
Benchmarking Visitor Attractions

Improving visitor satisfaction and attractions' financial health

Spurred by government demands for Best Value and the increasing competitiveness of the attractions industry, an innovative benchmarking scheme for small to medium sized museums and attractions (up to 200,000 visitors) has been developed by Regional Tourist Boards and Locum Destination Consulting. It is based on an initiative piloted by the Southern Tourist Board and Locum Destination Consulting in association with a local partnership comprising Hampshire County Council, the South Eastern Museums Service, the Dorset and New Forest Area Tourism Partnership and Hampshire Training & Enterprise Council. The scheme was piloted through 33 attractions in Hampshire and Dorset in 1999-2000 to test and refine the methodology, and now has the support of the English Tourism Council. [Seán Young](#), a Director of Locum Destination Consulting, who has been closely involved in the piloting and further development of the scheme, explains the range of benefits it offers to participating attractions.



The overarching benefit of attractions benchmarking is that it can provide both an external customer-focused and internal management-focused basis on which to set priorities for action. The sharing of good practice then serves to help the attractions identify what they should do to improve over time.

The pilot project demonstrated its usefulness both as a guide to good management and operation, and as a tool for monitoring improvements over time and learning from comparable organisations.

The key uses of the new benchmarking service being offered by Locum Destination Consulting, in association with the Regional Tourist Boards and with backing of the English Tourism Council, include:

- **Identifying strengths and weaknesses:** in terms of the visitor experience, management processes and market and financial performance.
- **Influencing decision makers and securing resource:** under-performance against visitor expectations and against other attractions can be a powerful influence on the organisation's key decision makers and can help secure additional resources for poorly performing areas.
- **Supporting funding applications:** the findings of the visitor survey and results of the management and financial benchmarking is a very useful tool to demonstrate need for financial support or to demonstrate the competency of the attractions management team.
- **Identifying trends in the marketplace:** the market and financial performance indicator results are useful for tracking improvement over time and also any trends in the wider attractions marketplace e.g. did other attractions experience the same difficulties you did last quarter?
- **Best Value:** for local authority attractions and museums the benchmarking scheme can serve to meet the needs to consult with visitors and compare an authority's performance with others.

The attractions benchmarking service

The Regional Tourist Boards and Locum Destination Consulting are now offering a full attraction benchmarking service in 2002 and beyond. A key feature of the service is the standardised methodology which ensures a common approach to information collection and reporting. This allows participating attractions to compare their own performance against the maximum, minimum and average performance of comparable attractions - via a central database.

The services available to attractions are detailed below. It is possible to choose any of the particular services, depending upon the specific needs of the attraction manager, or a complete package of services.

1. Visitor satisfaction benchmarking

Following an on-site briefing for staff, the attraction receives an attractive, standardised self-completing visitor questionnaire, shown right, for distribution to visitors during the core period of June to the end of August. Upon completion, each attraction receives a confidential report providing its own results alongside the maximum, minimum and average for all attractions. Comparison is also available for attraction categories and other variables depending on the overall volume of participants which we anticipate will build year on year.

The questionnaires may also be used for a face-to-face consultation process if desired by the attraction manager.

2. Market and financial benchmarking

The attraction manager receives a standard self-completing questionnaire twice a year, which gathers key performance data on market, income and profitability indicators. Upon completion the attraction receives a confidential report providing its own results for the period alongside the maximum, minimum and average for all attractions and relevant categories of attractions. Details of past results are also provided so that the attraction can monitor its own performance and wider trends over time.

Attractions also receive a 'Good Practice Management Manual', which focuses on common and comparative processes that are key to the financial performance of small and medium-sized attractions. The areas of operation that are examined in detail are marketing, financial management, retail, catering and 'other areas of income generation'. The attraction manager can carry out a review of current performance by 'scoring' their attraction's performance against a range of identified good practice processes.

Attractions taking part in the market and financial benchmarking can also access a website, which includes a step-by-step guide to action planning to help the attraction to interpret their results and translate them into actions. A useful reference guide providing information on publications and organisations that may serve to help the attractions is also on-line.

VISITOR SURVEY

ENTER OUR FREE PRIZE DRAW FOR 1 x £100 & 2 x £50 MARKS & SPENCER'S VOUCHER

Dear Visitor, We would be very grateful if you could spare us a few minutes to complete this short questionnaire about your visit today. By completing this questionnaire you will be entered automatically into the prize draw. Your answers will help us make further improvements for future visits. **The questionnaire will be treated in strictest confidence.** Please indicate your chosen answer by ticking the appropriate box or writing in the space provided. We ask that **only one questionnaire is filled out per group.** Please seal down and place the completed questionnaire in the box provided or return to the address overleaf.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME - ENJOY THE REST OF YOUR VISIT.

