

Designing Parks Big Name vs No Name

by Cale Heit

Someone once defined mixed emotions as what you feel while watching your worst enemy go over a cliff in your new car. For theme park designers, especially those used to working on one-of-a-kind 'independent' projects, being assigned to work on a brand name park evokes mixed emotions as well.

There's no denying the professional prestige that comes from being associated with the development of a Universal, Disney, Paramount or LEGO park. But it's not just about ego. Budgets are usually bigger - no trying to shoehorn a client's Disneyesque dreams into his LunaPark budget. Visions are grander - no turning over-worked back lot, back 40 or back then cliches into themes. And time frames are longer. For designers, this is The Big Time. But.....



The flipside is that now, they've got to justify every inch of their design to a platoon of project managers, meetings take days instead of hours and suddenly they find their creativity being reigned in by 'design directives'.

Ironically, the most obvious difference between designing an affiliated and non-affiliated park isn't how the designers themselves approach a project, but how their client approaches it.

Excluding the family-owned-and-operated facilities, theme parks are typically the pet projects of people who want to get into a business they know little about. This includes retail or leisure property developers looking to add a themed attraction to one of their projects; large manufacturing companies who see a theme park as an exercise in public relations; government-backed entrepreneurs out to tap domestic tourism markets or construction firms that want to add theme parks to their repertoire. For them, the park is a business, perhaps only distantly related - if at all - to their core business.

For the brand name builder however, a park is a continuation of, or variation on, their core business. For example, film studios turned park builders/operators, [Paramount, Universal, Disney], use their parks to extend the earning capacity of their cinematic blockbusters through rides, live shows and retail outlets long after the original film has stopped earning at the box office. Danish toy manufacturer LEGO is building a chain of children's play parks designed to generate dollars not only at the gate but also at the cash registers of the thousands of toy retailers who carry their products.

For these folks, theme parks are three dimensional, real time, live action, hands-on, interactive brand extensions. And branding is about marketing and these people are first and foremost, consummate marketers. They recognize that the first step towards enhancing sales of specific products - be they toys,

foods or movies - is to build a park that lives up to, if not enhances, their company or products' overall image. Quality park = quality company = quality products is the symbiotic equation behind the painstaking planning and mega-buck budgets that makes the task of designing these parks uniquely different from that of an independent park.

Job #1 for a new, independent park is creating expectations, ["We're like nothing you've ever seen!"] while a name brand park on the other hand, is all about meeting expectations, ["You read the book/saw the movie/played with the toy - now visit the theme park!"] And as conventional marketing wisdom dictates, its always easier to feed folks more of what they already know and like than it is to create a new appetite. Nowhere is this more evident in our business than in the use of characters.

Disney may have originated the practice of cashing in on a cartoon stars' celebrity status by turning the venerable Mickey You Know Who and his many friends into park attractions in their own right, but the competition was never far behind. Universal anted up with lavish mega-million dollar rides themed based on its movie hits Jaws, Jurassic Park and Back to the Future, Terminator 2 and E.T. plus Marvel Comics' hottie Spiderman. When Paramount acquired its string of parks, which already had attractions themed around the Hanna-Barbera troupe of TV cartoon characters, it was quick to theme new attractions on its blockbuster movie properties like Star Trek and Top Gun. Six Flags drafted Warner Brothers' cartoon crew along with DC Comics super-heroes Batman and Superman. Even Knotts Berry Farm, one of the original independents, has adopted the gang from Charles Shultz's Peanuts cartoon strip.

The folks at these parks have learned that it's easier [although not necessarily less expensive] to lure potential visitors through the front gates with a Bugs Bunny, Scooby-Do or Buzz Lightyear than with a cast of newly-minted characters they've never heard of.

Concedes Mario O. Mamon, Chairman & President of Manila's Enchanted Kingdom, "We have our own characters which we are slowly promoting but as yet do not have the popularity of more established international ones. It takes years to build a name and recognition and attraction is related to this."

Rides especially lend themselves to branded theming. Despite being given an enticing name like, say, The Scorpion, a coaster in an independent park will require more marketing horsepower to achieve the same ridership of the exact same coaster called [for example], Superman, Ride of Steel in a branded park.

"Everyone will agree that having a good central character for your park is of vital importance" says Netherlands-based theme park consultant Mark Wijman. "A park character serves as your ambassador.....because it sums up in one image what your park does..."

So how do designers at the parks that don't have a superstar character of their own fight the Battle of the Brands? By enlisting the cast from the fairy tales, historical legends and fantasy myths that enchanted kids for centuries before Bugs Bunny ever noshed his first carrot.

In Europe for example, where EuroDisney is now the third most visited park in the world, Universal has established a beach head in Spain and Six Flags flags are now flying over Holland, Efteling remains one of Europe's most popular theme parks by dipping deep into the fairy tale talent pool. Since opening in 1952, the Dutch themer's rides, animatronic attractions, and shows have been headlined by some 30 storybook celebs, from Snow White to Hansel and Gretel. [Whose long-gone creators don't have to be paid royalties either.] In 1993, Efteling's own in-house design shop created Droomvulcht, [DreamFlight], a six minute dark ride through a Brothers Grimm realm of magical creatures that is today still the Park's most popular attraction.

Similarly, England's Blackpool Pleasure Beach just spent 15 million pounds

installing Hall of Valhalla, the world's longest dark ride. According to Managing Director Geoffery Thompson, the Viking theme was chosen after market research indicated the two favourite topics of British school children were dinosaurs and Vikings. Take that Buzz and Bugs! Parc Asterix, outside of Paris created "Main Basse Sur La Jaconde", a world class stunt show. It features a no-name cast of characters in a tale about the theft of the Mona Lisa that has audiences cheering the hero on enthusiastically.

