

No nay never, no nay never no more

*'No nay never, no nay never no more
Will I cross your threshold, nay never no more'¹*

This traditional ballad encapsulates the customer response that we all aim to avoid. Using a wide range of examples, David McCaskey identifies and analyses the service 'experience' issues essential to hospitality managers' thinking and as vital for student courses as finance, human resources or strategy. Customer response determines the success or failure of a contemporary hospitality operation.

Fundamental to any service is the promise to deliver. When the 'experience' we provide and continue to provide fulfils that promise, we engender trust. This is a prerequisite to the development of a long-term relationship leading in turn to customer loyalty and extending the possibility of achieving the lifetime value of that customer.

Central to this is the 'experience', the various components of which will be identified and analysed here. Pine and Gilmore welcome 'the emerging experience economy' which they see as

a distinct economic offering, as different from services as services are from goods... Consumers unquestionably desire experiences and more and more businesses are responding by explicitly designing and promoting them.²

The model they promote is the 'progression of economic value', shown in Figure 1.

Services, like goods before them, have become commoditised, leaving experiences to become the next step in the progression of economic value. So this determines that the next competitive battleground lies in staging experiences. An experience occurs

when a company intentionally uses services as the stage, and goods as props, to engage customers in a way that creates a memorable event. Commodities are fungible (interchangeable), goods tangible, services intangible and experiences memorable.³

The quality and nature of the experience provided is so evidently at the crux of business success in the hospitality industry, as in all service/experience industries,

including education. Many HND and degree students will have significant operational responsibility for the orchestration of experiences in their first management positions following graduation. So our students are encouraged to disaggregate, analyse and grade both the experiences they currently provide (as a majority of them work) as well as their own consumption experiences. A truly memorable experience may be one to relive, revisit and recommend. At the other end of the continuum they may emerge with the negatives 'no nay never' and roundly condemn the experience to all who will listen. It is essential that they are able to isolate the components or factors which in combination

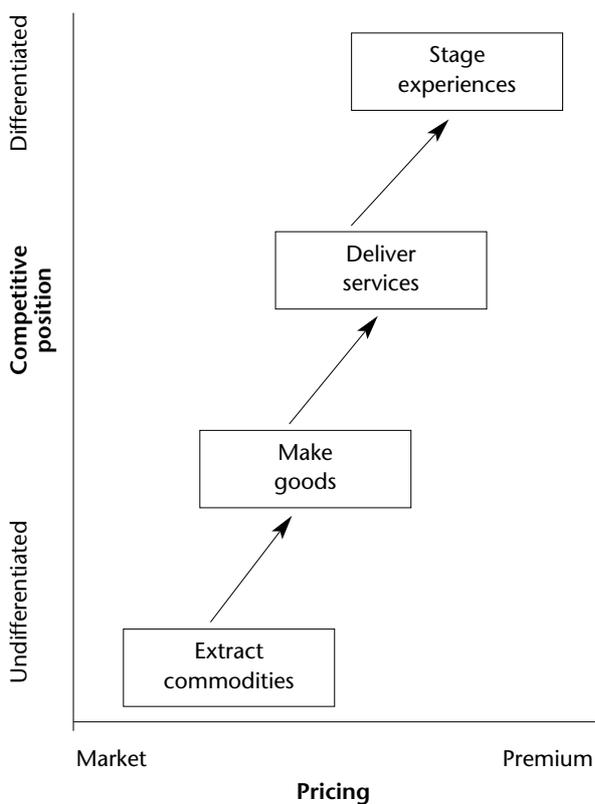
Businesses are in a new type of consumer relationship, a contract between informed, consenting adults

produced these negative and positive outcomes.

