

# THEME PARK – THE MAIN CONCEPT OF TOURISM INDUSTRY DEVELOPMENT

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*Theme parks are star players in the tourism industry, and play a special and important role in generating tourism demand. Theme parks are the main motivators for tourism trips to many destinations and core elements of the tourism product.*

*Competition in the theme park market is growing also in terms of an increasing number of parks, but also relative to other uses of leisure. But in different areas, the theme park market in seems to be reaching its saturation point and the parks have to cater for visitors who are getting more and more experienced and demanding. Given these trends of growing theme park supply, environmental constraints and increasingly discriminating consumer demand, it can be concluded that theme parks, to survive in this competitive market, must optimize is, given an ever increasing number of parks and future trend of consumer behavior.*

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## **The theme park concept**

In general, theme parks can be defined as a subset of visitor attractions. Visitor attractions are described as permanent resources which are designed, controlled and managed for the enjoyment, amusement, entertainment, and education of the visiting public There are the main types of managed attractions for visitors: *ancient monuments; historic buildings; parks and gardens; theme parks; wildlife attractions; museums; art galleries; industrial archeology sites; themed retail sites; amusement and leisure parks.*

Another definition of visitor attractions is regarded by specialists as “single units, individual sites or clearly defined small-scale geographical areas that are accessible and motivate large numbers of people to travel some distance from their home, usually in their leisure time, to visit them for a short, limited period of time”. Although this definition excludes uncontrollable and unmanageable phenomena the definition does imply that attractions are entities that are capable of being delimited and managed. The adepts of this definition consider four main types of attractions: *features within the natural environment* (beaches, caves, forests); *man-made buildings, structures and sites that were designed for a purpose; other than attracting visitors* (churches, archeological sites); *man-made buildings, structures and sites that were designed to attract visitors and were purposely built to accommodate their needs, such as theme parks* (theme parks, museums, waterfront developments); *special events* (sporting events, markets).

These four types are distinguished by two aspects. Firstly, the first three types are generally permanent attractions, while the last category covers attractions that are temporary. Second, tourism is often seen as a threat to the first two types, and is generally perceived to be beneficial and an opportunity for the last two types. Managers of the first two types of attractions in general deal with problems caused by visitors, such as environmental damages and pollution, while managers of the other two types tend to aim to attract tourists, increase visitor numbers, and maximize economic input.

The main features that distinguish theme parks from other kinds of visitor attractions are:

- a single pay-one-price admission;
- charge;
- the fact that they are mostly artificially created;
- the requirement of high capital investments.

Theme parks attempt to create an atmosphere of another place and time, and usually emphasize one dominant theme around which architecture, landscape, rides, shows, food services, costumed personnel, retailing are

orchestrated. In this definition, the concept of themes is crucial to the operation of the parks, with rides, entertainment, and food all used to create several different environments. Examples of types of themes used in contemporary theme parks include history-periods, fairy tails, animals, water, marine and futurism. These themes are used to create and sustain a feeling of life involvement in a setting completely removed from daily experience. Most theme parks are isolated, self contained units. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that most theme parks are developed, targeted and managed as private sector companies, and are commercial enterprises. The world's best known theme parks arguably are the Disney parks, such as Disneyland, Disneyworld and Euro Disney.

The amusement parks, appeared previous the theme park concept, which were developed at the turn of this century and consisted of a mixture of entertainment, rides, games, and tests of skill provided at fairs, carnivals, circuses, and frequently they had an outdoor garden for drinking. Amusement parks were an important element of mass tourism in the pre-depression period. However, the World War II has strongly influenced the decline of the traditional amusement park. Many parks were forced to close down permanently, while others survived, on a reduced scale, into the 1950s or even beyond.

Since the end of World War II the number and range of theme parks available to consumers has multiplied dramatically.

