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RESORT HOTELS AS FAMILY ENTERTAINMENT

Waterparks resorts can use brand stories to increase hotel stays, food revenues, shopping opportunities and overall guest satisfaction.

BY DONALD J. WEBER, AIA



“Whatever time and space mean . . . place and occasion mean more!”

Dutch Architect, Aldo van Eck (1918-1999)

How do we create the entertainment value in the waterpark resort industry that is present in theme parks? The brand value and brand experience a property brings to the customer turn time and space into place and occasion. Brand value is the value of the emotional response customers have to a product. Brands tell the story. The emotional response customers have relates to them on a personal level, turning the time and space in which they visit into a special place and a special occasion. The opportunity to connect personally and more fully increases customers' satisfaction of their experience and makes MEMORIES! Satisfied customers in a resort hotel setting may increase their length of stay and thus increase revenue opportunities for the property. Creating great memories brings customers back.

Theme parks are one of the nation's leading industries in per-visitor spending. Opportunities for brand value and application greet visitors at every turn. Often a main street opens to numerous shops, restaurants, games, and other unique spending environments each with a character and feel reinforcing the park's brand experience, such as Disney's Main Street, U.S.A. Waterparks resorts and hotels can take a lesson from how theme parks make their money though it may challenge the typical hospitality space planning program. A closer look reveals how using this approach can increase hotel stays, food revenues, shopping opportunities and the guest's overall satisfaction!

CREATING THE BRAND

Customers appreciate brands because they offer an extra value, one that extends beyond the product itself. The brand value becomes the motivation to use or buy the product. Introducing an application of brand into a waterpark resort, for example, creates separation from the everyday, an emotional separateness of being away from work or school, away from obligations, responsibilities, and even in a short-stay, on vacation. Brands that are successful in their application find that customers value the experience as much or more than the product, meaning they may spend more.

There is a feel and experience to visiting a coffee shop like Starbucks. The coffee is good but not necessarily better than what is found at other places. The employees are distinctive in their green aprons, personal style and manner of speaking. The walls are covered in soothing tones; there are interesting things to look at and music to hear. The employees smile while customers order a ridiculously long-sounding cup of double-tall, soymilk, non-fat, half-caff coffee. It isn't

about the \$3.50 cup of coffee; it is about the experience of going into Starbucks—the way the place looks, the way it feels and the way the customer feels when they are there. The Starbucks brand relates to you on a personal and emotional level. In fact, the brand is now about not only coffee but also being in a place where you can buy new music that is cool, and even buy gadgets and gear for making coffee and turning your home into the shared experience you have in the store. For the company, there is a monetary reward for this brand value buy-in from its customers. It is the opportunity to not only sell coffee at a higher price on a regular basis but also coffee gear, music and other things to complement the coffee experience.

TELLING THE BRAND STORY

Creating a brand and a brand story for your company can be real or imagined but it must create, as Aldo van Eck said, place and occasion with history and characters. Customers naturally expect businesses to respond to their needs but introducing a brand story creates many more opportunities to be unique in the market.

For example, let's say we are developing a hotel in a part of the country where many Revolutionary battles took place. Our hotel could take the form of The Great American Adventure Resort Hotel, showing how the sacrifice and bravery of early leaders like George Washington produced the greatest nation in the world, the United States. The brand story might place a Colonial Williamsburg-style village and historic flags from the past on the path to greet visitors as they approach. A multi-level balconied lobby provides differentiated places for customers to eat, shop and relax. Everywhere the customer looks they discover a place or time that tells the story of “The Great American Adventure.”

Let's think about what this would feel like for the guest. A giant map of the U.S. over-layed on the lobby floor is covered with hundreds of all-American images, which might be what greets us when we come in. Children can seek and find places large and small on the map, to investigate and learn more about the country, perhaps in the form of a scavenger hunt where prizes are awarded for their discoveries. A spectacular three dimensional floor-to-ceiling wall mural covers the entire back wall of the lobby with images from sea to shining sea. This interactive collage gathers great American adventure images, from the Brooklyn Bridge and Statue of Liberty through the heartland and the South to the American Rocky Mountains and finally California's giant Sequoias and the Golden Gate Bridge. Each night different locations in the U.S. are highlighted through an audio/visual show telling the stories of places large and small, bringing families together in the central retail/restaurant core of the facility. Restaurants are themed to represent dining styles such as New York bagels in the morning, southern-style barbecue for lunch and Italian-American pasta and pizza for dinner.

Menus change to reflect the tastes of the Great American experience. A night club themed for Chicago Blues would be a place for adults to unwind and shopping themed for America's heartland provides unique opportunities for adventure.

An indoor waterpark or dry play area can be made to carry out the brand story through characters and attractions that bring the American experience to life. At the "Roaring Gorge Water Park" customers would find mountain guides who greet them for navigating white water rapids, glacier slides and bubbling pools. Even the guest rooms help tell the story, each named for an American adventure experience, fun facts, décor and information in each room tell the tale to its guests.

We add this brand story to our more traditional architectural space program and together, they become a program from which we design. The result is the three-dimensional "telling of the story."

BET YOUR BOTTOM DOLLAR

Family entertainment hotels add to per-head spending opportunities and produce greater revenue and return on investment. We learn from the theme park business per-head sales and length-of-stay are what drives additional revenues. Creating more and diverse opportunities to spend increases customer spending. Branded environments introduce a high platform of excitement and they are synergistic, making a property seem bigger than the sum of its parts. This idea supports spontaneous spending. It also provides opportunities to cross brand within a facility or to introduce the brand into food and merchandise areas that tie back to the main storyline. Knowledgeable space planning in a branded facility can promote repeated walk-by opportunities and introduce the element of surprise for the customer. The idea of "Yes, I'll splurge for that, I'm on vacation." can be a powerful way to drive revenue.

Increasing the length of a customer's stay is an additional way to drive revenue. Locating a facility near other regional or area attractions with more to do outside the hotel brings visitors back for the extra night stay. Once they are back inside the resort, the opportunities for activity and spending through themed execution and the "story" of the hotel create the sense that there is more to do than they first assumed. The idea of "Oh, we haven't been there yet." Using our Great American Resort Hotel as an example, this could be as simple as themed eateries being branded as the "Mountain Man Breakfast Hall" for the morning and a Southern fine dining experience at night in "Anna Belles." This can all be accomplished in one single area, planned and themed as different experiences. The morning might be focused with a character visit or other special food item, while at dinner, customers enjoy a themed beverage on the "front porch" while they wait in cozy rocking chairs or porch swings. Special events can also be timed to create opportunities

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for additional dining and purchasing, the idea of a fourth meal or special snack during an evening show or parade further brings the brand to life, increases per-cap spending and possibly even length of stay.

Families are hungry for fun ways to spend time together. Activities that people of all ages can enjoy together bring the convenience of one-stop shopping and not having to get back in the car to drive from place to place. Bringing a range of activities to life in one facility to make memories and connect families is a powerful way to drive the revenue engine and create repeat business.

To recap below is a list of comparisons between hotels and theme parks for traditional spending opportunities. Simple adaption of theme park models for spending into the hotel experience can change revenue opportunities in powerful ways. [WWA](#)

Challenging the Hotel Space Use Program

Hotels	Theme parks
Room rates	Gate admissions
Food (limited)	Food (various choices)
Merchandise (limited)	Candy (other specialty "treats")
Conference space	Merchandise (various and branded/licensed)
Spa	Special Events
	Games
	Arcade
	Parking
	Group events/catering
	Up charge "dings" (paid photo ops, sky coasters)
	Seasonal pass sales

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