Increasingly, stages of experiences are taking a formulaic approach enabling the experience to be branded, e.g. Disney, Centre Parcs and TGI Fridays. To these companies, the brand is a value creator; to the customer it should represent a promise of fulfilment in function and performance over time. Some recent research from the Henley Centre on 'Planning for Consumer Change' exposes a loss of faith in many long established brands. They report

...the disappearance of the inert consumer and the emergence of the Active Trustee consumer who forms an attachment to innovative consumer brands but is sceptical of

Figure 1 The progression of economic value



*institutions. They are outspoken and will actively support or disparage brands based on their consumer experience.*⁴

Such Active Trusters are far more likely to trust new brands that win their mind space and which, through constant innovation (often consumer-led), continue to meet their ever-increasing expectations and always deliver the brand-promised experience. Paul Edwards, CEO of the Henley Centre, identifies the essence of consumer change thus:

Brands and businesses can no longer tell consumers what

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*is good for them. Businesses are in a new type of consumer relationship, a contract between informed, consenting adults.*⁵

Progressively we are faced with more and more choices, especially in ways that we might spend our discretionary income. With greater choice comes a greater likelihood of consumer indecision. As a result, brands have to work harder than ever before to influ-

ence consumer decision-making. At a simple level a brand could be defined as:

A recognised name, term, symbol, smell, taste, sound, marque or design which identifies the specific product, service or experience attributes of one seller and differentiates them from those of a competitor.

However, inevitably there are complex value associations and benefits of brands related to the attributes of value, choice, convenience, relevance, reassurance, satisfaction and status. A successful brand is a trusted brand. All the writers on branding conclude that successful brands have a unique point of differentiation from the competition as well as values that the customer segment really wants. This added value allows the company to add profit to their bottom line and ultimately increase stakeholder value. A strong brand is all-pervasive, and brand owners and all connected with its delivery must live the brand ethos. If, for instance, we are in the business of staging memorable and enjoyable experiences, that is our strength and our brand will decay whenever the experience is not up to scratch.

To provide a framework for this analysis, the following concept and model will be used: the extended marketing mix with the emphasis on the additional three 'P's—people, process, and physical evidence—set into the context of those well-established characteristics which separate products from services, as indeed services from experiences—intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability.

1 People

In his latest book that master of brand-thinking, Leslie de Cheratony declares that

Today's environment is one of paradoxes. Brands are complex entities, yet can be simplified to considering them as clusters of functional and emotional values.

Sustaining a brand's competitive advantage is one of the goals of managers, yet with rapid advances in technology it is increasingly difficult to sustain a brand's unique functional values. Consequently more attention is focused on striving to devise and sustain emotional values...

*...to break away from these paradoxes, new thinking has emerged where companies are beginning to recognise that staff are the embodiment of the brand, providing a welcome difference not just through what the customer receives (functional values) but also how they receive it (emotional values). A sustainable competitive advantage is that of an appropriate organisational culture reflecting the aggregate values of employees.*⁶

Our focus must be on defining an externally-centred promise and in considering how staff inside the organisation can be orchestrated to ensure commitment to delivering it. Increasingly staff are being recruited not just for their functional knowledge. Prospective employers want to know how much their values align with the values of the brand they will be supporting. De Cheratony finds that

customers are more sophisticated and can see through staff who pay lip service to a brand's values, doing little more than acting out a branding role. They welcome interaction with staff who genuinely believe in what a brand stands for and are committed to its delivery.⁷

Staff who become both the voice for and the epitome of the brand can be found in the UK in Prêt a Manger. Prêt have just been selected by *Fortune* magazine as one of the top ten European companies to work for, alongside such high-status luminaries as Porsche and Morgan Stanley. Prêt are found to have

the most pumped up workforce in Europe. Here the unofficial slogan is 'let's have fun and get the work done'.

The company has created an environment where their staff are

especially appreciative of the chain's commitment to quality—from its use of fresh ingredients (no preservatives or additives) to its shiny aluminium décor. Everything has to be spot-on-perfect.

One employee compared it to other employment in her experience

where there were lots of rules and the companies were only interested in what gave the basic result. This really annoyed her and she was now delighted to work for Prêt where 'everyone tries so hard to do their best, looking for perfection, and as that's what is expected, everyone goes that extra mile'.⁸

Prêt a Manger currently sells over \$1,500 of sand-

wiches per week to Buckingham Palace and regularly delivers lunch to Tony Blair in Downing Street—yet another source of pride.

