Davis Young

served for many years as president of US-based Edward Howard & Co., America's oldest independent public relations firm. He has been recognised by the Public Relations Society of America for the year's single finest public relations programme. He is author of the award-winning book 'Building Your Company's Good Name', published by AMACOM, the American Management Association.

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Public relations for leisure properties after September 11: Opportunities if operators see them and seize them

Davis Young

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Abstract

The current business recession and the events of September 11 may actually lead to new business opportunities for the leisure industry. Venues that appeal to families, promote good family fun and can show they are safe have potential to prosper in a very difficult environment. These are issues the author addressed in a November 2001 talk, 'Building Your Property's Good Name In A Scary New World', presented at the annual meeting of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions in Orlando and elaborated upon in this paper. The author's perspectives are taken from observations as a long-time public relations adviser, including counselling the ownership groups of major professional sports teams and also the management staff of a large and successful arena.

INTRODUCTION

In the months before September 11, one could hardly pick up a newspaper or watch TV news without reading or seeing stories about a slowing US economy and, indeed, a slowing global economy. According to the US Congressional Budget Office's 'Economic Outlook' published just a month before September 11, 'the slowdown that began during the second half of 2000 deepened in the first half of this year (2001) more than forecasters had expected'.¹ Whenever such conditions begin to prevail, there is potential negative ripple effect for many industries. Leisure is no exception. Consumers start to ask questions such as 'Can I afford to take this trip or go to this attraction? If money is tight, should I spend it on fun and games?'

Clearly, the economy was not friendly to travel, lodging or entertainment before that awful day when terrorists brought the World Trade Center to the ground. According to the UK Office for National Statistics, overseas visitors to the UK fell by 9 per cent in June 2001. Moreover, leisure industry revenues dropped by £600m in the first six months of 2001.² The human tragedy of September 11 translated into significant additional business issues for the broad leisure industry already impacted by poor economic conditions.³

Davis Young
Edward Howard & Co.
1360 East 9th Street, 7th Floor
Cleveland, OH 44114-1716, USA
Tel: +1 216 781 2400
Fax: +1 216 781 0025
E-mail:
dyoung@edwardhoward.com

SUDDENLY A NEW ISSUE — SAFETY

What September 11 did was add the new issue of personal safety to an existing concern about the rapidly deteriorating economy. For example, a number of stories began appearing in US newspapers and on television talking about potential targets for terrorism. Buildings. Nuclear power plants. Bridges. Tunnels. Chemical plants. And, yes, Disney World. One news story contained this chilling first sentence: 'Terrorist groups have surveyed at least five sites for possible attacks in the United States, including Disney World, Disneyland and the Sears Tower in Chicago, according to three internal government reports.'⁴ Likewise, *USA Today*, in a major front-page article, quoted a young terrorist recruit as saying, 'I recommend [suicide] operations against [amusement] parks like Disney'.⁵ Suddenly, consumers began asking another question. Is it safe to go there?

Personal safety

Particularly with respect to the USA, the issue of personal safety is somewhat of a new concern. It will be quite a while before Americans learn to accommodate this issue as their new reality. And every time there is another safety incident such as the early November plane crash in New York, there will be profound implications for public venues and attractions. The media feeding frenzy will no doubt be repeated.

Whether or not a new safety incident is caused by terrorists is a moot point. The mere fact that it occurs will be sufficient to send a bad message to leisure customers. This is certainly true with respect to the USA. One might reasonably conclude it is true anywhere. Serious safety incidents in any country will very likely have a negative impact on consumer confidence everywhere going forward.

Looking ahead

How should owners and operators proceed in this very challenging environment? Despite a poor economy and highly visible safety issues, there is much reason for optimism in the leisure industry. People still want to have fun. In fact, a strong case can be made that they need to have fun now more than ever.

PUTTING ON A BRIGHT FACE

All leisure professionals should plan now for how they will react if another bad event occurs. But, they should also be seeing the glass as half full and figuring out how to fill the other half. Seeing the glass as half empty only feeds into negative thinking. There is enough of that already. Leave negative thinking to others. Of all industries, leisure needs to put on a bright face. One suspects this applies equally to the USA as well as to countries everywhere.

Research in the USA by RoperStarch Worldwide indicates the public sees three business categories as most likely to be impacted by the events of September 11: airlines, travel and entertainment.⁶ As readers of this journal learned, that prediction became what is often referred to as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Issues confronting readers of this paper are large indeed and could easily be overwhelming: September 11 was not a good day

for the leisure industry. But within the fallout from that day lies opportunity. Looking again to RoperStarch Worldwide research, one can see the beginnings of that opportunity in their findings that people are looking to reconnect with families, and that short family-oriented trips should be encouraged.⁷ One might ask if there has ever been a better time to offer wholesome family entertainment. The challenges to owner-operators are these:

- get families to come
- give them reasons to recommend the venue to others
- make the experience so good that they come back again.

