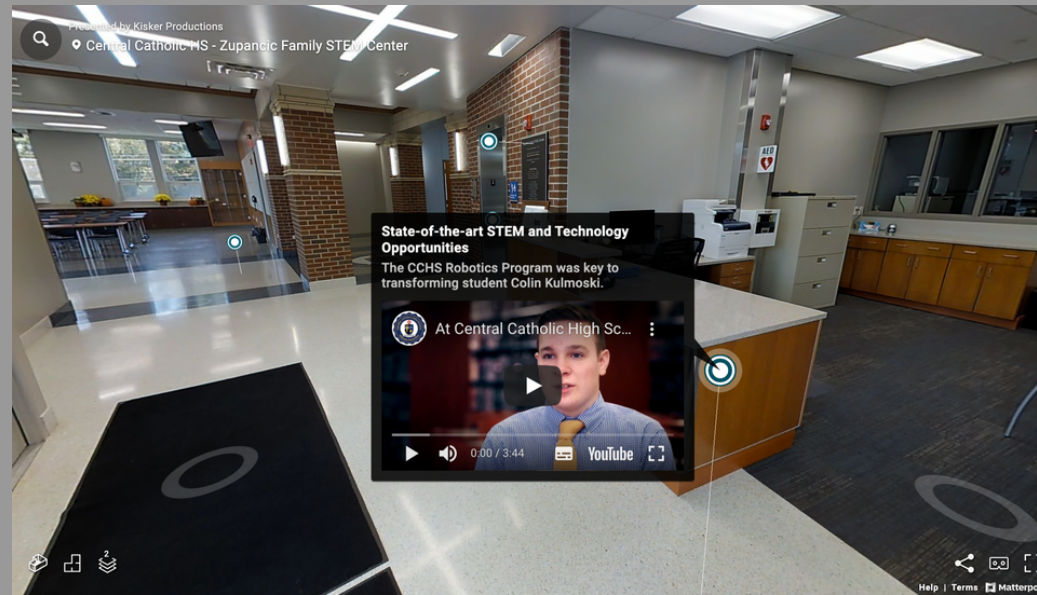
- The black box for the content box – same on every tour
- Circles on the floor to help you move…2 feet – but why?
- Hotspots same in every tour – turquoise/pink/white
- Bottom left and right – templated
- School name in Matterport Font top left
- Left- Dollhouse
- Below – the spot that takes you to look at the WC door indicates no attention to User Experience (UX)

PROS: EXCELLENT QUALITY PHOTOGRAPHY (DSLR OR MATTERPORT CAMERA), COMPETITIVE MID-TO HIGH RANGE PRICING, CAN ALL BE OUTSOURCED AND COMPLETED QUICKLY.

CONS: SECURITY RISK AND LONGEVITY OF A SUBSCRIPTION MODEL, UX/UI, LITTLE/NO DESIGN/EDITING/FLEXIBILITY, TILE PULLING, TOO MANY CIRCLES/CLICKS/IRRELEVANT IMAGERY, DOLLHOUSE AND MEASURING TOOL COULD BE PERCEIVED AS GIMMICKY

Software options

There are further considerations as to what software is used to build the Tour or if it's built using code.

The most important advice I can give when it comes to software is the software doesn't matter much, it's what can be done with it and HAS THAT AGENCY USED IT TO ITS FULLEST CAPABILITIES.

Common software are:
3D Vista
GoThru/TourMkr
Kuula
Pano2VR

Every software comes with its own built-in BASIC SKIN TEMPLATE (think of it like a website template - how the menus, buttons, the wireframe are laid out) that anyone can upload their 360 images into and a tour is, for intents and purposes, done. Unfortunately, these software companies have one template each and everyone who has that software licence seems to be using those same free basic templates, instead of building their own. The end result, having seen hundreds of school virtual tours, is there are about 3 different 'looks' across all those tours.

- The 3dVista Template has a left-sided box menu, that fits flush to the left side of the viewport, with room names as text that when clicked expands out to sub-rooms. All content hotspots will be a very familiar asset - it's a white animated carrot arrow icon
- The TourMakr Template has a left-sided, rounded-edge menu that behaves the same way as 3DVista's. It also has duo-tone hotpots and pin assets that are the same icon in every tour, just branded to teh school's colours.
- Pano2VR is really limited and shows a box of text for rooms and room titles, with very little to no flexibility in design, fonts colours etc.

Each software has teh capability to so varying amounts more than the above, but it's simply easy to use eth template, reduce tiem on the build and either charge less, or charge

TERRACE

REDDAM HOUSE BERKSHIRE

Software options (con't)

Each software has the capability to do varying amounts more (some MUCH more!) than the above, but it's simply easy for photographers and agencies to use the provided template, it reduces their time on the build and then they either charge less, or charge more and happily pocket lots of profit for doing few days of photography and a few days build

It is a good idea to investigate what features are available and what would be included in 'your cost' as many providers might quote to build the tour, but perhaps may not understand the sheer amount of content schools have to upload and that might add a significant cost to the tour if this is not discussed early in the sourcing stage.