When Scott Hospitality-owned and Bass-operated Holiday Inns transferred their management contracts to Whitbread to operate as Marriott Hotels little was known in the UK as to what the Marriott brand stood for. To clearly differentiate the brand and to inform potential customers and staff, Marriott embarked on a very successful series (market research supports this) of double-page spread advertisements in the broadsheets. The series entitled 'That's what we call empowerment' showed staff finding ABCD solutions (Above and Beyond the Call of Duty) to customer problems. This was a

first in the UK and created much impact achieving objectives for both increased recognition and an understanding of this new brand's values. In the late 1970s Forte Hotels, recognising the significance of these interpersonal encounters, made their first foray into TV advertising with the pledge to provide 'The Biggest Smile in Europe' followed closely by the enigmatic promise of 'A Certain Smile'. Neither of these could be

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delivered as the staff preconditions (standards of employment, commitment to the brand) could not be met. In turn this led to much scepticism and distrust, not dissimilar to the reaction of Sainsburys staff to the ill-fated 'Value to Shout About' campaign extolled by 'market trader' John Cleese. It was also in the late 1970s that British Rail launched their equally inept campaign 'Let the Train Take the Strain' when it was (is still) tak-

ing the train which creates the strain.

There can be no doubt of the absolute importance of people interaction: it can be a major contributor to both satisfaction and dissatisfaction. It can lift a good experience into an entirely memorable experience. Our leadership and exemplary behaviour should lead to the best outcomes.

2 Process

This issue may be best summed up as: are our processes user-friendly and frustration-free? How easy is it to reserve? To book in? To check-out? An illustration from Marriott will suffice. Their research showed that the first ten minutes of a guest's stay determined whether the customer would expect to find the rest of the stay enjoyable and the likelihood of their returning or not. For many of us, the first two minutes (some say 30 seconds) is enough. Using their guest database, Marriott developed a First Ten programme that greatly facilitated the check-in process. Follow-up research showed how well this was received and thus a 'seamless' check-

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in was introduced to all hotels in the group. It continues to be refined.

In our cash-rich, time-poor society, taking stultifying bureaucracy out of the process for travellers is a main consideration to both providers and users alike. Technological solutions like voice recognition and the current experiment by Virgin Atlantic using iris recognition to speed up passport control, both show great promise for industry-wide adoption.

3 Physical evidence

Because services are intangible, customers often rely on tangible cues or physical evidence. This includes all those substantial aspects of our offering which can be seen, heard, touched, tasted, smelt, felt or sensed. Zeitham and Bitner carry out a thorough dissection of what they refer to as the Servicescape. They find that

...many aspects of the physical environment serve as explicit and implicit signals that communicate about the place to its users. Signs displayed on the exterior and interior are examples of explicit communication. Adequate signs have been shown to reduce perceived crowding and stress. Other environmental symbols and artefacts may communicate less directly than signs, giving implicit cues to users about the meaning of the—— and norms and

expectations for behaviour in the place. Quality of materials used in construction, floor coverings, items displayed can all create symbolic meaning and create an overall aesthetic impression...

...it is without doubt that the servicescape provided can have a profound effect on both customers and employees.⁹

For my students, this is often summed up as the WOW factor, graded from 1 to 10 (with 10 the best). Sadly my students don't often come across places which make them go WOW. Too many are lack-lustre, fatigued, 'curled up at the edges' places which, if given a little investment and lots of TLC, could be restored to excite and delight the visitor. What is important is that the students are able to evaluate what enriches or detracts from the encounter.

In their humorous deconstruction of themed pubs, Brown and Patterson capture this aspect fully.

