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TIM O'BRIEN: THEME PARK PERSPECTIVE

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Article written by Visions staff from an interview with Tim O'Brien

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ABSTRACT

This is an interview with Tim O'Brien exploring his thoughts about some of the important issues that affect the theme park and attractions business. His reflection gives rise to issues that are important now and in the future. The insight that he has provided is a bridge from the old to the new. He is always on the cutting edge of new thoughts, yet with a focus on the past to develop continuity. It is important to note that some of the issues emphasize COVID-19, but most of the thoughts are dealing with future issues.

His thoughts are a guideline to the restarting of the theme park industry. He recognizes that there has been a tremendous psychological impact of the virus. Many individuals are ready to engage with themed attractions with enthusiasm. Others are going to have to be educated and given time to adapt because the virus has been such a traumatic influence upon their life. The educational process is not a marketing effort, but a true effort to help individuals adjust and again reformulate their position to different entertainment products and a new way of approaching new norms. A personal style of writing was used throughout the article to emphasize Mr. O'Brien contributions.

Key: theme parks success, future theme parks, COVID-19, attractions

ARTICLE

INTRODUCTION

The article will be divided into the following topics: success, special events, future, social media, popular culture, and trends. The thread throughout this article is issues that have application to the development of parks in the future. This is an exploration of topics that directly relate to understanding the nature of the bridge between the old and the new.

SUCCESS

One of the most important topics to the issue of success is examining some of the elements that have influenced the success of parks in the past and that will have direct impact upon the future. This is not a comprehensive list, but only a reflection of some important elements that should be used to start a discussion about the future. The basis of the content selected focuses upon the visitor and the social psychological and cultural influences. These are the elements that will help to achieve greater visitor satisfaction.

Atmosphere

An important element in the success of any park is a friendly atmosphere upon arrival. The establishment of a friendly atmosphere influences their remaining experiences and potentially encourages return visits. No matter your purpose for the visit, it develops a sense of place and an atmosphere of belonging. Within the first 30 seconds, you can feel whether you are really welcome as a guest, or if they just want your money. You need to let people know that the money they are spending is worth the experience. There are many different approaches to develop a positive atmosphere when entering the park. One such approach by Cedar Point is having the staff and management meet the guests at the park entrance with a warm greeting. It is essential that this type of greeting be carried throughout the park during the day by all employees. Each encounter is an opportunity to develop a sense of belonging to the park family. This type of acknowledgment must have an element of authenticity for the development of the proper atmosphere.

Another element that deals with atmosphere is the excitement generated by color, smell, lights, et cetera. The traditional carnival midway is the best example of this type of excitement. There is energy when you walk through the gates of the carnival that generate or stimulate the senses. There is a bombardment and a competing for which is the strongest of the senses. As the senses are stimulated, there is energy and a motivation to participate. You have the sounds of the rides,

the people screaming, and the talkers in front of the games, and most importantly the aromas: the waffles, onions and sausages, and so on. This is a very kinetic atmosphere.

When you walk into most parks, you may hear music playing on the speakers system and you will see some color, but where is the neon and where is that excitement of the midway? I can compare the two because I was a journalist covering both of these industries. When you walk into a carnival, you see all this excitement in front of you. You see the high rides, the low rides, the games, and this is the kinetic energy. When you walk into most theme parks, they have everything spaced apart. So when you walk in, you are waiting for a wow experience and it is not there.

People, even park lovers, stroll through a carnival midway because of the color, the smells, sounds, and people, and that is what parks have to do. They have to create that feeling of comfort and belonging. They need to bombard people and overstimulate their senses at the very beginning and create the need to want more. They should create a need to dig deeper and deeper into the park or carnival, just to see what else is available. They need to get a sincere wow at the beginning because this is important in the development of atmosphere for their entire experience. It is an ice breaker that allows the visitor to appreciate the other aspects. This is a very important element missing in most parks.

