

From branding TO BONDING

At the UK Tourism Society's 25th Annual Conference in London, Locum's managing director, James Alexander, spoke alongside Sir Rocco Forte of RF Hotels, museum director Patrick Greene, Brian Leonard (representing Tessa Jowell, Minister for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport) and others, outlining the key ingredients for making destinations successful in the future - from building a strong core product and brand to creating 'emotional resonance' with visitors.

Where is the destination sector heading? Today we have a far broader definition of what an attraction or destination is. Ten years ago nobody would have thought that retail would be such a strong competitor for our leisure time, or that cities would be so popular with everybody from the short break, middle class traveller to the student, or that hotels would take such a new and innovative 'boutique' direction.

There has been a flood of new product across all these types of destinations in the UK, in some cases fuelled by the investments of the Lottery funds. And the consumer is ever more sophisticated in making leisure choices, with far less time, yet far more money, to spend. The upshot of this is not only that the winners are winning big, but that a previously highly segmented market is now being subsumed into a single sector: the destination sector. In this new sector museums compete with shopping malls, which in turn compete with theme parks. The traditional barriers and closely defined target groups have disappeared.

What makes a winner?

So, in this new order, what is it that makes a winning destination? A strong core product is vital, as is strong operational competence. A successful destination also needs a brand that underpins the core product and delivers on its promise. In addition, capturing a fashion (i.e. trend) plays an increasingly significant role, as does iconic architecture. Perhaps the most important move a destination can make, given the fickle nature of consumers, is to recognise the need for constant reinvestment. Reinvestment in product, services, brand and image: unless a destination remains fresh, it is yesterday's news.

Here is a selection of destinations that offer pointers for the future.

London Eye

The London Eye is a winner by any measure, yet what is it about it that makes it a winner? Is it the architecture? Is it the scale? Or is it the fact that when you are at the top you get a wonderful view of a city that has been forged and evolved over centuries? Its success has now been finally acknowledged, as the original temporary planning permission has been extended to full planning status. Yet there are wrinkles in the Eye and its operation: the services on the ground and the ticketing arrangements aren't ideal and anyone who has been there will remember that it has been overrun by hot dog vendors. These are the problems of success, and they need aggressive management if they are not to erode the all-round experience.

Disney

Disney is a truly global phenomenon. We can't get away from it. But even Disney isn't immune to failure caused by market





Prada, SoHo

changes. Indeed last year in North America 50 of the Disney stores closed and another 50 are due to close this year. That's 100 stores, 25 per cent of their total. If even Disney has to change and evolve, what does that say for the rest of the sector?

Sony Metreon, San Francisco

The Metreon is adjacent to Yerba Buena Art Centre and Gardens, neighbour to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The Metreon exemplifies a new hybrid type of destination combining arts environments and programmes with shopping and eating, a multiplex and a themed visitor experience, based on the works of children's author, Maurice Sendak. It is the blurring of the edges of the area that is interesting. No longer does a contemporary art centre hold the high ground in terms of its location and environment, but rather it co-exists with its commercial competitors. From a consumer perspective this is not unusual. We don't compartmentalise our activities as we used to and, of course, imaginative destination makers don't want us to.

Potsdamer Platz, Berlin

Closer to home is Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, which was, during its construction phase, the largest building site in the world. In

1995, in response to this, Schneider und Schumacher were asked to design a spectator facility, the 'Red Box', which was erected 23 metres above ground in the middle of Potsdamer Platz. It allowed views across the whole of the Platz and offered site interpretation. At its peak it received two million visits a year. Here was a visitor destination created out of nothing more than a construction programme. A product relying on our interest in 'watching things happen'.

Contrast this with what happened recently in London, when Paternoster Square was razed to the ground. With the site cleared, a view of St Paul's from the north was available for the first time in decades, and probably the last time in a hundred years. How did the UK construction fraternity approach this dramatic opportunity? A peephole the size of a letterbox that allowed you to look across the building site at St Paul's. What a missed opportunity to create a destination, albeit temporary, of genuine uniqueness.

