Challenging the Traditional Culture Vulture: Experiential Marketing in the Cultural Tourism Sector

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Introduction

This paper investigates experiential marketing as a means of promoting cultural heritage within a highly competitive leisure and tourism marketplace. It explores the role and significance of cultural tourism as an example of a niche tourism market. Turning to heritage tourism as a segment of the cultural tourism market it goes on to examine the emergence of an experiential approach to the marketing of cultural heritage attractions. The UK tourism sector has been surprisingly slow to adopt an experiential approach, and yet those cultural heritage attractions that have moved away from a traditional product focus toward an experiential focus have succeeded in maintaining or even increasing visitor numbers in the face of adverse market conditions. They may have located –or even created- new, niche visitor segments or they may simply be engaging traditional visitor segments in new ways. The analytical basis for the evaluation is provided through a comparative case study analysis of two cultural heritage attractions based in a historic town and city, which reveals marked differences in their apparently similar experiential marketing strategies. The paper concludes by offering suggestions to practitioners considering taking forward experiential marketing as a timely and effective niche marketing strategy.

The emergence of cultural tourism

The term 'cultural tourism' is not always clear and is often used inconsistently, however the following definition is offered for the purposes of this paper:

'Tourism constructed, proffered and consumed explicitly or implicitly as cultural appreciation, either as experiences or schematic knowledge gaining.' (Prentice 2001)

Cultural tourism maybe conceptualised as one element of niche tourism (Novelli 2005), the latter defined as 'special interest, culture and/or activity based tourism, involving a small number of tourists in authentic settings'. She goes on to suggest that cultural tourism in turn comprises a number of sub or micro segments, namely tribal, religious, educational, genealogical, research and heritage tourism.

Cultural tourism is a form of tourism that has always existed but is at the same time a new tourism market reflecting changing needs and tastes(Richards

2001). It may be part of a wider mass tourism market or may have emerged alongside it. Cultural tourists may be a sub group of mass tourists seeking new experiences or may be new tourists with a distinct agenda. Recognised as a growth sector in the West European tourist industry it is also a fiercely contested niche segment comprising a number of significant sub or micro segments including the cultural heritage (Bywater 1993).

The roots of cultural tourism in the UK may be traced back as far as the eighteenth Century Grand Tour but rather than remaining the preserve of an affluent elite, cultural tourism has been increasingly popularised (Prentice 2001). This is generally attributed to factors such as increased incomes, leisure time and tourists seeking new experiences (Hughes and Allen 2005). Cultural tourism tends to be welcomed in the UK as the revenue earned helps to maintain historic sites and resources that would otherwise not be viable (Prentice 2001, Hughes 2000) and the cultural tourist is often seen as a more desirable visitor being' typically well educated, affluent and broadly travelled' (Holcomb 1999). This concurs with The Arts Council's most recent typology of visitors to arts and cultural attractions (2009) which features the 'Traditional Culture Vulture' as altruistic, discerning, comfortable, conventional, well informed and having accumulated wealth. Whilst only comprising 4% of the UK population they are nevertheless 'heavily engaged' in travel and visits to arts and cultural attractions.

Heritage tourism- a sub segment of cultural tourism

The social and economic significance of heritage tourism in the UK is clear. A recent VisitBritain report (2010) featuring research conducted across 32 countries reaffirmed that the UK's core strength as a visitor destination is in heritage, history, pageantry and culture. Heritage tourism is the UK's fifth largest industry, contributing £20.6 billion annually to the economy and supplying an estimated 195,000 (full time equivalent) jobs. (HLF 2010).

Heritage tourism focuses on the presentation and interpretation of heritage assets and resources, whereby the heritage resource is used to present 'tangible and intangible elements perceived by visitors to be part of their own personal heritage' (Poria and Ashworth 2009). Cultural tourism on the other hand, has conservation and preservation at its core and an emphasis on archiving and sustaining (ibid). This distinction is significant in terms of its implications for the adoption of a marketing approach that focuses on the visitor experience rather than the product offering, and is discussed later in relation to the case studies.