Many of the parks created during the past 50 years are often planned to the purpose of the owners and designers, not the technicolor dreams of the guest. The designs are often based upon the misperceptions of the owners and architects. The element that is often missing is the programming of excitement based upon the guest perceptions and development of atmosphere throughout the park to fulfill the needs, wants, and desires of the guests. It must be done in such a way that it is inviting and very subtle in its structure and function to produce the desired objectives. Another way of saying this is that there must be a wow factor. Not every element has to have a wow factor associated with it, but it must be an adventure and diversity in the exploration of new experiences for the guest. I do think in many parks there are wow experiences that fit together. The fit is very important in the development of continuity. It is not being suggested that familiarity is not an important element, especially in the identification of previous experiences relating to famous characters, popular individuals, et cetera. The collective experience has to be provided around the impacts of the central theme. This is extremely difficult with the sophistication of audiences today because of the wealth factors that exist in movies, television, gaming, et cetera. Creativity is very important in the development of these experiences. An important element to remember is that the individual is responsible for developing their own experiences. The structure and function of park has to be programmed so that the cohesiveness of the experience is evident no matter how the individual chooses to use the resources. Each of the elements must have a wow factor, even though all of the resources at the park are not used by the individual. Many times the interactions and the ability and freedom to create their own experiences are a wow factor in itself.

Expectations

Another element that is important is people's expectations. This is a function of marketing. A park must meet and exceed these expectations to achieve satisfaction with their experience to develop a desire within the guest to visit the park again. Creating unachievable expectations and promoting the park with all kinds of superlatives can be very dangerous.

Disney, in their own corporate culture, creates high expectations just in the way the company operates and the way they present themselves. The diversity of the products makes it difficult to achieve a very high standard in large operations. Reputation is an important part of these expectations because of previous successes. The dedication to high standards allows operations to achieve popularity and high rates of return visits. Facility size is a very important factor in helping to meet visitors' expectations. It is the integration and the total immersion that helps to provide quality experiences. These expectations are very difficult because of the diversity of populations that visit these parks. International visitors and their culture have a tremendous effect on how services are delivered.

Culture must be viewed in terms of individuals who reside in the culture and individuals who are inbound guests. A good example of the issue of culture is when Disney parks were developed in France. The concept of blending the culture in regard to expectations is a difficult goal to achieve. For example, when Disney developed their park in Paris, there was an expectation of having wine with the food. In the initial development, because of Disney's culture, wine was not provided. Disney had to modify its position to adopt a French perspective regarding spirits. This park did not do well until they added more French cultural elements. As a comparison, Parc Asterix, a park in France focuses upon a traditional French character is very successful. Culture in France is very important from the perspective of park participants. The park is cleverly French-themed. This park is in the Paris area, the same market area as Disney. It is based upon a French comic character. It is themed around this concept, and is very characteristic French. Asterix was very worried about the competition with the Disney park. It turned out in the first year of Disney's operation, Asterix increased its attendance. People wanted a French family atmosphere completely opposite from an American (US) perspective. No matter where a park is developed, culture considerations must be part of the process.

Psychology

Another important element in success is understanding the audiences and providing for the needs of each audience type. The primary objective is designing programs based upon individual differences. These differences are primarily by age, culture, et cetera. It is very important that individuals developing programs have a good sense of the audience's perceptions of fantasy and reality. It must be remembered that escapism is the primary element that is significant in the development of a park. The important component is bringing an element of reality to escapism so that the individual can relate to the theme and issues in their personal life. Size of the park is extremely important in the personalization, as it relates to the development of the theme. Parks that are extremely large have difficulty in developing a personal touch.

This issue of personalization can be viewed on a continuum. At one end of the continuum is where the culture is created based upon fairy tales and fantasy. This allows for the complete escape of the individual into a state of dreams. The middle position on the continuum is where there is a balance of fantasy and some aspects of reality. This allows the individual to have a perspective involving both worlds. The other end of the continuum is where reality is created, but it has a fascinating story that allows the individual to use their imagination to explore different perspectives. This is a very difficult balance to achieve in the parks. An example is the Shanghai Disneyland Park, where the participants expect a Disney culture, but at the same time enjoy the elements of the folklore stories that are basic to the Chinese culture.