In Themelandia, capturing a sense of reality is very important, as the designers of such establishments make clear. But, as authenticity is unavailable to the themesters, the spirit, or air, of reality is evoked through plenitude. That is to say, reality is created by means of an exaggerated attempt to capture 'everything' about the theme in question. The imaginers of themed environments, in short, seek to evoke Irishness, Americanness, Nineteen-

Seventiesness, through the sheer proliferation of artefacts, objects, knick-knacks and memorabilia. Every available signifier and vaguely relevant referent is thrown into the mix and, while the result may strike many as a grotesque caricature, it is necessary to include 'everything' in order to convey a sense of (pseudo-) plenitude and create a (counterfeit) cornucopia. Themed environments are often described as imitations, as simulacra, as parodies, as superficial tissues of ill-chosen quotations, as preposterous monuments to post-modern artifice. This is true; it cannot be denied. But they are also much more than that, insofar as the themes attempt to capture the essence, the core, the kernel of the concept concerned. They are epitomisations not imitations, syntheses not simulacra, the pith rather than parodies, the quintessence rather than quotations. They are the apotheosis of the artificial, the kitsch, and the ersatz. Arche-typecasting prevails in the Hollywoodesque theme factory.

Above and beyond abundance and inauthenticity, themeing is intriguing on account of its retrospective bent. A crucial point to bear in mind about theme pubs—and theme environments generally—that they are unerringly retro, a repository of times past. The Scottish, Australian, English or Irish pub is not a representation of contemporary conditions in the countries concerned (polluted, grid-

locked, dilapidated, etc) but an attempted evocation of the way things were, or how the designers imagined them to be. Thus the typical Irish theme pub, with its garish green décor, pseudo-Gaelic invocations, 'thousand welcomes' doormats, shamrock-inscribed fittings, peat-burning fireplace, freshly brewed stout, wide range of whiskeys, conspiratorial hints of under-the-counter-poteen, and general air of pseudo-hiperno bonhomie, cannot be considered indicative of today's Ireland, yesterday's Ireland, or any other Ireland this side of *The Quiet Man*. Irish theme pubs, in point of fact, are commercially-motivated commodification of the Celtic Revival of the late-nineteenth century, which was itself a politically-motivated commodification—an invented tradition—of half-baked Irish pre-history...¹⁰

The epitome of Oirishness, nonetheless, is Waxy O'Connor's opened by Glenora Leisure in 1996. An 80,000 sq ft labyrinth in deepest, darkest Soho, Waxy's is the superpub to end all superpubs, with its warren of neo-Celtic drinking spaces. Here a fake pharmacy; there a kitsch chapel; over there a replica-spirit grocer. A pulpit for storytelling, copious sepia-hued photographs and wall-mounted displays of copper utensils help complete the picture, albeit the establishment's centrepiece is a 200 year-old lightning-blasted tree trunk, which was painstakingly shipped over from Erin's craggy shores. Excessive perhaps, extravagant unquestionably and doubtless environmentally unfriendly, but the bottom line is that Waxy's sells over 45,000 drinks per week, making it one of Britain's busiest pubs. So successful has the concept proved, that two additional branches—or should that be trunks?—have since been opened in Glasgow's West End and Fifth Avenue, New York.

New York, to be sure, to be sure, is hardly a stranger to Irish pubs, nor are most of the world's major cities. Ireland's reputation as a friendly, forthcoming, fond-of-a-drink nation, where celebration, conviviality and the craic come first, is proving eminently exportable.

4 Intangibility

This is the most distinguishing characteristic, which separates products from services and in turn from experiences. A service becomes an experience through its performance.

As managers, we orchestrate a range of tangibles and intangibles to create an experience, a performance. We know when we have generated a buzz of excitement and contentment, and equally we know when the atmosphere is flat and critical. Experiences are most often subjectively judged, based on a set of expecta-

tions and perceptions used to evaluate the performance delivered and which inform an opinion. Because the risk in purchasing may be high, strong brand images may be developed to assure the consumer. As Richard Teare suggests

*These may engender a positive attitude thus resolving some of the risk and anxiety of purchase.*¹¹

The smallest cue can aid in the creation of a unique experience. When a restaurant host says, 'Your table is ready' no particular cue is given. But when a Rainforest Café host declares, 'Your adventure is about to begin,' it sets the stage for something special.