Prada SoHo, New York

At the other end of the continuum, and with a wonderful irony to it, is the new Prada store in New York's SoHo. Located in a building that was previously home to the Guggenheim, this fashion store is a

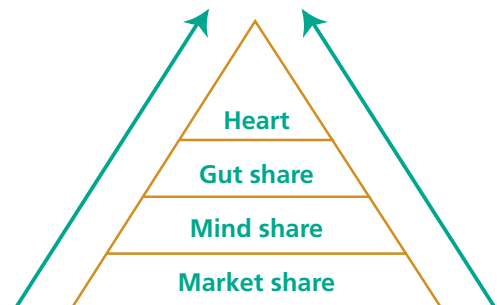
staggering blend of gallery, performance space and retail shop. Put simply, it is corporate showcase and visitor experience at the very edge of fashion. The uncertainty it encourages in the visitor is exactly what the designers and owners want. You don't know what it is, where you are, or what to do. Except, importantly, that it won't be forgotten.

Tomorrow's successful destinations

So, what are the ingredients of success for tomorrow? Many can be found in today's projects. The key to forging a successful future is the ability to look and learn from others (particularly outside of a destination's traditional niche).

The first essential ingredient is a very strong brand, and a product that delivers on its brand values. Second is exceptional quality - not only in the core offer but also in the whole way in which a destination or an attraction is managed, including high-quality public realm, high-quality services and catering (for example) to underpin the core product. Third is integration, and the creation of a holistic visitor experience from seemingly disparate elements. Fourth, commitment to investment. Over the 50-

Delivering Emotional 'Buy-in'



year life of a destination, the initial capital investment will be as little as 10 per cent of the project's total cost.

Lastly, and a point on which it is worth dwelling, is the delivery of 'emotional resonance', which is best understood with the help of a simple diagram (above). There are four tiers to this pyramid. The base, 'market share', reflects the fact that any destination must develop a profile in the market place that we understand. Beyond this, destinations need to turn that market share into 'mind share'. Mind share is the point at which awareness turns into visiting. At the next level, destinations encourage us to take home the experience, to get a 'gut share'. Gut share is about repeat visits, dwell time and loyalty. But it is at the peak of the pyramid, the 'heart', that destinations will genuinely be able to deliver sustainable strategies. This reflects the success of destinations that make consumers buy in to something so fully that they feel part of it. This is what good fashion retailers know how to achieve - what Prada can do in SoHo, and Sony at the Metreon and Sony Centres. It's about a level of customer care that declares: 'What you say here matters. We will change for you.' Once that happens, consumers feel so fully engaged that they will deliver loyalty and commitment to that product, that attraction, and that brand, beyond the

norm. This happens through affiliation, sponsorship and membership schemes. But a destination can never stop delivering in its ascent to the 'heart' if it is to be truly sustainable.

A future winner: London's South Bank

Finally, a few words about a project I have been very privileged to work on, which will be a future winner and which is already preparing to seek a position at the peak of the pyramid: the redevelopment of London's South Bank. The South Bank Centre is already Europe's largest arts complex, and the renaissance of the South Bank is about creating spaces in and around the core artistic and cultural facilities that will bring the South Bank alive for the widest possible cross-section of visitors and residents: a destination to which we will all want to keep returning time and time again.

The future success of the South Bank is founded in sound urban masterplanning and the detailed study of routes and key spaces. But more than this, there is a vision that looks to integration, imagination and quality across the board. At every point in the development process, the accent is on achieving excellence - excellence in

programming, excellence in urban design, excellence in support services. With this as a mantra, the foundations for a genuine and sustainable renaissance, of which we can be proud, are in place.

In summary, the destination success of tomorrow could be a retail outlet or a museum, but most likely it will be something of both, and the sooner that destination makers understand the sophistication of the market in which they are operating, the better the product they'll be challenged to present to consumers. As Dr Rolf Jensen says in his book, *The Dream Society*: 'Businesses need to imagine their futures the way good novelists imagine their stories.' I would say this is truer for destinations than for anyone.