The common thread through the continuum is the stories and their ability to stimulate the imagination of the visitor. The real question is: what is authenticity in relation to the stories being told? Most of the stories are dramatized and are theater. Even those stories that have a strong element of reality obviously have a strong drama element to better reach the visitor's imagination. These stories allow the individual to vicariously participate in the story being told. Everything is a replication, even in living history programs.

Special Events

Special events are ways to develop business based upon specialized niches. They are ways to generate and sustain business. It gives a park an approach to renew the facility in light of a unique presentation that relates to the individual's needs.

History

Once you visit a park more than once or twice, the initial wow most likely goes away. How do you make the park exciting and new again? A special event is one way to provide an additional experience that helps renew the magic of the park.

Parks back in the 90s started offering free concerts. Six Flags had their own amphitheaters. They found that Christian and country music were the two favorites and attracted a great many repeat fans. A guest would pay a fee and participate in the park activities, would have dinner, and attend a free concert in the evening. This approach attracted many repeat visitors. The regular price ticket had great value because of the additional event. Park officials noted quickly that concerts helped their park marketing and per capita spending very nicely. They found that special events were increasing repeat visits. Events sometimes become very competitive among parks. Many different events tried beyond entertainment included laser light displays, fireworks, and guest appearances of soap opera stars and teen idols. Special holiday events, like Christmas and Halloween, over the last 30 years have gained huge popularity. The attractiveness of these types of events is good and has added to the bottom line. This also helps to extend the season where there is an inclement climate, where the park would normally close mid- to late September. For example, Cedar Point stays open and has an extended season for Halloween. They are able to offer more reasons for people to attend. Although many of the major rides do not operate, people

come for the excitement of a special event. Disney has also used this concept by developing new facilities for sports and other competitive events. These competitions bring in significant revenue from competitors and spectators. Many times these events also receive significant television coverage, which provides marketing opportunities. Another example is Epcot and their different festivals. They have food, wine, and garden events throughout the year. I know individuals in New England that make the trek twice a year to Florida, just so they can attend the festivals at Epcot.

Programs

A specialized program approach for niche audiences provides for secondary incomes. The basic premise behind this type of method is the development of special environments and atmospheres to serve the needs of these audiences. The idea is that each park has a unique location and unique characteristics that can be adapted for specialized audiences. Because of these characteristics, not much money may be needed to develop an extension of the park.

An example is Kennywood right outside of Pittsburgh. They created special neighborhood days. There are many different ethnicity groups around Pittsburgh. They would choose different towns, and each town, for the last 40 or 50 years, would have specific day to celebrate their heritage. The residents would come, show off their pride and colors, enjoy the togetherness, and have a picnic. This type of approach has worked well for smaller local and regional parks. Many of these parks also have used the same approach with different companies in the region. With this method, the parks are often sold out. This becomes a tradition, and has a longitudinal impact because once the specialized audience visits, they will return for a repeat visit sometime during the season. This would be a significant personal benefit to the employees and companies. The program would include food and free rides. The park would also provide a reduced ticket price for additional visits. There was also a significant revenue increase because of additional food purchases, merchandise, and game sales. Many times marketing efforts and products were used with the personal approach based upon this particular park visit. The benefit to the company was that employees would mingle, get to know one another, and develop a sense of identity.

Future

When there is a crisis like COVID-19, change is going to happen. There will be new actors and new approaches. Those that are the most creative and innovative will bring change. This does not suggest that those actors that have provided quality services will not be an important part of the change process in the future though.

Wisdom

It will be difficult to address planning in the future. There are many individuals who are working on this issue. There are a variety of different opinions. Many individuals are betting strong capital that they have the right answer for operation and development after the virus.

The simple answer is that parks will have to keep doing what they have done in the past. They have been having good years. This should provide a road map for the future because change in the wrong direction may bring disaster.

I have been writing articles since the late 80s about “what’s new” that will increase attendance. An interesting approach that affected future events was when Disney bought the intellectual property to Indiana Jones. Up until then, they only focused on their own creations. Another interesting development was when Paramount purchased intellectual property to Scooby Doo. The Batman saga at the Six Flags parks was also a part of this era. This “branded” entertainment provided a framework for the development of a multitude of theme opportunities. This has continued, but with less effect than it had at first. IP brands were accepted with great excitement at the beginning, but now guests are used to seeing the world’s biggest, brightest, and best pop culture icons in the parks.

