

# SHARE AND ENJOY

How the distribution of destination benchmarking results and sharing of knowledge can bring real benefits to everyone – local authorities, tourist and retail operators, attractions and, most importantly, visitors themselves. By **David Geddes**.

The first issue of *Locum Destination Review* looked at the destination benchmarking project pioneered by the Southern Tourist Board and Winchester City Council in 1996 and rolled out between 1998 and 2000, with the help of ETC funding and the cooperation of regional tourist boards. The project's methodology is to conduct visitor surveys in towns and cities and to compare opinion scores relating to different aspects of the visitor experience, with the objective of identifying strengths and weaknesses. The resulting data can be used in a multiplicity of positive ways. As Clive Wyatt illustrated in his article, 'Improving Winchester', in Issue 2 of *Locum Destination Review*, participation in benchmarking can raise the profile of local authority tourism departments, influence internal and external decision makers to commit resources to identified areas, and generate publicity, all of which in their own ways contribute to improving a destination in the eyes of its visitors and residents.

## Measuring up

The participating destinations are divided into three types: historic towns, cities/large towns, and seaside resorts. The visitor surveys are generally carried out by tourist boards, and there is parallel research to determine the importance to visitors of the various indicators being measured. Each survey has a minimum sample of 400 people, and asks visitors to score different aspects of the destination on an ascending scale of 1 to 5. The scores achieved by each destination are compared to the maximum, minimum and mean for its type (i.e. historic town, city/large town or seaside resort), and to the scores for the entire group of participating destinations.

Visitors are questioned on their place of residence, reason for visit, whether they are a day visitor or staying visitor, the type of accommodation they are staying in, length of stay, spend on accommodation and their opinions of the quality and value of accommodation, the transport they used, and the ease and cost of parking.

Visitors are also asked their opinion of the attractions in the destination, places to eat and drink, shops, ease of getting around, public toilets, cleanliness of streets, upkeep of parks, nightlife and evening entertainment, general atmosphere and welcome, and the tourist information centre.

Additionally, visitors are asked about their overall enjoyment, what they liked most about the destination, factors spoiling their enjoyment, their likeliness to recommend it, and spending on different items.

## Adding value through benchmarking

The reason for doing benchmarking is simple: to bring about improvement. The process by which this is done has four stages:

1. Measure performance.
2. Identify the best performers.
3. Study them.
4. Apply the lessons learnt.

Locum Destination Consulting is working with the Tourism Management Institute and the Southern Tourist Board on the collection and dissemination of best practice. As a starting point, Locum prepared case studies on two of the key factors identified for visitors: retail and public toilets. In order to prepare the case studies, Locum studied the results for towns and cities that had been surveyed in 1999, and identified those which were performing well according to the surveys. It then tried to find explanations for why that was the case.

This article explores the implications of Locum's retail case study, highlighting actions that destination managers can consider adapting for their own towns.



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## Retail Top 10 – 1999

| Range of Shops |              | Quality of Shopping Environment |                | Service in Shops |                |      |
|----------------|--------------|---------------------------------|----------------|------------------|----------------|------|
| 1              | York         | 4.53                            | York           | 4.50             | Oxford         | 4.33 |
| 2              | Bath         |                                 | Bath           |                  | Bath           |      |
| 3              | Eastbourne   |                                 | Peterborough   |                  | York           |      |
| 4              | Guildford    |                                 | Oxford         |                  | Stockport      |      |
| 5              | Peterborough |                                 | Eastbourne     |                  | Eastbourne     |      |
| 6              | Cheltenham   |                                 | Colchester     |                  | Great Yarmouth |      |
| 7              | Oxford       |                                 | Guildford      |                  | Cheltenham     |      |
| 8              | Colchester   |                                 | Lichfield City |                  | Colchester     |      |
| 9              | Bristol      |                                 | Stockport      |                  | Lichfield City |      |
| 10             | Brighton     |                                 | Salisbury      |                  | Peterborough   |      |
|                | Minimum      | 3.34                            | Minimum        | 3.32             | Minimum        | 3.67 |

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## Retail

The destination benchmarking survey includes three questions measuring visitor satisfaction with a destination's retail offer: range of shops, quality of shopping environment, and service in shops.

The first thing we noticed was that most of the destinations had very similar scores for range of shops and quality of shopping environment. For 19 of 26 destinations surveyed in 1999, there was a difference of less than 0.1 (out of 5) between scores for each of these two factors.

There were, however, a few exceptions which made quite a striking point. Lichfield, for example, scored very well on its shopping environment, but very poorly on its range of shops. Bristol, by contrast, achieved a very positive result for its range of shops, but its shopping environment scored poorly.

Lichfield, of course, is a cathedral town, retaining its medieval street plan. Bristol, by contrast, entirely rebuilt its city centre after the Second World War in a new location and on a grid pattern.

The top-line results confirm that people like town centres with individuality and character. They like a medieval street plan, historic buildings, lots of good quality independent shops, a café culture and a cultural mix.

