

# Staying power

*The 'experience economy' of the future will be about lasting value.*

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WHOEVER wants to bring something magical to this world today notices that there are more and more things which are not as they seem. There is more chaos, more materialism, more fear and uncertainty. The real imagination one finds in the day-to-day world is becoming larger and different. This is a look at today's leisure industry.

#### How it used to be:

WHEN I was a kid, my mother used to read me a fairy tale before I went to bed, she was home when I came back from school and when we used to go on vacation we went all the way to Spain and my dad used to buy at least three road maps so he could determine the best route.

#### How it is nowadays:

TODAY we have kids too but instead of reading them a story before they go to bed, we buy them the Walt Disney collection, which gives us a shelf of easy entertainment which saves time. Now we simply insert a video into the mouth of the video recorder and our kids are happy for a while, so we can relax from our work. We don't have enough time to spend on everything we would like to, therefore we start to combine things, leisure and work for example. We do meetings on the golf course, plan conventions in the Bahamas. When we go on vacation we like to go mountain climbing in the Swiss Alps and in order to relax go to the Fiji islands for some beaches and scuba diving. We go to Disneyland Paris for a day; we don't have the time to worry about the route or anything, we just board a plane and rent a car, which comes equipped with a complete on-board navigation system. In short, our life is chaos and hence we are looking for a day of protected magical leisure, preferably in a fenced environment accompanied by a group of good friends or your family.

We go shopping for the fun of it, with numerous examples around the world, and

because our guests see more and more things we have to look for themes with a deeper meaning, we have to make sure that our guests see that we are spending their money where they can see it. We are past the point where we can say "we are looking for some kind of ride with some kind of theme" because then our audience knows and sees we are faking. A coaster which has a character of Superman on top of the lift hill is not themed and we have to stop pretending it is. That does not mean of course that things have to be themed to be good; a stand-alone ride, attraction or restaurant can be great the way it is. At a recent seminar Jack Rouse said: "Theming is essentially a way to make your facility heterogenous. People are really looking for quality" - and he is absolutely right.

The economical value of your facility is there because of the emotional affiliation your audiences have with it. Say you had opened a new attraction this season and you received huge media attention on the day, you were on all TV channels. The only bad thing was that it rained. Now say you were on TV again, because there was some special event, again enormous media attention, again it rained. The thought people most likely associate with your facility is "it is a great park, a shame though that it always rains there." This is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as your marketing communications are focused on the fact that all queue lines in the park are covered and that there are many things to do even if it is raining. Communication is the key word.

The largest problem of today's industry is that nearly everybody thinks of their facility as a profit-making machine and that the attendance, turnover and profits are all that counts. The initiator of the themed industry, Walt Disney, just thought the other way around. At first he wanted to build a place for him and his children to enjoy together, where people would feel welcome and special. You have to make sure that you

feature . . .



remain flexible, that you give your audience more than it expects and that you invest as much as possible where they can see it.

It seems that everything has become digital today, everything that is except for emotion; a shiver, a tear, a laugh will never become digital. However, the electronic superhighway is a competitor for leisure time, just as shopping is a competitor for leisure time. Make sure you understand this subject well, so that you don't explain to your local media after a bad season that it is because of the expansion of the shopping mall down the road. Because you are then saying that your facility has the same entertainment value as a shopping centre and let's hope that is not what you mean.

From all the Internet hype, however, there is something to learn, or better there is something which makes the Internet remember what some of us have long forgotten and that is that you can make your own product! For example, Infobeat (<http://www.infobeat.com>) allows us to make our own newspaper, selecting topics we want to read about, together with your own personalised stock market information at the time you want it.

This is easily transformable into the world of themed entertainment. Nowadays many things have a beginning and an end. For our kids we buy toys which are finished and with which they can only do one thing. Those toys are becoming more and more technologically advanced, yet it seems that children are very quickly bored with toys like this. The same thing counts for our industry. When we give our guests attractions with a well defined beginning and end, why would they come back next week to see this attraction again? Only attractions which can supply something new each and every time around are worth building.

The years beyond the millennium are those of the experience economy, not only for operators and their guests but also for suppliers and consultants. We do not want to "sign a deal" - we want to have an experience with each other. And as long as we keep in mind that there should be something new, we do not have to worry about the signature. ☺