Approaches

Many parks, to kick start the recovery, may have to go back to the standard approach of building the tallest, prettiest, and loudest attractions, whatever superlatives are needed to bring in or bring back visitors. This is going to take a tremendous capital investment and involve risk. Unique marketing is going to be the key to the success of attracting and sustaining visitors. There may be a great reluctance of some populations to visit theme parks. There is going to have to be an initial era of reinvention to meet the new norms established during the pandemic. This does not suggest characters like Harry Potter will not provide an excellent basis for theming in the future. Often, there is a popularity cycle with these characters, and investment directly depends on the ability of the park to sustain their popularity.

It is important that the various demographic and psychographic segmentations of the audience be understood after the pandemic. The pandemic has definitely changed people’s priorities and overall health awareness. There have been number drastic changes for many people over the past year. Conditions such as isolation and increased use of technology to visit with friends and family have had a profound influence upon virtually everyone. These changes have had a significant impact that will influence the new needs and desires of the park guest. It is very difficult to predict what changes will need to be made to accommodate the new norms. There is little doubt that protocol such as masks, social distancing, et cetera will be a part of the new requirements for visitors. But with parks slowly opening during spring and summer 2021, it appears that “normal” will be different from state to state and country to country.

They will need be a two-pronged approach for the future. One is going to represent the older population and the other the younger population. This was shown during the pandemic itself: different age groups were affected by the virus in different ways. And maybe more importantly,

different groups, even of the same age range, chose their own path to follow. This raises questions about various groups and their choices and how parks will be able to satisfy everyone's needs.

Role of Social Media

With the predominance of social media in society, this technology is going to have a profound influence in changing people's life patterns, and as a result, their participation in parks and special events. Technology is changing so rapidly and the question is one of adoption. Younger populations adopt new technologies well, and older populations adopt these technologies slowly.

Communication

Social media definitely is a major lifestyle for certain age groups. It is mostly a youth culture. It is even becoming more complex now, with a youth culture using certain social media platforms, while the older group relies on a different platform. This does not suggest the older adults are not influenced by social media. The older adults are primarily interested in communication and information and reconnecting with friends and family, while younger adults' and **kids'** primary focus is video streaming, gaming, and quick communication with their peers. How rides, shows, and attractions in parks will be affected by social media is still unknown. It is more a question of how social media will help marketing and crowd control than how it will affect rides. As a result, rides will be based upon virtual games. At one point many years ago, the big idea for ride development was virtual reality. While successful in some ride development, it did not turn out to be as big as many predicted. Various ways to use the technology were tried, but it did not turn out to be a big success.

An interesting development is that social media and apps involve interactions. These will allow communication among participants, as well as relaying information about what is going on in the park, such as show times, the daily special at the restaurant, and a virtual map of the park with your location highlighted. This will help in the development of continuity. These interactions will bring connections among the visitors, as well as with the park managers. Visitors will also have connections to family and friends as they experience the park. This also can provide a system to help manage the parks. It will be an excellent tool for marketing and the ability to have feedback and design messages for visitors while they are at the park and for future contacts. Movies and gaming have provided a network during the virus for staying in contact with visitors. This has provided a link to allow continued contact during times of isolation.

Competition

Social media, including gaming, has grown during the pandemic. During times of quarantine and isolation, people found ways to make their days less lonely. While various platforms have been used by many for years for game playing between individuals hundreds of miles apart, more and more of the population embraced it over the past year. For many, individuals competing against each other on a computer were a revelation.

Individuals can actually compete against each other on line. This is a basic factor in the gaming world today. There are gaming parlors and venues like Dave and Busters that allow these individuals to compete. This competition also extends to the viewing of events and the development of a social atmosphere. The creation of this virtual environment is just the beginning as new mechanisms are found to increase the social interactions. This is the wave of the future that has been stimulated by the virus. Computers and cell phones are the instruments that have been used to communicate and play during the pandemic. Individuals have gained a great degree of comfortability and skill during this period. Park developers may want to look at this phenomenon as a potential addition to their offerings.