The rise of car-ownership has increased mobility and allowed people to visit more isolated parks in their own countries that were previously inaccessible. Rising affluence has increased the amount of free time. Also, longer weekends and increased paid holidays have helped to stimulate the expansion in theme park visits. Furthermore, the growth of tourism in the past fifty years and the recognition of the economic benefits of tourism have led to the growth of purpose-built attractions, such as theme parks, specifically designed to attract tourists, and to encourage them to spend their money.

Disney was the first to introduce a special and new style of parks around a number of themes or unifying ideas to sanitize the amusement park for the middle classes.

The modern day techniques for reproducing landscape, buildings, and arte facts can create a reality in theme parks that has been previously the preserve of film and theatre.

Through changes in transportation technology and social attitudes, downtown industrial and residential land has become redundant.

For example, historic buildings are often inaccessible to the new scale of road, and historic buildings worthy of conservation are not always adaptable to new business practice. The current interest in urban space for leisure and the use of leisure as a generator for adaptation and renewal is significant. In marketing urban locations for new investment the quality of life is becoming identified with the quality of the leisure environment.

During the 80's and 90's, theme parks began spreading around the world. While many developing nations are experiencing the entertainment of theme parks for the first time, the theme park growth slowed in the USA due to escalating costs and a lack of markets large enough to support a theme park.

The development of theme parks over time has been different in every country, reflecting differences in a number of factors including:

- *the level of economic development and the distribution of wealth;*
- *the transport system; the natural environment and built heritage;*
- *the national culture;*
- *the degree to which tourism is a matter of incoming*
- *foreign visitors rather than domestic demand.*

### **The tourism general environment of the theme parks**

The theme park and its total tourism environment need to be a place in which the entire array of physical features and services are provided for an assumed capacity of visitors. The tourism supply and demand market is the two sides that require close examination for theme park planning. Insight in market developments is necessary for taking a longer term perspective in theme park planning.

#### **The economic environment of theme parks**

The planning efforts of theme park are mostly directed towards improving the economy, because the economic impact of theme parks is generally positive including: increased direct and indirect employment, income and foreign exchange; improved transportation facilities and other infrastructure for tourism that residents also can

utilize; generation of government revenues for improvement of community facilities and services; the multiplier effect within the local and regional economy.

Although improving the economy is an important goal, it will not be achieved unless planning for the economy is accompanied by three other goals, enhanced visitor satisfaction, protected resource assets, and integration with community social and economic life. For example, some theme parks use imported goods and services instead of taking advantage of locally available resources. Also, tourism can cause inflation of local prices of land, goods and services.

#### **The socio-cultural environment of theme parks**

The impact of theme park operations can bring both benefits and problems to the local society and its cultural patterns. A theme park in an area generates contact between residents and visitors. This can be problematic in areas where the traditional cultural pattern of the residents differs extremely from that of the visitors of a park. Also, when there is a substantial socioeconomic difference between the visitors and the residents this may cause a problem. For example, problems may include over crowding of facilities and transportation, over commercialization, misunderstandings and conflicts between residents and visitors because of differences in languages, customs, and value systems, and violation of local dress and behavior codes. Theme parks especially have peak attendance figures, and therefore the concentration of visitors in space and time is a major problem. On the other hand, tourism in an area may improve the living standards of people and help pay for improvements to community facilities and services if the economic benefits of tourism are well distributed.

#### **The psychically environment of theme parks**

Theme parks' environmental impact is mostly negative and a cause for concern. As theme parks have been designed specifically to accommodate the modern visitor, the environmental impact of theme parks can include visual pollution like unattractive buildings and structures, and large unattractive car parks. The space occupation of parks is enormous and mostly involves destruction of parts of the natural environment. Other environmental problems are air and water pollution, noise, vehicular and pedestrian congestion, and land use incompatibility. Therefore, an essential element of theme park planning is determining the carrying capacities or use saturation levels of the area.

#### **The transportation of the theme parks**

Passenger transportation is a vital component of the theme park system.

Theme parks have a relationship with transport systems in a number of ways:

The transport networks make theme parks physically accessible to potential visitors and therefore are an important factor in determining the number of visitors a theme park is likely to attract.