Options like embedding content, on-brand assets & hotspots, in-built video chat, in-built analytics, and in-built forms, Facebook and WhatsApp integrations are all features to ensure engagement with your Tour and tracking of your Return on Investment (ROI) and should be discussed when you commission a tour so that your provider understands your expectations.

IF YOU WANT A DIFFERENT DESIGN THAT EVERYONE ELSE, FIND AN AGENCY THAT IS BUILDING USING THIS SOFTWARES BUT DOES NOT USE THE TEMPLATE FOR ALL THEIR SCHOOL CLIENTS OR FIND AN AGENCY THAT BUILDS IN CODE. YOU SHOULD WANT YOUR TOUR TO LOOK DIFFERENT AND STAND OUT, BUT IF THAT'S NOT IMPORTANT TO YOU, THEN YOU CAN SAVE MONEY BY GOING WITH A CHEAPER OFF-THE-SHELF OPTION THAT HAS BEEN DESCRIBED.

Content Embeds

Another crucial point to make and thing to look for is a provider who will add/embed your content. Content embeds can be just about anything! Hotspots in a tour can be clicked to open all sorts of content – images, galleries, text, videos, sound, documents, webpages, graphics, 3D models etc.

- Photo galleries, and text explaining things about that space, about the school, about the pupils and staff support your brand storytelling efforts.
- Videos of all sorts – from UGC to brand videos, should be embedded on TV screens that play when you enter a room to embedded in iframes in hotspots. Videos also help new families meet key personnel, meet pupils and get a sense of the school personality.
- Sounds – either diegetic or narration – are hugely useful in a tour to immerse your user in the experience.
- Documents – Prospectus, magazine, a PDF of fees are all helpful documents.

Some of the software options listed on the last page allow for the embedding of content, and others do not. For the ones that do, the differences lie in how that content is displayed and how much flexibility the agency will have in customising that content to look well-designed and on-brand for your school. A few of those softwares listed only have one set of icons, so you can be sure your icons will look like every other school's icons. Some won't allow the change of colours to your brand colours, some won't allow your font. Some do animation, some don't. Most don't allow full freedom of customisation and even if they do, it doesn't mean the agency is using that. 99% of the time, I see only the iconography that has been provided as free assets in each software and never see customised, designed assets.

YOUR TOUR SHOULD HAVE CONTENT EMBEDS, OTHERWISE, IT'S *JUST* 360S WHICH IS A MISSED OPPORTUNITY. HOW YOU ARE ABLE TO PRESENT YOUR CONTENT EMBEDS IS KEY TO HAVING AN ON-BRAND PRESENCE IN YOUR TOUR. LOOK FOR AN AGENCY WILLING AND ABLE TO ADD CONTENT AND MAKE IT LOOK DIFFERENT FROM YOUR NEIGHBOURING SCHOOL'S CONTENT!

Photography and Design Issues
"What to Look for and Avoid in Photography"

- **Chromatic aberration (CA)** – purple or green fringing, look on 360 images at the edges of doors, windows and trees for purple or green hues. One-shot cameras are notorious for CA, both DSLR/Mirrorless and Matterport Tours will suffer a very small amount of CA.
- **Sun/shadow placement in the image** – if your main landing image is the front of the school, it probably should not be in shade, in fact, none of your outdoor imagery should be in the shade unless it couldn't be avoided. Good photographers know how to avoid this (HDR and proper scheduling, you'd be surprised at how punctual the sun can be!)
- **Skies and grass** can easily be replaced in any shot in post-production, so there is very little excuse to show your school on a miserable grey day or with discoloured or patchy turf. That's lazy editing. If you are paying a cheap price, sure, but if you are paying a premium, your photographer/designer should be adding blue sky and green grass as standard at no additional cost.

Chromatic aberration

BEFORE   AFTER

- **Clutter in the image** – bins, signs, rucksacks, rubbish, displays on walls not straight, bundles of wires, anything distracting! These are all a sign of poor pre-production, the provider not guiding the school as to how rooms need to look and that no staging was done on the photography day. Estate agents don't photograph houses without staging them, so schools should expect the same. It is also a sign of no/little post-production Photoshopping on the provider's side.
- **Blown-out windows** – windows that look 100% white and no detail is seen outside? Poor photography/exposure.
- **'Noise' in image / 'grainy' image** – this is the sign of a one-shot or low MP camera. Looks cheap. Shows very dark and flat.
- **Visible camera and/or tripod** on the ground and in reflections – can you see the shadow of the camera and tripod? Can you see a tripod in window or mirror reflections? Good photographers know how to remove these. And Matterport images typically won't remove them either.
- **Attention to detail** – This relates both to design and security – look for blurred car registrations, faces, pupil names. These are important LEGAL and safeguarding concerns that need to be addressed.

Photography and Design Issues
"What to look for and avoid in Design"

Surrey Hills

King Edward's 100 acre campus is an area of outstanding beauty located in the Surrey Hills. With ample space for activities, landscaped gardens and quality sports pitches, pupils have the opportunity to enjoy the spacious woodlands and open spaces. Curiosity, inspiration and exploration prompts wellbeing and aesthetic appreciation for all.