In Asia, designers typically find themselves balancing the public's growing taste for Western pop culture with the developer's sense of cultural nationalism. Recently, our proposed design for a Korean theme park adjacent to an auto racing track blended tail-fin era Americana with stone statues of a good luck god. Landmark Entertainment Group is designing a park in central China themed around the Monkey King, a Chinese folk hero.

For Stoney Morrell, the owner of Story Land in New Hampshire, the fun part of the business is "not having to work within the boundaries of a particular character or storyline." As Morrell sees it, "the principal advantage of not using highly identifiable icons is that it forces us to be more creative....Creating unique attractions, rides, play areas, entertainment is what we feel is at the root of our success. Our most popular attractions were built in-house and came from our own imagination and drawing boards....based simply on watching what our young guests liked."

Still, there's no denying that no matter where they get it - out of a book or off a screen - an audience's 'pre-awareness' of characters and/or their story gives designers a head start because such a large part of our job is storytelling. While the story is generally not visible to the park's guests, it serves as an essential guide for us in keeping our designs for attractions and theming consistent throughout a park. Each of the three independent parks we are currently designing in Asia required an imaginative mythos to explain how the park [or its unique site] came to be and why it is themed as it is. As much as we designers relish such unrestrained exercises in creativity, I think most park developers would agree with the Enchanted Kingdom's Mamon when he admits;

"I would think twice about starting to build or develop from scratch. If possible I would ride on the popularity of well-publicized characters and merchandise because it save a lot of time, effort and money...in promoting a new attraction."

One of the attractions of designing branded parks then, is the opportunity to tell the characters' story, or backstory, in more 'depth' than in the one and two dimensional formats of print and video. Mark Wijman contends that this expanded story telling "...can create a true competitive advantage which allows for emotional bonding with the facility and longer term visitor interest."

Still, such detailed storytelling can be a two-edged sword for designers because clients are, naturally, very devoted to their brands [i.e. characters] and tend to be quite rigid about exactly how they are to appear in a park setting. Standards governing the use of trademarked colours, logos and costuming for example, not to mention guidelines for keeping a character 'in character' must be adhered to religiously. Perhaps too religiously at times. The brand guidelines established for a TV format for example, can't always be automatically transferred to a theme park. Since our task is to design a more imaginative forum for the presentation of the client's products, we often have to coax their 'brand police' into allowing us a little wiggle room when taking one of their cherished characters off the page or screen and into a park environment.

Within our profession, designing within a strict brand discipline is the proverbial half-filled glass - it's either a challenge or a problem, depending on your perspective. Despite the powerful allure of the big names, there's still a small but die hard cadre of rugged individualist designers who prefer working for independent clients because, as one designer succinctly put it, "there's more creativity, less bureaucracy."

Okay, so the meetings take longer and there are a lot more fingers in the [design] pie. But those in the pro-brand camp say they much prefer a brand name client's sometimes exasperating fussiness and creativity-by-committee approach to the personal and political whimsy in the decision-making at many of the independent parks.

In one recent example, all of our designer's meticulous colour scheming of a Pacific rim park was undone by the client firm's Chairman, who demanded entire buildings be re-painted in his favourite colours. Still another client ordered his favourite trees be planted around a park's main plaza for the opening ceremonies, although our landscaper designers advised him this species would die within six months in that location. Outside of North America, where so much of the new park development is occurring, this 'whatever-the-boss-wants-the-boss-gets' culture, combined with a general naiveté about the principles [not to mention the complexities] of themed entertainment frequently leads to flawed [and invariably] costly decision making. Shepherding a pet project safely through the minefield of local sensibilities requires teeth-gritting diplomatic skills they don't teach at design school.

Developers of brand-name parks may be as naive about this business as their independent counter-parts and their chain of command may be equally Byzantine, but at least they work for high profile public companies. Their decisions are based on what's best for the park and ultimately, the shareholders, not what's best for the boss or his cronies.

Finally of course, there's the issue of money, as in how much force it exerts on the design process. Let's face it; the big names have to spend ever bigger bucks to keep their turnstiles clicking. Designers are divided on whether a larger budget buys a better design. Many designers insist that the depth of the client's pockets doesn't affect the process - at least not when it comes to the level of effort they personally bring to the project.

"For me, the creative effort I put into a design is the same regardless of whose name is on the front gate" contends Terry Brown, a veteran designer in our firm. "The quality of my work is also the same. The only real difference is in the theming."

Others, like Brown's colleague Bob Pavlich, argue that inevitably, dollars do make a noticeable difference.

"Unfortunately, with the independent parks, the cost of doing it right too often proves too high. As a result, you don't get that extra 20% of detail that makes the difference between theming that looks good at 50 yards and theming that looks good at 5 feet."

Put a group of good designers together however and they'll all agree on one thing: that despite any differences in the process, the design of both branded and independent parks alike must achieve one fundamental imperative: the park has to work. For the guest. For the operator. Designing a park that works isn't simply a function of dollars. Expensive theming may enhance the guests' experience somewhat, but in the end, a poor ride with really terrific theming is still a poor ride. And no amount of cartoon stars on a menu can hide a lack of stars in the kitchen. Put simply, bigger doesn't guarantee better. Nor does smaller mean lesser. Ultimately, good design - big name or no name - is, as Michael Croaker, Entertainment Manager for Wonderland Sydney put it, about "our ability to offer a complete park experience unique to any other industry venues both within our region and internationally."

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