The existence of major theme parks and attractions leads to the development of new public transport services to meet the demand of visitors.

The transport is also important within destinations to make travel between theme parks and attractions and between attractions and services as easy as possible.

The modes of transport can often be an attraction in themselves with passengers being encouraged to see using them as a type of special event.

The novel methods of on-site transport are used to move visitors around the theme park in ways that will add to the enjoyment of their visit.

The planning of inter modal transportation centers is needed for domestic local, as well as outside, visitor markets.

#### **The infrastructure of theme parks**

In addition to transportation facilities, other infrastructure elements include water supply, electric power, waste disposal, and telecommunications. These components are usually planned by the public sector. Even though private and independent decision making are valued highly by most enterprises in all tourism sectors, each will gain by better understanding the trends and plans by others. The public sector can plan for better highways, water supply, waste disposal, when private sector plans for attractions and services are known. Conversely, the private sector can plan and develop more effectively when public sector plans are known.

#### **Facilities offered by the theme parks**

Accommodation, hotels and other tourist facilities, provide services so that tourists can stay overnight during their travels. Other facilities necessary for tourism development include tour and travel operations, restaurants, retail

outlets, souvenir shops, financial facilities and services, tourist information offices, public safety facilities and services of police and fire protection.

A theme park and its environment need to be planned in such a way that the entire array of physical features and services is provided for an assumed capacity of visitors. It is important in planning the services businesses to realize that they gain from clustering. Food services, lodging, and supplementary services must be grouped together and within reasonable time and distance reach for the visitor.

### **The institutional environment**

The institutional elements need to be considered in planning the theme park environment. From national to local governing levels, statutory requirements may stimulate or hinder tourism development. For example, policies on infrastructure may favor one area over another. Also, the administrative laws and regulations can influence the amount and quality of tourism development in a particular area. Policies of the many departments and bureaus can greatly influence how human, physical and cultural resources are applied.

### **The development of theme parks**

The theme park market worldwide has grown dramatically during the last decades.

For example, in the USA (where most of the theme park trends originated), theme parks have more than 200 million paid attendees each year.

This strong consumer demand has resulted in the development of many parks. These parks are not only growing rapidly in size and importance, but also are investing substantial amounts in new entertainment and facilities, and extending their services into relatively unexplored areas such as catering and accommodation..

Also, Asia is the theme park market for the new millennium. Even more, several Asian cities, like Bangkok, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, want to become 'tourism hubs', and theme parks are central to these plans.

Although in the Asian countries a shift from hopping centers to theme parks can be seen, the opposite can be observed as well indicating a growing role of retailing in existing theme parks. The relationship between merchandising and theme park visits clearly has potential for further growth, and the advantages of stimulating this demand are becoming increasingly recognized by theme park operators. They are racing to obtain more profits out of their rides, activities and exhibits by linking rides to merchandise and placing goods at spots where visitors are most likely to buy, and that is close to the key rides, activities and exhibits. The objective is to give people a part of the park to take home and share with others.

In Europe most theme parks were built in the last 25 years. First, theme parks were more a Northern Europe phenomenon, but recently, several regions and countries in Southern Europe have supported the growth of theme parks as an attractive option to increase economic input.

Due to all these new parks built, the theme park market is saturating. Consequently, the competition in the European theme park market is growing. Not only in terms of the growing number of new other parks, but also due to other uses of leisure time and discretionary expenditure such as home-based entertainment systems.

Managers of large theme parks are concerned about the scale of the investments required to add new exciting rides, activities and exhibits to their product. Especially, because a golden rule is that a theme park every year has to expand their park with a new attraction, to attract the required level of visitors

European theme parks invest in average twenty percent of their turnover on new or better rides, activities and exhibits.

### **Theme parks challenges**

The first challenge for theme parks managers is to integrate the elements in the park itself with all the elements defining the theme park environment in the theme park development plan. For example, theme parks cannot function without transportation possibilities to bring the visitor to the park, or food supply or accommodation to support the visitor's stay.

