

# Walking the talk

## PY Gerbeau on life, leisure and living the brand



Photograph Matt Greenslade

### PY Gerbeau

- 1984–91** Pro ice hockey player
- 1989–91** Management consultant, TPS Conseil, Paris
- 1991–99** Disneyland Paris
  - Manager of Human Resources (1991–92)
  - Manager of Attractions (1992–95)
  - Director of Attractions (1995–96)
  - Vice-President and Director of Park Operations (1996–97)
- 2000–01** Chief Executive and Board Director, New Millennium Experience Company Ltd
- Jan 2001** Executive in Residence, London Business School

Last year, as Chief Executive of the New Millennium Experience Company, **Pierre-Yves Gerbeau** faced undoubtedly the toughest task in the destination industry: keeping the Dome alive until the end of 2000. Against all the odds, the man who came to be known universally as 'PY' succeeded, and the ever-cheery approach he brought to the job earned him the sympathy of the British public. Here, in conversation with Locum's Managing Director, **James Alexander**, and the Editor of *Locum Destination Review*, **Owen Burdekin**, he talks passionately about the brand philosophy behind the public persona and identifies the key issues on which he believes change is required for the destination industry to progress.

PY Gerbeau first became known to the British public in February 2000, when he replaced Jennie Page as the Chief Executive of the New Millennium Experience Company, the organisation responsible for running the Millennium Dome. Since then, his face has become instantly recognisable, as a result of more TV, radio and newspaper coverage than most individuals – even famous ones – receive in a whole lifetime.

The announcement of his appointment sparked an inevitable round of sensationalist tabloid headlines about the Dome recruiting 'the wrong man at Disney'. *Private Eye* also got in on the act, christening him 'The Gerbil'. Having ridden out the initial storm of personalised publicity, he settled quickly into the task at hand: getting enough bodies through the turnstiles to justify keeping the Dome open for the remainder of the millennium year.

To many people's astonishment, far from shunning the prying cameras and microphones of journalists, he accepted as many interviews as possible, taking the view that they could be transformed from potential PR disasters into opportunities to advertise the Dome. The emphasis he placed on the attraction's positive visitor feedback became a consistent feature of his public appearances. (In the end, 87% of the 6 million paying customers went away satisfied with the product and 90% with the service, and the Dome achieved a remarkable 26% repeat visitation within the one year it was open.)

Although it seems like longer, eight months have elapsed since the Dome closed for business. Given the visible passion that characterised his management of the Dome throughout, it came as no real surprise to learn in early 2001 that he intended to bid for control of the Dome. His plan was to keep it running as a premier attraction and events venue. The public followed with interest PY's joint bid, with James Palumbo of the Ministry of Sound, and its subsequent blunt rejection by his political taskmasters in Whitehall. 'The idea was to retain elements of the original attraction, and to stage major events in the central arena. Of course, by the time the bid reached the Government, all the assets had already been stripped, which was crazy.' Publicly, he was shot to pieces over the 'over-cautious' business plan he

had prepared for the venture, a supreme irony, considering the abysmal commercial planning behind the original project, and an insult when you consider that, under his leadership, from April 2000 the Dome actually made a profit. This official reason, of course, concealed political interventions to ensure that the bid failed, the specifics of which he has no desire to put on the record. At the end of July, the Government went one step further in humiliating PY, by announcing that the Dome could be made available for pop concerts and other events from the autumn: 'I am so mad. This is what I proposed four months ago.'

## Living the brand

PY is keen to stress his belief that strong brand strategy – and the sharing of brand vision at all levels of operation – is the critical ingredient for any organisation, public or private. Within days of arriving at the Dome, his first priority, he says, was to put in place a clear brand strategy, to guide the project through its remaining months and ensure that all its employees were singing from the same hymn sheet. Simultaneously, he himself braved the national media on a daily basis, taking untold amounts of flak whilst talking up the merits of the Dome as an attraction. Cleverly, he never wavered from one clear and certain message: *customer satisfaction*. This had the instant effect of geeing up a hitherto subdued workforce: 'We had 5,000 people there, totally demotivated, who were saying to themselves every day, "What the hell am I doing here?" Suddenly, they had someone who would stand up for their attraction, who would face the cameras in an honest way, and for the rest of the year they were all really excited about being there.'

He values his experience with the Dome's employees even above the commercial achievement that his leadership inspired: 'There was a formidable turnaround in the business from February 2001, but the thing I'll take away with me, just like at Disney, is not the business turnaround but the people.' Within his brand philosophy, people management is the thing about which PY most animated: 'I have always been a people person and this will be an important consideration for me in whatever it is that I choose to do next. I believe passionately that if you can genuinely enthuse your own people, a brand always has the chance to succeed.' PY obviously loves the role of brand choirmaster; but what gets the choirmaster out of bed in the morning? Money? 'I guess you could say I believe in "capitalism for the right reasons": we all need to pay the bills, but money on its own is not a sufficient motivator to get up each day and live the brand. To do this, everyone in the organisation needs to understand the brand, and be proud of it.'