Experiential marketing in the heritage tourism sector

Marketing in the heritage tourism sector has tended to be transactional and product focused, emphasising the importance of product features and benefits-such as the collection, the site or the architecture as the basis of the visitor offering (Leighton 2007). There are a number of potential problems with this approach including the failure to recognise the role and expectations of the visitor as an active, skilled and discerning participant in the

consumption process (Bradburne 1998). Traditional models of consumption have tended to treat consumer behaviour as a rational, problem solving process rather than considering the more hedonistic reasons for visiting (McGuiggan in Manzenac, 2001). An experiential view of tourist behaviour may be a better representation of consumer choice where less tangible variables may be significant predictors of behaviour (Leighton 2007). Twenty first century visitors demand a value-for-money 'edutaining' (Robinson, 1994) and worthwhile experience but expect at the same time to be 'entertained, stimulated, emotionally and creatively challenged' (Schmitt, 2000). Moreover, in seeking an 'experience', the intensity of the experience may be more important to the visitor than the purpose (Ryan, 2002); all experiences may not be of equal validity and any experience will not necessarily do.

The adoption of an experiential approach to the marketing of heritage tourism is potentially problematic. Stakeholders as diverse as funding bodies, conservation groups, landowners, Boards of Trustees for museums and galleries, local, regional and national government and local communities may be working to different agendae. There are also innate tensions between commercial objectives and curatorial goals, between visitor access and preservation, between scholarship and entertainment. The adoption of an experiential approach is by no means straightforward, even where it has been identified as an appropriate marketing strategy.

The experiential approach and visitor numbers

Experiential marketing is defined by Pine and Gilmore (1999) as :

'when a person buys a service he purchases a set of intangible experiences carried out on his behalf. But when he buys an experience he pays to spend time enjoying a series of memorable events that a company stages to engage him in a personal way' (pp2)

This has particular resonance for tourism markets, where visitors have moved away from mass consumption toward products and services that offer authenticity, personal experience for new meaning and self actualisation (Haven-Tang C and Jones, E in Morgan, M et al 2010). Heritage attractions that have adopted an experiential approach have reaped the benefit of buoyant visitor numbers in a market that is over supplied and where visitor motivations are heterogeneous, unpredictable and voluntary (ibid).

Two such heritage attractions are analysed for the purposes of this paper, located in the historic tourist centres of York and Warwick.

Case study 1- Jorvik Viking Centre, York

Jorvik is one of the most popular visitor attractions outside London, and promises visitors 'an authentic Viking encounter'. Since 1984 Jorvik has welcomed over 16 million visitors and is both an educational charity and part of York Archaeological Trust with a mission to 'investigate the past for the benefit of present communities and future generations'. Visitors are

transported around reconstructed Viking age streets in state of the art time capsules, and enjoy a full sensory experience from the sound of the animatronic figures conversing in Norse to the smell of food and bad sanitation. Alongside the remains of one thousand year old houses and artefacts from the archaeological excavation of the site, visitors can interact with costumed interpreters and can engage in ancient Viking crafts. The visitor experience is further enhanced pre and post visit through the use of social networks such as twitter and Facebook; animations can be downloaded together with an interactive map of the site and retail therapy is part of the offer via the actual or online shop. Jorvik itself is undoubtedly a rich and unique experience, educational, entertaining and almost wholly immersive but it is much more than an experiential product or servicescape thanks to an experiential marketing approach that succeeds in integrating all stages of the visit through from planning ('take Hold of the Past') to visit (real or virtual thanks to the availability of Skype for education groups) to post visit evaluation ('Join Eric Bloodaxe's army on Facebook'). Through experiential marketing Jorvik becomes much more than a cultural tourism product in a city offering a plethora of museums, galleries, historic houses as well as an impressive castle, minster and thriving marketplace. It succeeds in accessing the heritage tourism market, and enables the visitor to co-create an individualised experience through a range of immersive appeals.

