

Branding the Visitor Attraction Experience

Nick Booker, Attract Marketing Ltd

Strategic planning for visitor attractions can often have rather disjointed beginnings. Issues of “secondary” importance, such as access, buildings, design and detailed planning frequently dominate discussion at an early stage. However, the fundamental questions that need to be addressed are:

“How will this visitor attraction work as a consumer proposition?”,

and

“How can it be branded for success?”

Creating a visitor attraction that is sufficiently strong, differentiated and marketable as a consumer proposition is, in the long term, even more important than the key “front-end” questions of funding, investors and capital development needs. It is, after all, not investors and public funding authorities who sustain the profitable operation of a visitor attraction. It is consumers. The visitor attraction’s return on investment depends ultimately not on buildings, but on individuals, seeking a visitor attraction experience.

Visitor attractions and the “experience economy”

A visitor attraction can be defined as “somewhere worth leaving home for”, and this is as relevant to a single museum or cathedral as it is to a tourist area or town. People make visitor attractions – the people who conceive them, the people who develop them, the people who manage them, but above all the people who consume their products.

In a successful visitor attraction, the product on offer is the experience itself. Committing time to that experience must be rewarding for the individual; spending money on that experience must be worthwhile. In the experience economy, visitor attractions must constantly “reinvent” themselves to encourage repeat visits and survive. This economy of experience is about quality, service and choice – it is not about size. Every visitor attraction is experienced on the smallest possible scale – by an individual visitor making an individual choice. Successful visitor attractions of whatever size sell expectations, experiences and memories to individual consumers.

The changing visitor attraction marketplace

In addition to the demands of the new experience economy, the visitor marketplace itself is changing. Visitor attraction consumers are now spoilt for choice, and they are becoming more and more sophisticated. We are also becoming a more cash rich, but time poor society. So those visitor attractions that win, will win big. Visitor attractions must therefore offer value for time as well as value for money by offering a range of activities and experiences within an integrated package. Finally, to respond to the demands of the experience economy and the changing marketplace, visitor attractions must provide consumers with ever more personalised media content.

How can visitor attractions compete?

To respond to the new experience economy and the changing attraction marketplace, new types of visitor attraction strategy are needed. “Visitor attraction makers” – those people planning the development of their visitor attraction – need to consider a consumer-orientated, not supply-driven approach. First ask how to find, reach and retain consumers/visitors and only then start thinking about product.

With this approach in mind:

- Reliable market research and analysis is the bedrock. It is vital to understand the visitor and their needs.
- A clear vision for the unique consumer proposition and visitor attraction experience of the visitor attraction will focus development, management and marketing thinking.
- This vision and the values of the visitor attraction experience must be captured in a powerful brand promise.
- High quality experiences through a series of integrated products and services are needed to make a visit to an attraction worth consumers’ time and money and are required to match the brand promise.
- Strong, personalised, targeted marketing is needed to attract consumers’ attention.
- Visitor attraction managers must always be concerned to build brand loyalty to encourage regular and repeat visitation.

Planning an integrated visitor attraction

A comprehensive Visitor Attraction Review – a thorough analysis of the attraction’s “visitor attraction offer”, which will identify strengths and weaknesses – is a useful process in planning for an integrated approach. All parts of the visitor experience are examined by analysing and testing the visitor attraction’s offer against the following list of key elements that should comprise an integrated attraction:

1. “Attraction” projects – which create awareness and attract the market

These are the capital “building” projects that raise the profile of the visitor attraction and motivate visits – including activities, galleries and events.

2. Support services – which create a sense of place.

These are the infrastructure and support services that are needed to ensure that the visitor attraction works for the visitor – including accessibility, internal routing, car parking, accommodation, signage, interpretation, lavatories and cloakrooms, shops, catering, visitor information points and visitor amenities.

3. Service and management projects – which manage and sustain the visitor attraction attraction

These are not capital build projects but rather the services that require on-going revenue support. They are absolutely vital to the long-term sustainability of the visitor attraction – including marketing, promotion, brand management, visitor management, security, cleanliness, and events and activities.

A Visitor attraction Review following these guidelines will help to identify gaps in both physical provision and, crucially, service and management provision. It should then be possible to prioritise the projects and services that need to be in place to fill the gaps and prepare an informed action plan for development.

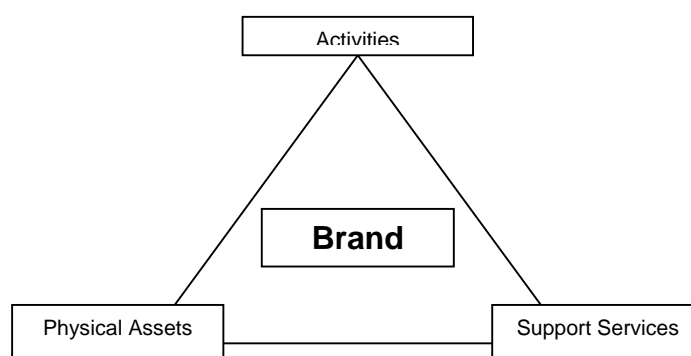
Build your visitor attraction brand values

A commitment from the start to develop a visitor attraction brand is a powerful “secret weapon” in the competitive visitor attraction marketplace. Every visitor attraction has a brand, even if it has not been pro-actively developed. But pro-actively developing and shaping a brand helps a visitor attraction to gain a competitive edge and to differentiate itself from competitors. The brand strategy can encourage closer integration between individual activities on site, partners and stakeholders.

The brand serves to provide the foundation for all marketing activity and helps to promote the visitor attraction experience more effectively. Brands are highly valuable – they can engender consumer loyalty and long-term commitment, which encourages repeat visits.

As the diagram below illustrates, a brand must encapsulate all the key elements of the integrated visitor attraction experience.

An Integrated Visitor Attraction



An attraction for visitors, stakeholders and owners

Strategic planning for an integrated visitor attraction necessarily involves consideration of almost all elements of the visitor attraction experience and offer – from infrastructure through to buildings, retail, catering, activities, museums, opening times, leisure facilities provision, signage, interpretation and so on.

As a result, visitor attraction planning addresses many of the issues of direct relevance to staff, investors and other stakeholders. Therefore an approach to strategic planning that recognises the needs of the visitor (and the benefits that success brings to the business) also recognises many of the needs of staff and investors. A successful visitor attraction will also be a success for staff and investors as well as the owners and other stakeholders.

In conclusion, the key lesson is to always start with the consumer. Ultimately, it is people that make visitor attractions successful, not buildings and infrastructure. Visitor attraction managers must always hold the consumer proposition and the visitor attraction brand firmly in mind when undertaking strategic planning.

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nick@attractmarketing.co.uk

This article is based on work by Sean Young of Locum Destination Consulting