Those individuals that are innovative and creative will be successful because they are finding new ways to use these expansive platforms.

Popular Culture

An approach that has been overlooked is that of involving popular culture. Popular culture is understanding the causal dimensions of trends and what influences these elements within a society or smaller social groups. These are the factors that have an influence through time. They help illuminate changes that occur in society. The basic elements of popular culture are just an expression of basic needs that do not really change.

Models

Theme parks are an expression of popular culture trends. They are a popular form of entertainment. It is essential to understand the basic influences of popular culture. Many times just the expression is understood and not the underlying dimensions. Some of the basic elements that help explain the expression of popular culture are ritual drama, escape, and hero worship. It is essential to know how characters and events are popularized and how they relate to mass culture. One of the best models is that of Disney. They use movies with popular themes and institutionalize these elements in their parks and merchandise. They are excellent students of reading various populations such as children and teenagers, and understand the basic underlying needs and develop programs to utilize these elements in their stories.

Important Variables

An example of this perceptiveness can be seen in many Disney TV programs and movies that focus upon pre-teens and teens and the constant friction between “nerds” and the “popular groups” They exploit all the various relationships and outcomes associated with everyday living. Preteens are the ones that are often drawn to these programs and movies. Music is an integral part of these programs. The developers understand the needs of these preteens for identification and how to relate to them very well. Another example is ritual drama which is the relationship between “good” and “evil” and the outcomes. This theme is often explored in terms of young adults who see the world with rose-colored glasses and simplified interactions. Again, the audiences relate to these interactions, which help them understand the world in which they live and fantasize about their position and role in the world. Parks need to understand all those interactions as well, and think about ways to exploit these very strong emotions.

It is important to understand why King Kong and Godzilla movies are very popular. These are ritual dramas that have fascinated audiences for years. It is the same type of ritual drama that exists in big time wrestling and college and professional football. Once these basic premises are understood, then they can be used in a number of settings to develop characters and environments that exploit them, and popularize programs and movies which drive themes within the parks. This is the ability to sustain demand by understanding the population and their needs and the development of mass culture.

Trends

The basis of being successful in the future is the ability to be able to predict trends. Some people follow trends, other people predict trends, and others manipulate variables to influence the development trends. This is not a discussion about these positions, but only a discussion about the importance of understanding trends and being able to use them in operation. An understanding of popular culture and the variables that influence the culture are helpful in the successful prediction trends.

Problems

An interesting trend was virtual reality. It was thought to be a development that would affect theme parks. Different types of glasses would be used to live all types of reality scenarios. In the 90s, they were talking about the whole concept that amusement parks were going to go by the wayside and people would just walk in pay money and enjoy such items as virtual roller coasters, virtual Ferris wheels, et cetera. People were already writing the traditional theme parks off. A good example was a second park at Disney in Paris. When you walk into that park, they had virtual reality and gaming studios. Guests were not treated to the excitement and color of a theme park. They were all housed in separate buildings. You walk from one building to another

and had a different experience at each location. This was a failure. In the early 2000s, they tried virtual reality for rides in arcades and malls where you sit in the little capsule and shake a little. You would be wearing your virtual reality glasses and a headset. This type of experience did not translate into the general theme park industry. While popular, these “rides” never captured a large portion of the market, and few of these capsule rides were ever installed in parks. However, the motion-based platforms were refined and many park rides today utilize that concept. When you are riding a roller coaster, you want the wind in your face and bugs in your teeth. You do not want to enjoy your ride and climb out of a capsule and be in the middle of a mall. Predicting trends is very difficult, as you can see from the examples provided.

One trend that has continued for a long time is that of deeply theming a park. The old saying is that all theme parks are amusement parks but all amusement parks are not theme parks.