So what type of challenge is he looking for? Not too surprisingly, major public projects are not too high on PY's wishlist of potential employers. 'I am on the lookout for a brand in need – in need of help and an injection of dynamism, not a brand in need of rescue from a disaster scenario like you-know-what! To help an underperforming brand turn around its fortunes and nurse it back to health would be a great challenge – and terrific fun.' Here is someone who sees himself as a brand doctor – but not a brand life-saver. His Dome challenge might have been a tremendous experience, but ultimately, having to watch his beloved attraction being stripped bare within weeks of closing was an experience he has no intention of repeating.

Will he find the challenge he is seeking in the leisure industry? 'Maybe yes, maybe no. The issue I've got is that when you've driven two powerful cars [the other being Disneyland Paris], you have a hard time going back to any other car. The other thing is I don't want to be Mr Troubleshooting for the next 15 years!' In line with his aspirations, would a key position with one of the biggest underperforming brands in Europe, Marks & Spencer, provide the sort of challenge is looking for? 'No, it's too big. I'm not good enough to manage a company of 60,000 people and with a multi-billion pound cashflow. I've got a lot of things to do before I do something like that.'

## Leisure and the destination economy

Staying with the subject of leisure, we ask PY to do a little crystal ball gazing, looking at future developments within the supply side of the industry as he sees them. He starts at the beginning: 'The number one objective for everyone involved in leisure provision should be to make people happy: Sure, we all have to make a living and keep a close eye on the finances, but what we are delivering each day is happiness, not only to visitors but to our own colleagues, too.' This bold iteration of the Disney brand vision is hardly surprising, given his previous dedication to the Disney cause. Moving on to the specifics of leisure product, he believes that consumer demands for greater interaction and choice within leisure activities, witnessed over the last five years, are set to continue for the foreseeable future. 'We have moved from "do it for me" to "give me choice". Any leisure destination suffering a lack of interactivity will face certain failure.'

He thinks that technology will grow in importance for destinations across the board, but it could remain a double-edged sword for some time: 'Technology obviously plays a big part, but technology can also be the biggest enemy if it doesn't work.' For PY, the future will probably be about what he calls 'interactivity plus', where the consumer is involved more and more in creating the experience: 'Visitors will become actors: "I want to be Michael Jordan", "I want to be John McEnroe". The challenge is to live up to these consumer expectations and find ways of delivering these immersive experiences.'

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Like other leading lights of the destination industry, he suspects that the era of the basic package holiday is almost over, while another is beginning: the era of space tourism. Earlier this year, the world saw its first space tourist, and PY believes there is no reason why tourists will not, in the near future, be able to take mini-breaks in space: 'Arrive at the launch facility, receive training, go into space and come back, perhaps all within one weekend! What is the driving force behind this trend? 'The leisure experience of tomorrow must by its very definition must take you out of normality.' Assuming these experiences are some years off hitting the wider market, what does he make of the opening up of the current destination market back on earth? 'You can still go to Florida or California, but if you don't like to be hot and sweaty, and you don't want to face the horrendous traffic, you can now go to Spain just for the weekend, or Scotland or Saudia Arabia – and all for next to nothing! You don't have to be ABC1 to travel anymore. The world is in your hands.' Given the choice, what would PY's own ideal personalised leisure experience be? Without hesitation, he describes a round-the-world golfing extravaganza: 'I would jump on Concorde and fly to Augusta, play a round or two, then back on the plane to the next golf destination – St Andrew's perhaps, or Sunningdale.'

Back in serious mode, he is clear that any operator seeking to provide competitive leisure experiences must ensure 'a combination of some basic ingredients: attention to detail; quality of product; quality of service; constant reinvention'. Paying tribute to another of his former employers, he recognises Disney's strength in all these areas: 'Part of the magic of Disney is that everywhere you go in a theme park, you see different things every time. And transport is very important for Disney: the two things that tourist visitors will always remember are the first and last contact they have with a place. What is in between helps, but if even it's good it will be irrelevant if you screw up the departure.' PY should know: he spent a total of nine years with Disney, one of the world's leading brands, climbing the ladder to become Vice-President and Director of Park Operations at its flagship European theme park.

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## Learning from Disney

Originally launched as Euro Disney and later rebranded as Disneyland Paris, this park now enjoys considerable success, achieving no less than 30% repeat visitation. But things were not always so happy. As he recalls, in the first years after opening as Euro Disney, the park underperformed dramatically, attracting far fewer visitors than projected. Why was this, and what did Disney do to turn the situation around? 'We realised we were missing a critical target market, which was young adults: 17- to 25-year-olds, mainly with no kids. We spent \$110 million and launched the Space Mountain ride as a symbol of this new approach. In the first year of this new effort, we attracted 250,000 new visitors in this age group, in the second year 1.2 million and in the third 2.5 million.' Such a turnaround is testament to the can-do approach for which the private sector of leisure is renowned, compared with the often appallingly slow nature of public sector decision-making. (His memories of dealing with the British civil service are still painful: 'It was a nightmare; we could have done so much more and so much faster if we hadn't faced that level of bureaucracy.')