Case Study 2. Warwick Castle

A castle has stood in the picturesque town of Warwick for over 1100 years and has been inhabited continuously since the middle ages. In 1978 Warwick Castle was bought by the Tussauds group, now part of Merlin entertainment, the world's second largest leisure group after Disney and owner of a leisure portfolio that includes the London Eye, Madame Tussauds, Alton Towers, Legoland and Sealife Centres. The castle provides a wide range of visitor offerings –' Dare you visit the most haunted areas of the castle?', 'Experience the darkest, bloodiest history in the Castle dungeon…are you brave enough?' 'Relive the preparations for battle in Kingmaker' 'Meet Henry VIII and his six wives' 'Try armed combat with the Warwick Warriors' and ' 'Learn the skills of an archer'. Warwick Ghosts Alive provides a live action experience with live actors, sound, visuals and special effect lighting' A more exclusive, individualised experience is offered in the individual 'Bird of Prey Gift Experience', and there are exciting packages for the events market under the banner of 'Events Reinvented'. Pre-visit, the website offers a virtual tour of the castle, a draggable child friendly map and online games. In short, there is a vast array of experiences on offer and these are conveyed through strong and emotive experiential marketing appeals. Warwick Castle succeeds in positioning itself as an exciting leisure and tourism experience, going beyond the cultural tourism market into the realm of the visitor seeking a thrilling leisure experience.

Comparative analysis

Both Jorvik and Warwick Castle have the potential to attract the traditional cultural tourism visitor, as both are cited in historic tourism centres with rich and diverse cultural heritage offerings. Both attract considerable numbers of international tourists, York as a prime visitor destination and Warwick because it forms part of the 'Shakespeare Country' brand. Jorvik conforms to Poria and Ashworth's (2009) notion of cultural tourism discussed earlier with its focus on conservation and preservation, but has also used presentation and interpretation to good effect to access the heritage tourism sector. Jorvik provides an authentic archaeological offering, but goes on to successfully differentiate itself from similar heritage attractions through experiential marketing. Not only is the product itself an experiential visitor offering, but it uses experiential marketing appeals to engage a wide range of visitors beyond the archaeology enthusiast. This is important for a charity that needs to develop audiences in order to secure its future, and that of the York Archaeological Trust whose work it supports.

Warwick Castle also succeeds in differentiating itself from its competitors through experiential marketing. Whilst it has a fascinating and colourful history, its primary focus is not on conservation and preservation but on interpretation and presentation, placing it firmly in the heritage tourism market rather than the cultural tourism market (Poria and Ashworth 2009). Warwick Castle targets the heritage tourist through experiential marketing appeals but whereas Jorvik uses experiential marketing to broaden its *educational* appeal Warwick Castle uses it to create a series of unforgettable leisure experiences that are fundamentally about *entertainment.*

But have these visitor attractions located new visitor segments or have they created new, niche segments? Both have recognised the need to move beyond the cultural tourist, the 'traditional Culture Vulture' and a conservation and preservation focus toward an interpretation and presentation focus that will attract the heritage tourist. Jorvik has chosen to provide an education and entertainment experience that brings the visitor back to the core values of conservation and presentation intrinsic to its mission, whereas Warwick Castle pushes the visitor to more and more thrilling experiences that are more about fun and entertainment and less about education. Significantly, both organisations appear to have succeeded in locating experiential marketing strategies appropriate to their organisational values and culture.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the use of experiential marketing within the cultural tourism sector, and within heritage tourism as a niche or sub segment of cultural tourism. The context for this discussion has been provided through an analysis of the emergence of cultural tourism and then in turn of heritage tourism and its economic and social significance. The need for the heritage tourism sector to move beyond a transactional, product based approach to marketing has been argued and the potential for adopting an experiential, consumption based approach presented. Comparative case study analysis of two UK visitor attractions reveals that both have succeeded in locating and accessing niche visitor segments within the heritage tourism market, albeit in

markedly different ways consistent with their contrasting organisational mission, values, culture and goals.

It is evident that tourism managers are in a unique position to apply the principles of experiential marketing to their activities since their product is almost always experiential (Williams 2006), but there is an even stronger case for heritage tourism managers, since visitors interact with the interpretation and presentation of the site to create their own individualised experiences. Experiential marketing presents a unique opportunity for heritage organisations to capture new, emergent visitor segments. In an increasingly unpredictable and competitive tourism environment the challenge is to find a suitable framework for doing so.

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