In his critique of Las Vegas, Russell Beck fully identifies with his orchestration to create a memorable experience.

Dateline Las Vegas. Megacorp recently announced plans for a new, entirely below ground, hotel/casino/theme park here to be called 'Hell'....

Hell. The resort ties in nicely with the city's annual Helldorado celebration as well as its well-entrenched association with the mortal sins of greed, lust, drunken-

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*ness, debauchery, and bad taste. With the catchy ad slogans Megacorp is trumpeting—'Go to Hell', 'You'll be Dying to Get Here', 'The Devil Made Me Do It' and 'Damned Good Fun'—Hell seems destined to become the latest and greatest attraction in this city of excess. With Hell's promised spectacle of ever-flaming fire and brimstone, the Mirage's periodically erupting volcano is likely to seem tame. Planned theme rides like The Drop of Doom, From Here to Eternity, and The Bottomless Pit promise much more profound and frightening adventures than the roller coasters and log flumes of other Strip resorts. What's a wild-wave pool when you can swim in boiling oil? What's a barge on the Nile when you can be ferried across the River Styx by Caron? And what's gambling for money when you can play 'You Bet Your Life'? If the Secrets of the Luxor appeal to those fascinated with New Age occultism, imagine the Satanic possibilities of titillating torture in Hell. Demonic and devilishly costumed employees will be fittingly called the croupiers from hell, the cocktail waitresses from hell, and the pit bosses from hell.*¹²

It is an interesting exercise to draw a line between physical evidence and the intangible qualities. Critics might suspect hard-nosed managers, cautious about the intangibles they are seeking to deliver, of trying to

guarantee their presence for the customer by piling on the tangibles.

5 Inseparability

This is the customer's involvement and active participation in the delivery and consumption of the experience and may be a major component of its memorability. Two television advertisements captured this element well. Forte Travelodge depicted the business stay-er arriving with his energy battery almost depleted. Through the period of his stay, check-in, bath, dinner, sleep, breakfast and check out, we witnessed his gradual restoration to becoming fully charged-up, ready for the next day's business. Swallow Hotel's 'stripper', peeling off his business suit as he walks through the hotel

The potential for variability in the experience delivered is something that taxes all managers

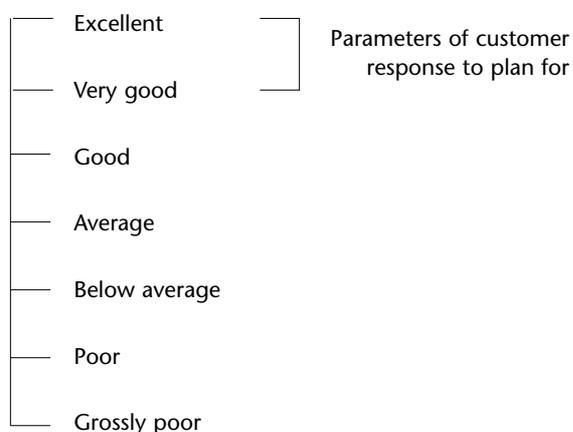
and diving into the swimming pool, embodied the 'work, rest and play' potential of a stay in their hotels.

6 Heterogeneity

No two performances can ever be the same. The potential for variability in the experience delivered is something that taxes all managers. The concept of a brand *gestalt*, i.e. a perceived, organised whole where the outcome is more than the sum of its parts, can be usefully applied here.

Through deconstruction and perfecting each of the components it becomes possible to guarantee a very good time where occasional underperformance in one or two factors still gives tolerable variation. However, in most cases, an excellent time will still be the norm. In turn, this level of consistent service delivery differ-

Figure 2 Parameters to plan for



entiates a brand from much of the mediocrity that prevails.

Inevitably, a brand which takes this approach builds in flexibility and has contingency plans to be triggered when circumstances outside its control create a service malfunction. Thus effective and efficient service recovery is ensured.