Photograph courtesy of Disney

It was also at Disney that the seeds of PY's interest in brand philosophy and people management were sown. At its newly opened European operation, Disney welcomed an audience comprising a far greater diversity of nationalities and cultures than it had previously been used to. 'If you look at the Disney experience in France, you can see the mistakes that they made by trying to duplicate the way things were in the States. I'm sorry, but you don't treat an English customer like you would a French or Italian customer – it just doesn't work.' The lesson of cultural understanding had to be learned, in areas such as queue management: 'We found that the average acceptable wait time at attractions for European guests as a whole is 22 minutes. But within this, the average acceptable wait time varies by nationality – whilst British visitors are prepared to wait for up to 25 minutes, French guests will only happily stand in line for a much shorter length of time. Of course, any wait time is only "acceptable" if the end product is worth the wait!'

What else did his time with Disney teach PY? 'One crucial thing I learnt at Disney was always to be humble, in ethos and in business planning.' Which means basing your projections on the worst- rather than best-case scenario, in order to set up a situation in which you under-promise and over-deliver (the

antithesis, it appears, of normal UK public sector planning practice). PY's view is simple and straightforward: the thinking must be longer-term. 'How the hell can you expect to amortise £800 million in four or five years, let alone one? It would have needed a 15- to 20-year plan to amortise this level of capital investment. If Euro Disney was mixing commercial operations with capital investment, they'd be bankrupt tomorrow!' All of this serves to underline PY's insistence that the time has come for the public sector of leisure to get real about adopting private sector business methodologies and taking a more measured approach to destination management – or not to bother at all.

## Lessons for the public sector

Long-term planning is a key theme for PY, but one, it seems, that the UK political structure doesn't allow for. He points us in the direction of Futuroscope, an attraction-cum-science park in Poitiers, France, which has just been bought by a private company: 'In its first year, every single Parisian including me said, "It's a scandal, it's the most appalling vision." It has lost hundreds of millions of francs every year, but it put Poitiers on the map, created 20,000 direct and indirect jobs, helped to develop the region, and turned the entire area around it into a new tourist destination. Everyone agrees it has been the catalyst for the regeneration of the whole area. It is rightly seen as a fantastic success.' For PY, Futuroscope provides one of the clearest examples to date of the widespread benefits to be gained by the public sector taking the longer-term perspective when investing in an ostensibly recreational product ... unlike somewhere else we could mention.

This call for improved public sector understanding of the destination industry leads us onto another element of the industry facing an uncertain future: museums. What sort of future awaits them? 'Although you have wonderful museums in the UK, many still haven't made the switch into the twenty-first century.' Is the product the only element holding the sector back? 'Culture in the UK is still perceived as a very serious thing. Despite what the Brits might like to think about becoming more inclusive, there is no doubt that culture is still something that is "done" here by the upper and middle classes, almost exclusively.' So how can museums convey to all parts of their audience the cultural experiences that they offer, and what these experiences are going to do for these people? PY firmly believes that in order to start breaking down some of their barriers, museums must start operating and communicating more effectively – and this will inevitably mean seeking help from expert operators and consultants from the private sector of the leisure industry.

Tate Modern has apparently proved the worth of concentrated marketing and positive media exposure. 'Visitors to Tate Modern go because it is trendy, because a lot of famous people have been seen there, because they hear the name so they have to go, and because, unlike that "stupid tent", it's free!' But in PY's view, the destination product at Tate Modern will not stand the test of time: 'Personally, I don't think the hype will sustain it.' What the Tate Modern experience has shown us above all else about the present museum environment, he says, is that 'at the end of the day it's a numbers game, because it's a very competitive marketplace'. The message is clear: while museums will continue to be popularly perceived as having an educational role to play, their worthy reputations and exhibits will ultimately be worthless if visitors fail to return. This is not to say that positive publicity and effective marketing are anything other than absolutely necessary. ('You cannot win a battle in this country if you don't take care of the media profile. Been there, done that, got the T-shirt, lost it.') But even the best promotion in the world will not be enough if the quality of destination product is not there. And how do you go about ensuring the consistent quality and renewal of product in all destinations, museums and otherwise? We should have guessed: 'It all comes down to branding: you have to live your brand, whatever it is. If the brand is not lived by your employees, your visitors, your stakeholders, it is not doing its job.'

For any brand to succeed, the workforce must have pride in it. The management must be seen to live the brand and deliver the brand promise.'

Speaking with such confidence and passion about eating, sleeping and breathing the brand, it strikes you that it wouldn't be altogether surprising if one day we see the emergence of PY as a brand of some sort in his own right. Who knows? As for the immediate future, there have been plenty of suggestions by the media as to where his talents could be employed to turn around problematic ventures, perhaps the best of which was made by the *Sunday Times* (29 July): 'Let the Gerbil play Wembley. He could provide a mix of Gallic showmanship and organisational flair to get the structure out of the planning office and on to the building site! Whatever he decides to do next, surely it's only a matter of time before he'll be hitting the headlines again. *Bonne chance!*

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