

# What are we doing this afternoon?

Until recently, **Paul Edwards**, as one of the UK's leading strategic thinkers on marketing matters, was Chief Executive of The Henley Centre. He now heads up the communications group Lowe Lintas and Partners as UK Group CEO.

When I was young you could go to the seaside or to a country park and see people in their cars just looking out. Sometimes they might have brought a flask of tea and sometimes the knitting needles. The point of the expedition, though, was simply to go somewhere; to have a change of scenery.

A generation later and my children couldn't imagine just *going* somewhere; they have to be *doing* something. A destination isn't a destination for them unless there is something worth going for. 'What are we going to do?' and 'What are we doing next?' are much more common questions for them than 'Where are we going?' Consequently their view of geography is somewhat hazy but their idea of the worth of a venue is highly developed. To take them just to look at something is to invite the question 'What's the point?' and the wear-out time of scenery is depressingly fast.

I don't think my children are particularly unrepresentative of their generation. Together, they are the face of what has become known as the experience economy. This is, if you like, the cutting edge of the experience economy, because it now costs more to take the family out; over and above the cost of getting there. This is where the theory becomes harsh reality for the family budget.

What it also means is that the yardstick for measuring the quality of a destination has undergone extensive change. Compare the experience at the average UK seaside resort with the experience at Center Parcs seen through the eyes of a ten-year-old. Forget nostalgia and what it meant for you as a ten-year-old, there is just so much more to do at Center Parcs. As a destination the quality of experience is so much higher, and commands an appropriate premium price. Consider the Gambling Review-fuelled speculation on turning Blackpool into the Las Vegas of the North West: abhorrent to the traditional seaside goer, probably essential to the survival of the resort.

But it goes even deeper than this because when you class a visit as an experience then you have to add other, more sedentary, experiences to the comparative set. Does a visit to this or that venue have more experience value than sitting in front of the Playstation or Sky TV? If your answer is 'Of course it does, just look at the scenery' then you're missing the point. It really is vital to consider what people are going to do when they get there. To have the car journey question of 'When are we going to get there?' converted rapidly into 'When are we going home?' is very unrewarding.

The hotel sector has begun to recognise this with a growing polarisation of the market into functional and cheap places to

rest overnight and a burgeoning sector of hotels that recognise they are part of the experience economy. From the Ian Schrager trademark hotels for the conspicuously wealthy, through the short break hotels for those with a little time, to the boutique hotels who are recognising that satellite TV and music centres in the rooms, and bars to enjoy, are now part of the price of entry to the sector. Like so many sectors before it there is less and less room for mid-priced, mid-facility hospitality. The middle of the road is the most likely place to be run down. Eating out displays a similar polarity, with food as fuel being increasingly distanced from food as pleasure. (Some of the burger chains do particularly well here by offering some level of experience along with the fuel - for children at least.)

So that old concept of value for time rears its head again; with the journey to a destination and the time spent there, it simply has to measure up in terms of value for time against the other options (which may include staying at home). If the value for time equation is right then value for money follows swiftly. Objectively, the theme parks are expensive for a family to get into, but parents know they are guaranteed a day full of experience and they will not be disappointed. Like the cheap baked beans, it's no bargain if the children won't eat them.

And as an experience, how quickly will we want to come back to your destination? Money *will* limit the frequency with which most people can visit the big theme parks but the desire to go back and enjoy the experience again and again must be there for the sustainable destination. It is not just the quantity of experiences on offer but the quality or intensity of enjoyment. Think again of how similar this is to the computer games market; is a game worn out quickly or do they want to play it over and over again? Word of mouth will quickly restrict the appeal of the game with limited repeat potential.

In our busy lives, the time we spend with our families has become ever more precious and we are concerned that the children are having a good time. Their needs and wants often take precedence over the adults' and they are 'indulged' to a degree not recognisable by our parents' generation who, from our perspective, seemed to have more time. Families will make more and more destination decisions based on the desire to create an enjoyable experience for the children. For a destination to get into that competitive set requires a keen eye on all the alternatives. 'What are we going to do?' has become the key question for the experience economy.