7 Perishability

In one fundamental source of their difference from products, services cannot be stored. Unsold rooms tonight or unoccupied covers for tonight's dinner represent a perished opportunity, now past their sell-by date and time. Demand from our different market segments is variable. Thus to maximise the use of resources, hotels and pub/restaurants have had to develop chameleon-type qualities. For example, the lighting, the tempo, the beat change throughout the hours of operation, creating an alternating ambience to meet the differing customer needs. Perhaps this is best shown by the changes required in hotels to meet the very different needs of the weekday corporate guest to those of the weekend bargain break-er.

8 The holistic experience

In Figure 3, Hill et al have embraced every aspect of the delivery of a Royal Opera House, Covent Garden performance. In hospitality we could readily adapt this model as a night at the Ministry of Sound or Fabric and equally to a wedding breakfast, a Bar Mitzvah or indeed the planned celebrations for the Queen's Golden Jubilee in May this year.

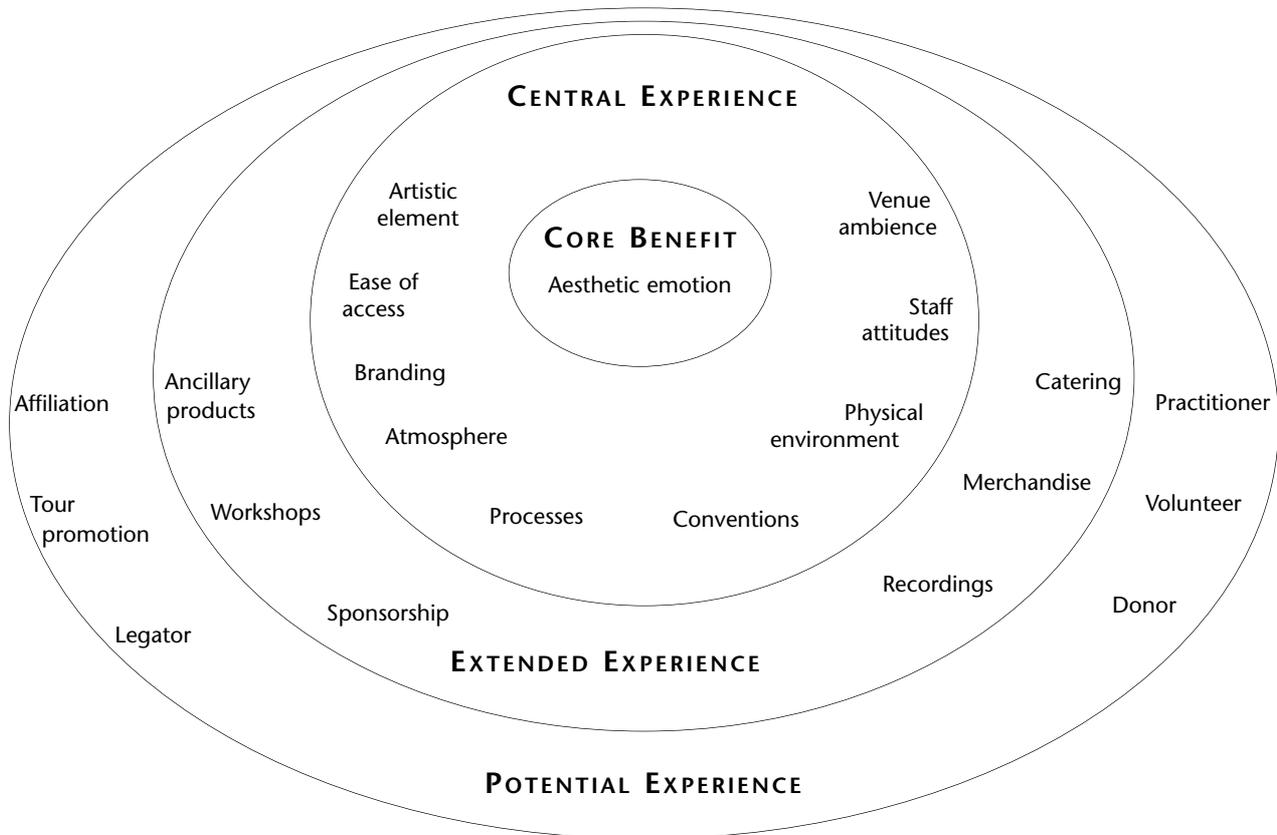
The controversy surrounding the Millennium Dome sparked interest in a team of Oxford Brookes lecturers. They carried out a programme of quantitative and qualitative research during the fortnight 14–30 January 2000 to assess visitor opinion of the Dome experience. This study is an exemplar for the analysis of an experience, essential reading for all students.¹⁴