- **UX/UI** – Can you view a providor's Tours on a mobile? Tablet? If they have not made the Tour for mobile, they possibly don't understand your audience. Check how text and embedded images display. Is scrolling intuitive or does it feel backwards? Can you click the hotspots, read the menus and content? If you can't navigate or work the provider's other Tours, then your parents won't be able to navigate yours. 'Force orientation' or orientation agnostic is also good to look out for as there are pros and cons to both agnostic and force orientation.

- **Branding** – look out for school branding, colours, iconography and fonts. These things you may not notice on someone else's Tour, you don't know what you're looking for, it will become obvious where extra care has been spent using bespoke icons (not the standard caret arrows like in Google Street View or the door icon) and school colours and fonts. Many softwares for Virtual Tours do not allow bespoke design work, icons or font choices so these are questions you need to ask a provider. Can I use my school logo and colours for all the hotspots and menus? Can you use our font? Can I move this element around? Can my menu be bottom-justified/right-justified etc? This flexibility in design is KEY! Otherwise, your Tour will look similar to every other school Tour that provider creates.

- **Design Immersion** – things that bring you 'into' the 'scene e.g. lens flare, diegetic audio, animations, 'moving parts' such as TV playing a video, or light switches that change the scene. These are features that engage your audience and make exploring fun and exciting.

- **Menu Design, Layout and Content** – Is there a menu of headline content that is easily recognisable to force a user to a CTA? This might be sign up admission forms, fees, process description, contact names and emails, a welcome from the Head etc. How is this information laid out? Is it easy to use?

How much should you budget?

You wouldn't budget £500 for a website or a film, so why do this with a similar visual marketing tool?

You will have this tool for years, it could be the only time a parent sees your school before parting with £15k for their child's first year. It's an emotional experience for them. So give them something to experience. Families will make decisions about your school based on this tool with other online marketing collateral, combined with a video meeting or phone call with the Head so making a good first impression with a premium quality tour is critical.

What do you want prospective families to think about how you present yourself? What is that impression worth to you?

How much you should budget? Of course, it all depends on how much photography, how much design and how much content you require adding, but as a general guide, you should add together ...

Camera type + software type + how much customisation is used in that software + how much content is embedded + room count

- If the supplier uses a one-shot camera, expect to pay less than £1,000 for 30 rooms and very little content.
- If the supplier uses a Matterport camera + Matterport software, expect to pay ~£5000 for 30-rooms and very little content.
- If the supplier uses DSLR/Mirrorless Camera and bespoke software or codes the tour, expect to pay £5,000 – £10,000 for a 30-room, comprehensive, stand-out tour with a true premium feel with a lot of content. Some tours are 10's of thousands, especially if coded. Most University 360 tours are about 50-80 rooms and cost £50,000-£100,000 which is in line with what Independent schools are paying for websites nowadays.

When looking at the higher end of the scale, do bear in mind, your provider is effectively building a website/microsite (that sits inside your own website) for you, with coding and creativity at the core of the 'build'. A Premium Tour takes time, resources and design expertise. Don't undervalue that skill and don't undervalue what you will need this tool for in the future.

Summary

The need for a 360 Virtual Tour is only increasing. Even with COVID over, the demand is still very high and I do still believe most schools will have one as the years progress.

Virtual Tours can all look the same if you don't know what to look for. This document is meant to help inform school marketers so it enables you to make the best decision.

We felt it apt to create this document after the past few years saw a three-fold increase in Virtual Tour providers. A large number of photographers and non-photographers took the opportunity to buy a 'one-shot' camera, or buy into Matterport and try their hand at 360 Virtual Tours this year with varied results. As Virtual Tours were previously only used in the real estate and construction sectors before COVID, there were no standards of delivery set in the education sector and marketers have had no experience in sourcing a supplier. As a result, we have witnessed a 'free for all' approach to pricing and delivery standards.

But if you read this document, and you now know what to look for and what to ask, you'll be able to invest your marketing budget wisely and create a long-standing brand tool that parents and pupils alike will engage with for years to come.

We hope you have found this a helpful checklist and as ever, we are always available for impartial advice and best practice techniques when it comes to Tours or anything school marketing related.

The views and professional opinion herein were collated and written by Taralyn Cox, Alchemist in charge 360 Marketing Lab, and experienced digital marketer with 13 years' experience in the education sector

Checklist – what to do before buying

- [ ] Will a 360 Tour benefit me?
- [ ] Can I get buy-in from SLT?
- [ ] Examples – Look at photography quality
- [ ] Look for red flags in images
- [ ] Test tours UX and UI and security issues
- [ ] Agency/Supplier–Review camera types
- [ ] Review software types used
- [ ] Review customisation of tour's skin
- [ ] Look for content embeds in every room
- [ ] Review customisation of content embeds
- [ ] Look for tour's special features
- [ ] Do my expectations match my budget?

Meet our Team

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IMMERSIVE VIRTUAL TOURS