

How a Brand Became a Place

Welcome to the Autostadt!



Night view of the Autostadt

In June 2000, Volkswagen opened the world's biggest corporate theme park in Wolfsburg, Germany. Arthesia worked exclusively with Volkswagen's executives to lead the strategy, concept and art creation of this "Corporate brand experience destination". With almost two million visits per annum, Thomas Sevcik, Director of Arthesia, shares the lessons to be learnt from a car and its branded environment.

The Autostadt stands for a culture of business that lays particular emphasis on superior service and exacting standards. The multilingual staff work together with one aim in mind: to give visitors an experience they won't forget.

What is Autostadt?

In June 2000, Volkswagen opened the world's biggest corporate theme park in Wolfsburg, Germany. Eight years on the site welcomes some two million visitors per annum. From car enthusiasts to customers, employees and opinion leaders, Autostadt has wide appeal. Stretching over nearly 100 acres of what was originally brown field in the middle of VW's vast Wolfsburg car factory area, it is made up of several buildings and pavilions set in beautifully landscaped parkland. Best described as a mixture of Disney's Epcot Centre, Orlando, USA and the Getty Centre Art Museum Complex, Los Angeles, Autostadt serves as Volkswagen's corporate communication, dialogue and marketing platform.

The site is made up of five major components:

- A corporate forum, highlighting VW Group's technological, social and financial achievements through a mixture of interactive installations and film;
- A museum showing the general history of VW and its competitors;
- Several brand pavilions housing the different VW brands;
- The customer centre, where visitors can pick up their brand-new car (pre-ordered at their home dealership, a kind of factory delivery) and drive it home;
- A newly built Ritz-Carlton hotel (the first of its kind in Germany) bringing luxury accommodation to what was formerly considered an undesirable location.

Why Autostadt?

The place transforms the company and its family of brands into not only an experience but also a producer of content, learning and peace of mind. Different from normal corporate visitor centres or 'brand lands', Autostadt avoids the hard sell, preferring to enter into a dialogue with the visitor about mobility. The visitor can sense the product itself throughout the complex, but hardly ever sees it: only a few of the brand pavilions (such as Bentley, Audi or Skoda) have actual cars on display. Other areas talk more about cars than show them. This approach has been hotly debated. Conventional marketing theories argue that not putting product first is blasphemy. From the beginning, Autostadt was designed as a place where the visitor can come to 'do their own thing'. Some simply roam around the park; others come for dinner or to one of the variety of events offered year-round. This is much more about indirect, soft marketing than hard-selling - an important strategy in a world full of sophisticated, well-informed and proactive consumers.

Autostadt as a destination brand

Autostadt is a new genre of large corporate location developments that aims to create a unique, branded destination. Brands have always

looked for new ways to connect with people. Evolving from early ideas of factory tours or visitor centres, brand shopping or flagship stores and developing into brand environment or brand pavilions (e.g. at World Fairs), they are now creating entire destinations such as Disney's Celebration and other big brand projects. Autostadt proves that people have an interest in visiting corporate or brand theme parks provided that they are done in an intelligent, subtle and anti-advertising way. Autostadt is clearly about 'pull' marketing and not about aggressive 'push' marketing, trying to sell you a car while you visit. Autostadt's potential is enormous given its strong brand. Just imagine several Autostadts around the world or smaller Autostadt satellites in city centres or at Airports.

What Autostadt did for VW

With Autostadt, Volkswagen began to interact with its stakeholders in a new way. With subsequent projects such as Gläserne Manufaktur in Dresden, (the VW Phaeton luxury car manufacturing site and visitor centre) and Unter den Linden (the VW showroom complex in the heart of Berlin), Volkswagen successfully adapted the idea of location-based brand destinations. Besides acting as an element in its marketing strategy, Autostadt also enables VW to feature and showcase long term themes and issues such as social responsibility, sustainability, good citizenship but also new technologies, the future of mobility and new market trends. Autostadt's limitations are clear: its catchment area is clearly national in its scope (although it gets a surprisingly high share of foreign visitors). As a fixed location-based destination, operating costs are quite high. Also, by its nature, it is fairly inflexible when it comes to redesign, refocus or reacting to imminent and 'hot' themes of the moment.

What Autostadt did for Wolfsburg

Since its opening, Autostadt has become a stand-alone destination and a brand in its own right. Visitors range from school classes (it runs education programmes for visiting schools) to customers picking up their car, making Autostadt the core element of a renewed interest in Wolfsburg as a daytrip destination. This city - about one hour by train from both Berlin and Hanover - now offers a Zaha Hadid-designed science centre, a factory outlet complex and many more attractions transforming the former dull manufacturing town into an attractive tourism offer.

Key learning

Only a critical mass of content, events and attractions can generate a true corporate or brand destination. Similar projects in the car industry and elsewhere have been less successful because they are much smaller, not creating enough destination mass. Autostadt is on the extreme side of a trend which nowadays starts with small and flexible brand pop-up spaces (temporary locations for brand image or product hype) and ends with entire brand cities and districts. Due to its size and permanent location, it needs quite sizeable budgets every year to operate, upgrade and expand the destination. Nevertheless, long-term investment in communication and marketing are becoming more and more important in a world tired of ineffective advertising and pointless events. So while not being for everyone, Autostadt is certainly a strategy for large global players to consider. It is also an interesting case study for mid-sized cities in need of upping their profile as a destination. Companies, brands and their products are, after all, a cultural reality of our 21st-century market economy.

Thomas Sevcik

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