

The successful destination maker has to live with uncertainty, with the fact that he or she can't know and control everything. How do we know what destinations mean to people, and how can we think about what we can't know? Risk and uncertainty seem like the enemies of successful destination management, but knowing the limits to what we can know is a key weapon in dealing with them.

I should say right away that I have a particular fondness for semiotics (the science of signs, also known as semiology). The semiotic method is particularly good at analysing objects, texts, buildings and places, regarding them as communication systems which convey messages in structured and discoverable ways. In the design of a museum, for example, the relations of car park, entrance, rooms, objects, labels, decor and the dress codes of the staff can all be analysed to reveal what messages are being offered to visitors. From the destination manager's point of view, the most successful semiotic design of an attraction is likely to be one which delivers a consistent message, and assists in branding the experience as a recognisable mixture of, for instance, pleasure, learning and memorability.

In the commercial world, semiotic methods have been employed by advertisers, designers and architects to discipline consumer behaviour. The semiotics of brand images, product design and architectural planning have been refined in order to lead the consumer to the desired behaviour, be it buying a particular product, aspiring to the meanings a product represents, or following the right route from the exhibition area to the giftshop. As well as conscious consumer behaviour (choosing a BMW because you know it signifies economic success), semiotic methods aim to interpret and explain unconscious behaviour (your preference for this supermarket derives unconsciously from the pleasant smell of baking bread at the entrance). One of the key insights in this kind of approach is that if you know enough about culture, you can design and manage consumer behaviour to a remarkable degree.

Planning and predicting

The purpose, then, is to manage the future: to produce predictability. Because of the importance of economic sustainability, destination planning is all about the future, in the sense that the essential questions are how many people will visit, and how much they will spend. Time and space come together here, because of the variant relations of movement through space, dwell-time in an attraction, and volume measures of throughput of visitors in a given space. Predicting movement and time are interlocking tasks, which can be understood and carried out semiotically. But there are limits to the enterprise of disciplining meaning in attractions themselves, and also in the methods used to plan and run them.

The public are fickle, and analysts of contemporary culture have placed a lot of emphasis on the variance of actual behaviour among consumers. Many of these different kinds of behaviour appear to be irrational, specific to the microcultures of individuals and small, ill-defined groups, and connected to so many other phenomena in consumer media culture that they are nearly impossible to pin down. The consequence of this for destination makers is that there is a set of risk factors involved in planning, realisation and management processes, which disciplined methods like semiotics cannot fully explain. How can we know what people want from a visit to an attraction, a leisure or retail location, or a tourism destination? Some knowledge can be gained retrospectively, by finding out how many people come back again, but even this says little about their specific motivations, and precisely what they enjoyed. Furthermore, and perhaps this is the most troubling aspect of the issue, it is also impossible to predict how much unpredictability there is going to be.

Pleasing the people

'You can't please all of the people all of the time.' But, as the saying goes, you can please some of the people some of the time. In order to keep pleasing them, destinations need to understand visitors' needs and desires, a task complicated by the fragmentation of consumer categories and the inadequacy of much traditional socio-economic research methodology.

Jonathan Bignell considers the nature of risk and uncertainty in the destination industry, and how a sharper focus on the individual could enhance understanding of visitor behaviour.

Limitations of research

In the face of risk and, even worse, the uncertainty about how much risk there is, the understandable response is often to gather more and more information, with the aim of categorising risks and eliminating them as far as possible. The whole pseudo-science of consumer behaviour research, audience research, polling and consumer surveys is driven by these issues. However, there are two major limits on the possible success of information gathering and prediction of consumer behaviour.

The first is that the better the profiling of consumers, the less helpful the resulting data can be. It has become an amusing commonplace among observers of the advertising and marketing scene that professionals in consumer opinion and behaviour research are always inventing more and more specific categories to describe consumers. There are plenty of well-known and sometimes useful categories, like Young Upwardly-mobile Professionals (Yuppies), Well-Off Older People (Woopies), or Early Adopters, for example. But what happens when profiles begin to produce recognised identities for the numerous small niche markets which now characterise the diverse and relatively affluent societies of Europe and the USA? There will be nearly as many categories of consumer as there are consumers. Several decades ago, theorists of information flows developed the axiom that the more data you have, the less useful it will be.

Second, it is worth considering the actual social dynamics of information gathering and processing. An extreme example is the broad-based consumer survey, done in the windy wastes of a shopping centre by personal interview, or by post with a six-page form about numerous aspects of product preference and consumer interest. First, we should admit the difficulty of getting representative samples. The people who are prepared to stand for 15 minutes answering what may seem a like a load of damn-fool questions may not be those whose opinion we want. Similarly, when we fill out surveys and answer questions, there is often a nagging sense that the available answers, or even the topics of the questions in general, are not the ones which fit our own experience of preference, interest and desire. We might answer anyway, primarily to please the unfortunate pollster standing in the rain, or to win the prize draw to which completing the form will give us entry. However good the design of information retrieval techniques, there will always be a difference between what we really feel or do, and what the system of recording, categorisation and delivery of data will allow. This is the case especially with desires and needs which are unconscious, since by definition we cannot access them in order to answer a researcher's questions about them.

Unprecedented consumer diversity

The knife-edge which destination makers are walking is between two quite different approaches to understanding visitor or consumer behaviour. On one hand, the disciplined approach regards consumers as masses, not individuals. For a given product, building layout or offer of a leisure experience, careful work on the coherence and placement of messages will provide a relatively predictable and manageable set of consumer behaviours, and target a relatively well-defined group, whose self-identities and



Uniforms are powerful semiotic devices Picture courtesy of Disney

Consumers have always been 'they' rather than 'us'

aspirations can be determined. On the other hand, the increasing focus on the caprices of the complex individual identities we take up in contemporary culture leads to a recognition of the inevitable unpredictability and unknowability of consumer behaviour. The grand narratives about social class, gender, region or age are no longer enough to describe the needs and desires of a population saturated with media knowledge, cynicism and resistance to the forms of commercial discipline which they know they are subject to. There is a first step on the way out of this seemingly impossible situation, however.

Consumers have always been 'they' rather than 'us'. Too often, professionals have been shy of putting themselves in the shoes of the visitor. This is hard work, and can reveal just how little the generally white, male, middle-class professional in the destination business really knows about the visitors to his attraction. Can you inhabit the mind-set of that 37-year-old black single mother with three children, a Nissan Cherry, a house in Feltham, a cat with dental problems, a love of George Benson, and no time to read the junk mail put through her door for the benefit of marketing consultants? It's not easy. But the exercise is worthwhile for two reasons.

First, it's useful because it reminds you that each visitor is different, and despite having properties in common, the most interesting thing about visitors is how they differ. Second, it reminds you that you are a visitor too. In some ways, your own particular identity, and your own consumer behaviour, map onto the categories you consciously and unconsciously use in your own work, and you are not so different from the people your product is aimed at. On the other hand, consumers like you resist being categorised, and you probably resent being disciplined in this way. Everyone is resistant to being categorised and disciplined, and living in a consumer culture means wanting others to anticipate our desires, and also being annoyed at the assumptions others make about us. This mixture of being known and unknown, knowable and unknowable, is what being a person is. Risk and uncertainty are here to stay, because desire, identity and the future depend upon them. So knowing ourselves, and trying to imagine what it is to be someone else, are essential skills for the destination maker. But so is the awareness that we can never wholly get there.

Jonathan Bignell is Senior Lecturer in Media Arts at Royal Holloway College, University of London.