Good example of a park that does not have an obvious theme is Cedar Point. They have a few themed areas. The whole basis of Cedar Point is thrill rides and people’s interactions. It is a ride park. Actually, Cedar Point has a very important and exclusive niche theme- roller coasters and thrill rides. People attend Cedar Point one weekend and Kings Island the next, and then Six Flags Great America in Chicago. Coaster fans go to five or six parks a year to ride the coasters. All those parks have different coasters and new coasters or a new thrill rides each year. This is definitely an expression of ritual drama that involves trends.

Brands

The development of a successful brand is based upon the popularization of the product or idea. Traditionally, this process of branding was through an entertainment medium. It is difficult to remember how brands were popularized before radio and television. It depended upon word-of-mouth in those days. In today’s society, it is not only radio and television, but the technology that helps to build brands.

One of the most popular brands has been Disney. Disney TV programs and movies often drove the brands that translated to merchandise and profits. At one time, the only rides you would find in a Disney park were based on Disney’s own products, and most of those products were based, sometimes quite loosely, on a Disney film. That was really a trifecta win for them. The box office success of the film, the merchandise sold based on the film, and then the excitement of a ride based on that film that brought people into the parks. Each element created the demand for the other.

Movies are made, the trend starts, and products and ideas flow into the other areas. At Disney, that goes the other way as well, as several of its popular rides and attractions came first, and then came merchandise, and then came the movies. The point being made is that some of the theme parks developed the demand and set trends, and others follow the trends. Once the popular trend is set, the primary factor is to make money through merchandising.

An interesting trend with Disney and Universal has been the popularizing of products and ideas through superheroes. Since they own the intellectual properties, this reduces the cost tremendously. The most successful intellectual property outside of Disney and Universal is

probably the Batman theming at Six Flags, with all their various rides and merchandise. This character has proven to have tremendous sustainability.

Bringing in iconic names with which people are familiar gets people's attention and then keep them coming back. Brands that people trust have amazing credibility and audience appeal. The effective use of these icons has great sustainability. IP is very important in generating demand. When the first Batman ride opened, it was in Six Flags in Gurnee, Illinois. The park was owned by Time Warner, which owned Batman. =It was a natural fit that proved to be immensely popular, a trend that continues to this day, even though the parks are no longer owned by Time Warner. Comic book and movie fans loved and trusted Batman. In turn, they trusted Batman the Ride and the Six Flags Parks.

Familiarity is very important. For example, when you are on the road and you are hungry for lunch, you will most often go to a fast food restaurant that you trust. You know McDonald's means quality because you trust the brand. It is interesting how there has been a marriage between merchandizing companies and McDonald's. Toys that represent movies are often used to generate business. Most often, these toys represent iconic characters. This is a good example of a marriage between popular entertainment either through the movies or Internet to generate business. A good example of this was the Beanie Baby phenomena in the past and the Pokémon card phenomena of today.

Whether it is Batman or whatever it is, it is an extension of merchandizing to create a secondary or tertiary layer of business based upon popularity. Branding is so important. When you look back, I did an article just six or seven months ago on the year 1955 and how important this year was important to pop culture, because so much happened: the original Disneyland opened in 1955, McDonald's opened, Waffle House opened, TV dinners added fish sticks. Many of these products are icons that were developed in that year. The list goes on and on. The Mickey Mouse Club TV show premiered in late 1955, and Elvis made his first national TV appearance. All these are iconic, and have proven to be trusted brands. It is important to establish the element of trust with the brand.

While not theme parks per se, brand lands, mega retail stores based on a brand, climbed to popularity in the 1990s. The Disney stores take the merchandise to the people, and are successful because people trust Disney. You can just look at the Disney stores in Times Square and other high-traffic areas. Other stores have followed suit. Hershey and M&Ms have their own brand lands. These places are packed because of the branding. Online stores are replacing brand lands to some extent because of the internet.

Branding is a key to business now and in the future. It is important to establish the element of trust with the brand. And it appears that no matter what else changes, parks should continue to trust not only their own brands, but the iconic brands that dominate the world today.

Summary

It is important to understand the history of theme parks as to not repeat the mistakes made in the past. It is important to look at the successes and how and why parks have prospered as an institution within society. The future is directly related to the past and understanding the future. Theme parks have been very successful in the past in developing innovative approaches to serve the needs of niche groups and the general population.