<p>Q1 Where do you live? Home town <input type="text"/> County/Country <input type="text"/> Post code <input type="text"/></p> <p>Q2 Have you come from home today? YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Are you returning home today? YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>IF 'YES' TO BOTH GO TO Q4</p> <p>Q3 Where are you staying at present? Nearest town <input type="text"/> County <input type="text"/></p> <p>Q4 Approximately how far did you travel to get here today? (TICK ONE ONLY) Up to 10 miles <input type="checkbox"/> 11 - 25 miles <input type="checkbox"/> 51 - 100 miles <input type="checkbox"/> 26-50 miles <input type="checkbox"/> 101+ miles <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Q5 Are you part of an organised group or coach party? YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Q6 What kind of IMMEDIATE group are you part of today? (i.e. not coach party) (TICK ONE ONLY) Alone <input type="checkbox"/> Adult couple <input type="checkbox"/> Family with children (under 16) <input type="checkbox"/> Other adults with children (under 16) <input type="checkbox"/> 3+ adults (no children) <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Q7 When did you decide to visit this attraction? (TICK ONE ONLY) Whilst passing <input type="checkbox"/> Earlier today <input type="checkbox"/> This week (i.e. last 7 days) <input type="checkbox"/> Within last month <input type="checkbox"/> More than 1 month ago <input type="checkbox"/></p>	<p>Q8 How did you hear about this attraction? (TICK ALL THAT APPLY) Leaflet for the attraction <input type="checkbox"/> Other leaflet / brochure / guide <input type="checkbox"/> Newspaper advert / feature <input type="checkbox"/> Radio advert / feature <input type="checkbox"/> TV advert / feature <input type="checkbox"/> Internet <input type="checkbox"/> Through school <input type="checkbox"/> Recommendation <input type="checkbox"/> Tourist Information Centre <input type="checkbox"/> Passing by / signpost <input type="checkbox"/> Previous visit <input type="checkbox"/> Local knowledge <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please specify) <input type="text"/></p> <p>Q9 Approximately how long in total have you spent here today? (NUMBER OF HOURS) <input type="text"/> hours</p> <p>Q10 Have you spent more or less time here than you expected? (TICK ONE ONLY) More time <input type="checkbox"/> Less time <input type="checkbox"/> The same <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Q11 Have you, or someone in your group, ever visited this attraction before? YES <input type="checkbox"/> Go to Q12 NO <input type="checkbox"/> Go to Q13</p> <p>Q12 How many times have you, or someone in your group, visited this attraction in the last 12 months? (TICK ONE ONLY) Never <input type="checkbox"/> Three times <input type="checkbox"/> Once <input type="checkbox"/> Four times <input type="checkbox"/> Twice <input type="checkbox"/> Five times or more <input type="checkbox"/></p> <p>Q13 How would you rate the admission charges to this attraction? (TICK ONE ONLY) Very expensive <input type="checkbox"/> Very inexpensive <input type="checkbox"/> Expensive <input type="checkbox"/> Did not pay <input type="checkbox"/> Average <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know <input type="checkbox"/> Inexpensive <input type="checkbox"/></p>
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3. Sharing good practice

One-to-one site visits

As benchmarking is about exchanging information and experience in order to improve performance, all participating attractions within the scheme are encouraged to visit each other's facilities and exchange information face-to-face. This process is facilitated through the provision of guidelines for ethical conduct between benchmarking partners and the Regional Tourist Board acts as a first point of contact for attractions that are interested in hosting or conducting site visits.

Specialist seminars

Attractions can also sign up to take part in a series of seminars focusing on the key issues addressed in the benchmarking scheme. These include expert-led workshops on marketing, business planning, retail, catering and other forms of income generation. The guiding principle behind the seminars is to keep the discussion practical and action-oriented.

Expert market and financial review

Finally, an attraction wishing to get additional assistance can request an expert financial review. A recognised expert in the field will analyse the attraction's benchmarking results, undertake a site visit to discuss the attraction's own action plans and provide feedback from the consultant's own experience. A short action-orientated report will be prepared by the expert focusing on the weak areas identified in the benchmarking process.

Support for the benchmarking service

'Participation in the benchmarking scheme has enabled us to identify areas where we can improve the experience for our visitors and better some of our income generating services. I particularly welcomed the opportunity to share good practice with comparable attractions facing similar challenges.'

David Butt, Director, The Tank Museum

'I found it very interesting to see how the attractions group as a whole had performed and to monitor wider visitation trends. The project brought together and helped to unite local attractions.'

Sandra Palmer, Director, Farmer Palmer's Farm Park

'We used the benchmarking results to great effect in the preparation of our funding application to the Heritage Lottery Fund. The Good Practice Management Manual is a useful reference guide in its own right.'

Cdr Jeff Tall, Director, Royal Naval Submarine Museum

'The site visit by the expert consultant gave me comfort that we were on the right track and helped me prioritise within my action plan for the coming year.'

Patrick Cooke, Proprietor, Athelhampton House and Gardens

Want to know more?

If you are interested in the opportunities offered by attractions benchmarking and want to know more about the service and how it is being delivered in your area, contact your Regional Tourist Board.

East of England Tourist Board:	01473 825 613
Heart of England Tourist Board:	01905 761 100
Northumbria Tourist Board:	0191 375 3000
North West Tourist Board:	01942 821 222
South East England Tourist Board:	01892 540 766
Southern Tourist Board:	02380 625 400
South West Tourism:	0870 4420 830
Yorkshire Tourist Board:	01904 773 331