Focus on details

In those three challenges, one can identify another piece of the opportunity puzzle. Make the operations the very best they can be. It is the author's observation over many years that winning organisations do the little things well. That is how they build reputation. Think about doing a handful of little things just a bit better and the difference that might make. It might not even cost any money. It might, on the other hand, generate new revenues. Doing those little things better can make the difference with respect to whether or not customers elect to go to an attraction or a competitive venue.

CONSUMERS HAVE ALWAYS HAD CHOICES

Movies. Plays. Concerts. Restaurants. Museums. Sporting events. Recreation. The list of choices is virtually endless. Today, one sees new and attractive additions to the list — the Internet, cable television and video games to name just three. Suddenly now, however, there is a new choice: stay home. This plays into both key issues — the economy and terrorism. Why would somebody want to stay home at precisely the time they most need to get out and enjoy themselves?

- Fear. 'Will I be putting my family and myself in harm's way by going to public places? And if I have to get on an airplane or other public transportation to get to a venue, how safe will that be?' (In the USA, venues most subject to the fear factor are those that are best known, such as Disney or Universal. High visibility normally equates with business success. In this instance, visibility may, in fact, further raise images of risk.)
- Inertia. 'In light of everything that is going on, is it really worth the effort to go to this attraction?'
- Tight money. 'Will I receive enough value to justify the cost?'
- Time. 'Will it take longer to get in and get around because security has suddenly become tighter?'

The public relations director for a large US theme park tells the story of how a customer contracted meningitis two weeks after visiting her venue. Despite the fact the local health officials told

reporters the meningitis could not have come from anything that happened at this park, reporters had a field day speculating. It is interesting to contemplate the negative business impact that would have been caused by the media fallout if meningitis instead had been anthrax.

SEIZE THE MOMENT

Like it or not — at least within the USA — many people have apparently concluded (hopefully only temporarily) that it is more hassle and less fun to go to public venues than it used to be. Said a trade publication:

‘More than any other industry the \$582 billion travel and tourism business was economically devastated by the horrendous events of September 11. The already weak pre-September 11 economy was dealt a brutal blow by the terrorist attacks. Over 100,000 people in the industry immediately lost their jobs, and the Travel Industry Association of America predicts that 453,000 jobs directly related to travel and tourism will have been lost by the end of 2001.’⁸

Said the same publication, ‘The International Air Transport Association forecasts that the international air industry may lose \$7.5 billion in business during 2001. International travel from the U.S. dipped a staggering 33% during the month of October.’⁹

Major challenges

For the leisure industry, there appear to be two fundamental problems. The first relates to safety concerns within venues *per se*. The second relates to travelling to the venues. Overlaying everything is a business recession. In the face of this, there are two fundamental steps the leisure industry simply must take to turn its fortunes around.

- Support local attractions. Encourage customers to get out of their houses and have fun.
- Support more distant attractions. Encourage consumers to get on airplanes.

Building on these two fundamental steps, one finds some immediate opportunities to develop business.

Particularly those attractions and ancillary businesses that are largely summer-dependent have had time to recalibrate their marketing programmes for the summer season. The process of doing this should have energised and enthused staff.

Local and regional attractions should be in a growth environment as they find new and better ways to appeal to the family market. Look at ways to turn day-trippers into two-day-trippers. One obvious way to do this is through price incentives. Another is to increase the advertising budget to reach more people more often. Special promotions to attract multiple generations of a

family, cooperative promotions with other properties in the area and effectively publicising new or improved aspects of a venue would be additional ways to accomplish that. All of these address key issues — travel, costs, family connection.

Safer flying

Despite the awful November plane crash outside JFK Airport, it will become increasingly apparent as security protection measures are added that this may be the safest time to fly in many years. National or more distant attractions — major theme parks, international resorts, distant nature attractions such as national parks — that rely on air service should benefit if they promote cooperatively with the airlines.

One does not have to read research reports to know that September 11 has provided a real wake-up call for everyone with respect to honouring and treasuring family relationships. People want to be together. People want to do things together. This is the market the leisure industry serves. This is a moment of exceptional opportunity for the industry.

All about fun

The leisure industry serves that market with fun. Especially now, people want and need fun. Critical to business success will be how one promotes and delivers that fun. Has there ever been a better time to do that? In particular, look at the venue's website to make sure it supports fun. Here are examples. Dixie Landin' (www.dixielandin.com) loops fun accordion music on its main Web page and gives a virtual ride or 360° tour of many of its attractions such as the 'Rajin' Cajun' coaster. Kiddieland (www.kiddieland.com) greets visitors with 'boiiing' and 'spoiing' sound effects and a cartoon cow blowing animated bubbles. It has an animated barber pole just like Hersheypark's website (www.hersheypark.com). Hersheypark's site has the added hook of making one hungry.