Planning a theme park requires significant public private cooperation. More and more public governments turn to the private sector for the provision of services and the production of new products. However, in order for such processes to run smoothly in theme parks, greater understanding of the roles of both sectors is needed. All private sector players on the supply side of the theme park environment such as, attractions, services, transportation, etc., depend greatly on investment, planning and management policies of government.

Conversely, governments depend on the private sector for many tourism activities and responsibilities. Therefore, cooperation between the public and private sector is essential.

Another characteristic of theme parks is that their demand is highly seasonal. For theme park planners seasonality effects mean that they need to plan the facilities in such a way that whatever season or number of visitors in the park, the visitor experiences in the park are optimal.

Also, when demand for rides, activities and facilities fluctuates during the day this can cause problems for the park, such as congestion and time specific peaks at the rides, activities and facilities.

For theme park managers, capacity planning and routing is therefore an important task to deal with these problems. For example, to optimize the visitor streams in the park and to minimize waiting times at the activities.

Another characteristic is the fact that theme parks face high fixed costs and low variable costs. This means that the costs per visitor in the low season, when there are only few visitors in the park, are much higher than in the high season, especially if the quality of the visitor experience has to be maintained. Furthermore, each year parks require high investments to add new exciting attractions to their product to attract the required level of visitors

At the demand side, theme park planners may rely on marketers to actively try and manipulate tourist demand, by price differentiation across seasons, special rates for early bookings and bundling of services and visits over time or with other tourist facilities in the region.

Similar to other tourist attractions, theme parks first and foremost provide enjoyment to their customers. This implies that theme park managers face especially strong demands from customers for new and exciting innovations in their services.

Special strategies need to be devised to deal with tourist variety seeking. Also typically a diverse number of services within a park is required to promote repeat visits and to cater for different members of visitors groups as seniors and children) and for different segments in the tourist population at large.

This has important implications for theme park planning in terms of location and type of activities that should be introduced and supported. Detailed consumer information often is essential to meet these consumers' requirements.

The costumers requirements place special demands on theme park planners in terms of: meeting environmental standards imposed through (inter)national regulations and local communities, by increasing demands in terms of landscaping and design, and financial responsibilities in terms of managing large areas of land which need to be bought, leased or rented depending on the organization's financial management strategy.

Another challenge facing theme park planner is that planning a park requires special skills in terms of combining creative and commercial abilities. Theme park design is crucial in determining the success of a park. In terms of design, several different levels can be distinguished. First, rides, activities and exhibits have to be designed attractively and effectively both in terms of initial appeal and usage. Second, landscaping and urban designs are required to integrate the different single facilities into a whole based on the selected theme for the park. And finally, activities and services need to be arranged that can support and increase consumer experiences of the physical elements in the park.

There also are some more general features of the theme park product that are shared with other services and that are a challenge to theme park planning.

Meeting consumer demand must be done however without compromising environmental and socio-cultural objectives. Because the theme product is consumed and produced at the same time, the service must be right the first time. Therefore, adequate theme park planning is highly critical for optimizing the delivery of the theme park product to the consumer.

The final challenges facing theme park planners are created by the theme park market. There is a growing competition in the theme park market, with an ever increasing number of parks and many parks expanding their activities. Even more so, the tourist demand market is facing demographic changes in the form of ageing population, economic changes that lead to tighter family time budgets because of an increasing number of double earner households, and the introduction of new technologies such as multimedia entertainment that compete directly with the traditional theme park market.

Knowledge of potential market origins, and interests, habits and other travel characteristics of the population is a necessary but not sufficient condition to plan the several components of the supply side.

It is important for the parks to know how consumers think, and what makes them visit or not visit attractions, and when they want to visit a park. Also, for theme park planners, an estimate of peak visitor volume is essential to the planning of every feature of the theme park, parking, attractions, exhibits, toilet facilities, tour guidance, food services and souvenir sales.

It can be concluded that the challenges theme park planners face ask for planning methods that can integrate the different components in the planning processes within and across various levels of planning.

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