Their recommendations, which were fully taken up and implemented by Dome management (NMEC) centred on the need to deal with basic visitor requirements, e.g. booking, queues, visitor information, rest points, family tickets and extended opening hours. They also found that

There was a need for a closer match between the expectations generated by marketing and the reality of the experience.

They established that there was an underlying feeling that the Dome's promise of 'The Most Amazing Day Out Ever' did not live up to what was being delivered.

Figure 3 The holistic experience



Source: Elizabeth Hill, Catherine O'Sullivan and Terry O'Sullivan¹³

Most respondents found the Dome to be 'a good day out' with over 75% prepared to recommend the Dome to friends and relatives.

On establishing a closer match between the expectation and the reality, i.e. an interesting and good fun day, but far from amazing, the strap line was eventually changed to

You've got a mind of your own; take it to the Dome.

This endorses the main thrust of this article. An experience is a promise to deliver and that promise must be fulfilled and never over-promised.

Conclusion

The emergent 'prosumer' (an educated professional consumer) has developed the expectation that experience-delivery will consistently match the promise made. Through this the service-provider will engender trust on which a long-term relationship may be built, which may eventually convert to loyalty.

Increasingly when we analyse audiences and try to accommodate them via traditional segmentation

methods, we see that these methods further fragment the consumer and the unique and different requirements of each individual come to the fore. This meeting of individual needs is implicit in the promise etched in stone at the Beverly Wiltshire Hotel *Mea Casa Est Sua Casa*, (my house is your home).

It is for these reasons that the teaching of the analytical and critical evaluation techniques, imbued through an understanding of the range of components which grade experiences must be central to the teaching of hospitality students.

For degree and HND courses, the study of consumer behaviour should be a core final year subject of, at very least, equal standing to these to her essentials of strategy, human resource management and finance. Francis Buttle captured this need best when he declared

*The more we know about the who, the what, the where, the when, the why and the how of consumer behaviour, then the probability of marketing success is enhanced.*¹⁵

Within this decade, the service-centric hospitality industry will concentrate on the staging of experiences which generate and perpetuate its relationship with the consumer. The industry will become even more

intensely competitive. Technological advances and their greater use by the public will also drive changes making it easier than ever before for providers to develop a personal and interactive relationship with their customers. Other drivers of change include demand-side issues such as an ageing population, rising affluence and time pressures.

Hospitality experience suppliers will need to set themselves apart to survive. This will mean brand-building, delivering consistency around a defined set of expectations, thus generating consumer trust and loyalty.

In a saturated and highly competitive market, a differentiated and coherent brand positioning will be essential. Consumer expectations will continue to rise and as more and more consumers exercise their desire for control, tailored, bespoke experiences will become the rule, not the exception. For examples, please visit www.redletterdays.co.uk or www.keithprowse.com.

- ❑ Staff, who will be a key manifestation of the brand experience, will find themselves facing new and challenging roles and responsibilities.
- ❑ The days of brand building defined simply by awareness, and driven by marketing alone, are over.
- ❑ Those companies that thrive will be the ones that create the most compelling and consistent brand experience for their customer. These organisations will build their brands in conjunction with their customers, and be supported by all parts of the organisation.
- ❑ The depth of the relationship between the brand and its customers will be the foundation for ongoing success and sustained competitive advantage.¹⁶

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