SIX STEPS TO GREATER SUCCESS

This challenging environment in which leisure professionals all live and do business reinforces the need to take six specific steps to be more successful.

- Do more listening. What are customers saying? If customers are fearful, understand why. Ask what they need to know to feel safe again. Are leisure professionals really current on their listening with the people who determine their success?
- Make sure employees are all sending a consistent message. Reputation starts with employees and builds up and out from there. Are employees effective ambassadors with the venue's customers?
- Identify problems and fix them before they turn into public relations nightmares. Visit problems before they visit the venue. A good example of this is the issue of cleanliness. Cleanliness — or lack thereof — is a message in and of itself about the venue. One can take steps to address cleanliness that cost absolutely no

- money. What has the venue done recently to identify and correct a potential problem, such as a less than clean facility?
- Step up training programmes. Set clear expectations. Make training and retraining central to the company culture. (A legendary US-based retailer has been putting all of its people through additional customer service training. They are doing this because they recognise that frayed feelings by nervous customers place a heightened premium on excellent customer service.) If the venue agrees, what is it doing with its training programmes?
 - Help the chief executive officer be the right reputation role model. If the CEO is not doing the right things, who will? For example, the CEO of the well-known US property Cedar Point always picks up trash he sees when he walks that park — which he does all the time. Not surprisingly, his staff and employees reach down to pick up trash, too. Is the venue's CEO setting a good example?
 - Get it right with the media. Every organisation with potentially high visibility needs to understand how to work effectively with reporters. The key to the term 'media relations' is relations, not media. Every day, there are examples of organisations that practise good media relations to accomplish their business objectives. This requires a commitment from the top, training on how to work with reporters, and a serious effort at relationship building with news outlets. Is the organisation sufficiently focused on this issue to protect the venue's good name?

COMMUNICATING AT A CHALLENGING TIME

Recently, the author's firm published an advisory for clients recommending how they might communicate in the challenging post-September 11 environment.¹⁰ Several of the points in that advisory have great relevance to the leisure industry.

- Identify successes. Especially with employees, celebrate positive achievements. Celebrate new employees. Celebrate the promotion of current ones. Celebrate employees who have served customers in great ways. Celebrate employees who come up with terrific new ideas that build business. This is a time to create and project positive momentum. Celebrate. Celebrate. Celebrate.
- If there is some bad news, deal with it quickly and completely. Do not turn a one-day story into a week-long nightmare.
- Take care of each other. Tensions in the workplace are at high levels. Recognise this and respect the feelings and emotions of both employees and customers. Try to be more patient with people. Choose words carefully. Take more time to listen.
- Continue to be a good corporate citizen. But do not overreach in terms of seeking recognition (in the form of publicity) for

- that. In the present environment, that may well be perceived as exploitation and backfire on the company.
- Talk about safety. For years, this has been a hush-hush subject. That simply cannot be the case now. Employees and customers want to know what the venue is doing to protect their safety. Tell them. And talk about their economic concerns, too.
 - Protect all employees. This is the time to demonstrate the company's commitment to diversity — perhaps most particularly ethnic diversity. Regardless of whether an employee comes from the Middle East or the Far West, make sure his or her rights, dignity and safety are protected.
 - Do something important symbolically and talk about it. A Florida water park has just done this by reinforcing its commitment to a major capital expenditure programme. Take steps that show the company and venue are strong.
 - Let employees show some patriotism in the workplace. In America, it is not at all uncommon now to see flags as lapel pins, patriotic neckties in the workplace and US flags on company vehicles. If this becomes appropriate for the company and country, let it happen.

CONCLUSIONS

Here are the conclusions this paper draws.

- In a difficult environment, opportunities abound. Customers staying home should never be allowed to be a viable option.
- Those who pay attention to doing the little things well are most likely to be rewarded.
- Everyone needs to keep their perspective. Fun still sells. Former New York Mayor Guiliani — a national symbol of courage and purpose in the face of grief — hosted the popular show *Saturday Night Live*. Both Mayor Guiliani and President Bush attended baseball games after September 11. It is OK to be selling fun. Fun remains on the approved list.
- It is not business as usual. Employees and customers are very sensitive, and they need to be extended a great deal of sensitivity.
- This is a very good time of the year to make sure what the venue does next season addresses the new realities of the various marketplaces.
- Focus on the family.

Fill the other half of the half-full glass!

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