

What ski areas can learn from amusement parks

Kees Albers, an international expert on theme parks, draws comparisons between these two sectors of today's leisure industry

Mountain resorts and amusement parks have a lot in common. They both are involved in the fun and leisure business and service a great many seasonal visitors during holiday and weekend periods. One could say that a mountain tourist resort is basically an amusement park themed by nature. Both businesses are influenced by weather conditions and have greatly benefited from the continuously growing market for leisure and entertainment. Both are also facing ever more demanding visitors in a highly competitive experience economy and subsequently require ongoing yearly investments in the product offered, the marketing of the product and the recruitment and training of seasonal personnel. Furthermore in both cases there are umbrella organisations providing services ranging from conferences to trade shows.

Traditionally there is a difference in the duration of the stay of the visitors, but because of the tendency of people to take more frequent but shorter holidays and the fact that amusement parks are also building hotels, the two are becoming direct competitors to a certain extent. At least the two businesses are growing in the same direction. Successful holiday destinations are providing additional entertainment for their guests. Bungalow parks, like Centre Parks, have created additional attractions, such as tropical swimming pools and even an indoor snow dome. Orlando in Florida, USA benefits from a growing number of major attractions ranging from theme parks and water parks to zoos and edutainment. Blackpool in England combines beaches with a thrilling amusement park and beach lovers in Spain can visit Port Aventura on a cloudy day. Duinrell park in the Netherlands even created a total mixture of a bungalow and amusement park. Offers range from all inclusive to joint promotions and crossover discounts.

Mountain resorts could also do with more of those synergies and visitor overflows, especially during the summer and bad weather periods. There is a lot to learn from the professional approach of the amusement park industry. Here are some key issues for your evaluation:

The most important reason why amusement parks are so successful is because they focus on very specific target groups and will do anything to totally spoil these selected visitors and make sure they will not get bored. Of course, this is quite a challenge. Take for instance kids (2–9), tweens (9–14) or teens (14–19). Kids have particular interests, but these interests change when they become tweens and they do not want to be around kids anymore. And teens definitely do not want to hang around with their family. This means that it is necessary to either focus on an age group or divide the park into target-group related zones.

Many parks such as the famous Efteling park in the Netherlands mainly service kids by offering a great number of attractions related to fairy tales. It is said that the entire population visits this park at least three times during their lives, once as a kid, once as a parent and once as a grandparent. Other parks, such as the Six Flags parks, specialise in excitement, with a selection of rides attracting various age groups looking for a yearly adrenaline boost.

Most parks are family oriented and are extremely aware of the fact that the interests

of the children greatly determine where the family decides to go.

Besides all this, children nowadays have considerable spending power of their own caused by fewer children per family, grandparent longevity, divorce rates, allowances and part-time jobs.

In order to be and remain successful, the amusement parks continuously strive to offer a better overall experience. In order to understand the guest experience, many parks lead all employees in observing the guests and their verbal and nonverbal comments. All comments are analysed and, very importantly, they let the guests know that their comments are taken seriously and may have resulted in some changes. They also use so-called "mystery shoppers" to get more information on their offerings. Mystery shoppers are people hired by the facility to act as guests. This input leads to the most desired improvements. According to surveys by e.g. the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA), service is an increasingly important part of the overall experience in the new millennium and conversely, poor service is one of the main reasons for dissatisfied guests. This is directly related to employee behaviour, thus making people the most precious resource. The quality and appearance of themed food & beverage areas and attractions, and the latest technology are also an important part of the overall experience. Amusement parks show that the required investments go far beyond snowmaking equipment and ski lifts when compared to mountain resorts.

The amusement parks are also an interesting source of information regarding marketing and public relations. Attending an attraction's management programme, I was personally inspired by the following definition: "Advertising is what you say about yourself, and publicity

AMUSEMENT PARKS

Top 10 theme parks by visitors in 2000:

1. Tokyo Disneyland (Japan)	16.5 mln	(-5 %)
2. The Magic Kingdom (USA)	15.4 mln	(+1.3 %)
3. Disneyland (USA)	13.9 mln	(+3%)
4. Disneyland Paris (France)	12.0 mln	(-4 %)
5. Epcot (USA)	10.6 mln	(+5%)
6. Disney-MGM Studios (USA)	8.9 mln	(+2 %)
7. Disney's Animal Kingdom (USA)	8.3 mln	(-3 %)
8. Universal Studios Flt (USA)	8.1 mln	(+0 %)
9. Universal's Islands of Adventure (USA)	6.0 mln	
10. Universal Studios Hollywood (USA)	5.2 mln	(+2 %)

is what others say about you.” The average expenditure on advertising for worldwide attractions in 1999 was as follows: TV 23 %, radio 20 %, print 32 %, Internet 5 %, outdoor 11 % and miscellaneous 9 %. Since the youth market is the most important part of this article I will focus on marketing via the Internet. It is no secret that the Internet is quickly gaining importance, and that tweens and teens are the most active users. In the meantime most of this wired generation in the USA has Internet access and the 9–17 age group would rather go online than watch TV. They easily check out the offerings of amusement parks (and your resorts). Amusement parks are quickly learning that in order to appeal to this target group, websites must be as interactive and up to date as possible. They must relate to these visitors, and they are used for latest news and events with downloadable wallpaper and postcards. It is a great tool for forum discussions, but a quick response to e-mails is essential. This generation is rewriting their and your marketplace.

As far as public relations are concerned, amusement parks tell us that “the customer is always right”.

Of course safety is a major issue in amusement parks, too. Amusement parks have extensive risk management programmes comprising supervision, signage, instruction, maintenance, first aid, security, crisis communication and so on. Whether a ride accident or an avalanche, both are equally damaging. Some parks have an employee bonus programme for x days without accidents.

Umbrella organisations, such as the IAAPA and the International Association for the Leisure and Entertainment Industry (IALEI), have taken responsibility for developing and providing extensive programmes based on the mutual and long-term experiences of many amusement parks. The training programmes, manuals and videos cover all imaginable subjects, such as human resources, seasonal recruitment, training, facility operations and risk, marketing and financial management. There is no doubt that these programmes could also greatly benefit the Alpine tourism industry.

Many managers and employees in the amusement industry originated from Disney. In this way the Disney Corporation created its own competition many years ago, when it decided to let go of most of the development department. This resulted in the establishment of many new independent designers, consultants and manufacturers. Over 1,300 of these suppliers exhibit at the yearly IAAPA Trade Show. Besides this trade show, the Themed Entertainment Association (TEA) can also be a great source of inspiration for adding new activities and attractions to the mountain. Interesting new trends include the growing success of live entertainment, animations and also edutainment, a combination of entertaining and educative attractions.

Many parks in Europe have personnel passes that provide free admission to other parks. Besides their use as an employee incentive, a visit to another park is especially promoted for study purposes. It should be of interest to mountain resorts to become part of these co-operation schemes, by exchanging lift tickets for admission tickets for the above-mentioned good reasons.