Bath scored very highly on all the retail measures, so Locum did a bit of research into what they were doing well. We discovered that Bath has an unusually high proportion of independent retailers – over 50% of the total. The planners encourage the independent sector and encourage clustering. On Walcott Street, for example, a secondary retail street off-centre, they commissioned a survey which determined that the

primary character was independent craft shops. Consequently, this use of retail space has been encouraged in planning decisions.

## Collective action

There are lots of independent retailer associations in Bath, all of which campaign to better their lot. The antique dealers association, for instance, has 82 members and produces 50,000 guide leaflets a year, which are distributed through shops, hotels and the TIC. They also have a website. Visitor surveys show that antique shops are the fifth most important reason for visiting Bath.

The presence of a very strong independent sector and active retail associations results in a lot of promotional activity and a lot of diversity. It also encourages civic pride. For example, the Walcott Street traders' association organises the financing of hanging flower baskets.

Bath was one of the first cities to have a town centre manager, and the town centre manager has taken some interesting initiatives, among them persuading the *Big Issue* to introduce a regional edition and organise the homeless, and negotiating a code of practice with buskers. Bath is a prime pitch for buskers, and there is a recognition in the city that buskers play an important role in providing vitality, but they can also be a nuisance, especially to residents (an infamous bagpiper is held accountable for damaging the sanity of a large proportion of Bath's citizenry!).



## PUBLIC TOILETS

The destination benchmarking results showed that 'hygiene' factors, especially availability and cleanliness of toilets, and cleanliness of streets, come top of the list of factors that are rated most important by visitors to town and city destinations.

### Top 10 – 1999

#### Cleanliness of Toilets

|    |                   |      |
|----|-------------------|------|
| 1  | Weston-super-Mare | 4.18 |
| 2  | Hull              |      |
| 3  | Salisbury         |      |
| 4  | Lichfield         |      |
| 5  | Hastings          |      |
| 6  | Eastbourne        |      |
| 7  | Torbay            |      |
| 8  | Telford           |      |
| 9  | Sunderland        |      |
| 10 | Blackburn         |      |
|    | Minimum           | 2.89 |

Locum evaluated why the towns at the top of the rating did so well for their toilets. A clear picture emerged. Towns which got the best assessment for their toilets had a majority of them attended. Added to this, it seemed that the attendants in all cases had a sense of pride in their toilets. In Kingston upon Hull, for example, the attendants take pride in the hanging baskets in the toilets. In Lichfield, the attendants maintain a mini TIC, offering advice to visitors.

A number of the top-rated towns made charges for admission to their toilets, and there seemed to be no resistance to such charges. So, the lessons appear to be:

- good toilets make a difference;
- having them attended is the key to pleasing visitors;
- users will accept a charge;
- the selection of, and relationship with, attendants is important – good people will show pride and provide added services such as information.

## Proactive leadership

Bath was worried about the impact of the Cribbs Causeway regional shopping centre development nearby, but it seems to have had little impact since it opened two years ago. This appears to be a reflection of the success of its product. Bath is pursuing an active strategy to try to improve even further its appeal as a retail destination. A three-year programme called City Initiative: Transport and Environment (CI:TE) was established by the City Council in 1998. A four-member multidisciplinary team was established and tasked with deciding how Bath could develop as a sustainable, prosperous and accessible heritage city where people can:

- enjoy the ambience;
- enjoy a dynamic street life;
- enjoy open spaces and peaceful areas;
- use attractive networks for walking, cycling and convenient public transport;
- and enjoy the benefits of a successful local economy.

The strategy proposed by the initiative depends heavily on controlling traffic. It proposes to:

- sever through traffic by creating 'bus gates';
- reduce and control street parking;
- stop circling;
- dedicate city centre car parks to short stay;
- encourage park and ride for commuters and long stay;
- and enhance pedestrianisation through wide pavements and traffic calming.

The reduction in traffic then allows an active strategy to enhance the entertainment quality of the city, which includes a public arts programme to 'make Bath an outdoor Art Gallery', an entertainment strategy, and a strategy to improve public toilets.

Bath's CI:TE initiative is intended to reduce traffic pollution, make it easier for shoppers and visitors to park, encourage pedestrians and cyclists, encourage pavement café culture, and enable closing of streets for events and markets. In other words, together these initiatives are designed to reinforce Bath's competitive advantage as a leisure shopping destination.

The proposals are, of course, controversial. Retailers warn that their business will be adversely affected by a reduction in passing traffic. However, Bath has recognised that the quality of its environment is its primary weapon in the fight against out-of-town development.



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## Lessons for town centres

Town centres up and down the country have a sudden window of opportunity. The 1970s and 1980s saw the homogenisation of high streets, with the same familiar chain stores present on all of them. These days, however, routine shopping is more conveniently done out of town. This releases space in town centres for specialist retail and food and beverage.

Town centres can offer 'authenticity', which can never be matched by out-of-town developments, and people like this authenticity.

The strategy of towns, especially market towns, should be to become 'leisure shopping destinations'.

By doing so, they can reclaim their traditional role as a market place – not only for goods, but also for services, information, ideas and gossip – and also as a place for recreation.

Town centres can offer qualities that out-of-town shopping can never match: a pleasant, authentic environment, lots of food and beverage, specialist shops and lots of culture and entertainment. These ingredients constitute a successful leisure shopping destination.

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