



Searching for Satisfaction

Bevan C Grant questions the role of leisure in a consumer culture

Consumerism is the way of life in the 21st century. Everything is for sale, principally to those with the resources – which is where the profit lies. But it's a competitive market so people from all walks of life are being coerced to part with their discretionary dollars. Leisure is like most other aspects of life - a commodity, a range of goods and services for sale - so it is no surprise that economic viability attracts more attention than social capital.

We live in a time when practices of the past count for little. Rational leisure is not so much old fashion but less relevant. This is particularly noticeable with the shift in society from being one mostly concerned for the public good to one of private enterprise. Profitability has become the guiding principle for much of what happens in our industry. Consumers are constantly negotiating a variety of tensions - control and freedom, being done to and doing it by self, community or individuals, desire and consequence, immediacy and satisfaction.

For better or worse, many of the social, environmental and personal benefits are easily over shadowed by the business jargon of economic rationality and sustainable practice. The bottom line is - nothing is free, profit means survival.

Although such a perspective might seem a little harsh, much of what happens in the modern leisure industry is about providing opportunities for the pleasure of others, us the consumers. We want to escape, socialise, fantasise, be creative, learn new skills, engage in some form of physical activity or interact with the environment. What's more, we want to do this our way - but this comes at a price. It is not surprising the industry talks of customers, productivity, entrepreneurship, competition, sustainability, branding, efficiency and profit. We live in a time when leisure is primarily a business. As articles and advertisements in this magazine over the years show,

we have advanced to become part of a highly competitive industry.

For an organisation to survive in such a market it must find ways to reap the greatest economic return. For some, this means customising what's on offer to suit the ever-changing market. But as Thomas Franks wrote in his book *One Market Under God*, "everything is commodifiable". This means that offerings in leisure that once had a strong social value have become standardised, or 'McDonaldised' as some would say. While this may minimise any confusion a consumer has about what to expect, it can reduce the chance for spontaneity, something at the heart of leisure.

The provision of leisure falls into line with other services and products in the consumer world. It is subject to regulation where benchmarking supposedly gives assurance (here 'best practice' emerges and 'cowboy' operators are supposedly eliminated), protection and control becomes paramount, and commonality becomes the norm. But as we know, regulation breeds bureaucracy and this can end up with regulation capture where consumer needs sometimes become secondary to those of the provider.

In a consumer society the suitability, stability and sustainability of what's on offer is ultimately dependent on the quality of the associated goods and services. These must be in tune with what a consumer wants – not what the provider thinks the consumer wants. However, predicting this with a high degree of accuracy is a challenge for the public who have an insatiable appetite to graze on a wide range of familiar as well as new experiences. There is an increasing expectation that many experiences will provide instant gratification as well as long-term benefits. Hence, keeping



consumers satisfied may have less to do with meeting their real needs and everything to do with satisfying their emotions – memorable experiences - the feel good factor.

The somewhat unpredictable nature of consumers makes knowing exactly what experiences to provide is the challenge for all providers. Even when due diligence is given to planning, marketing, pricing and so on, there is still a considerable amount of risk with regards to getting it right and then it might be short-term. For example, swimming is swimming, and getting fit is getting fit, but put these activities in a new facility or with a new brand and many consumers engage in what they believe to be new activities. It's the power of feeling connected, of being in vogue. Some cynics may say it's just 'old ideas in new bottles' but the industry is about satisfying consumer needs.

With changing socio-economic conditions and a more consumer oriented society, target markets become more diverse and difficult to define. In many instances, it is the experience, not the event or activity that is important. This often results in the provider trying to manipulate the potential consumer's emotions to create a desire to purchase or engage irrespective of the need. In essence, needs are created. Not surprising some researchers suggest leisure is becoming more closely linked with spending money rather than engaging in deeply satisfying experiences. As illustrated in many advertisements and brochures, the attention focuses on selling an image of the perceived experience (a desire to purchase) and instant gratification.

What the industry offers has a limited shelf life in a consumer culture. This means to stay in the game, a provider must continually modify an existing

service and/or product - perhaps create something new. This is particularly important with mass activities where some activities have been reinvented by creating a new kind of environmental ambience. Typically, the old experience is fragmented into a series of interrelated niche products and/or services, rearranged and packaged to fit under the umbrella of a theme or event. These forms of providing for the masses are not only commercially viable but allow the needs of a variety of consumers to be easily accommodated. Examples are evident at events like home and garden shows, craft fairs, some sporting occasions, music festivals, fun runs, Kidz triathlons, and food and wine festivals.

Surviving means realising that consumers are savvy. They seek experiences that satisfy functional as well as symbolic needs. This means being able to do the things that matter to them in a way that suits self. This helps reaffirm the identity of the individual. New experiences sometimes result from sifting through the proliferation of information about services or products on offer in the community. Of course, each promotional blurb promises the ultimate experience in idyllic conditions. But consumers are discerning and want to know exactly what's on offer, the cost and the conditions under which the experience will occur. Such information helps construct a perspective about what to expect for an investment of time and money should one choose to engage. Does the power lie with the buyer?

The meanings in the promotional material are embedded in the range of images and communicated through words, symbols and pictures. These are used to stimulate the emotions and trigger a desire that might become a need. But making a choice is a complex process and something attracting

considerable interest in consumer behaviour research. We are beginning to appreciate that consumers may not always make rational decisions. However, if the products and/or services are deemed to be unacceptable or there is little if any emotional connection, then enthusiasm for the idea will quickly fade away. And if this happens, the business to which it belongs may also fade into oblivion.

What people seek in leisure is not merely an activity or experience but a style of life with a range of positive personalised consequences. There is a craving for opportunities to escape the mundane aspects of daily life. Because people do this in different ways the market place is swamped with alternatives from which to choose, particularly for those who have the time and resources. But greater choice will not necessarily result in greater happiness or satisfaction. Choice can provide a false sense of autonomy, freedom and empowerment. From the organisations perspective, it is important the choice, even excess of choice, results in an experience that leaves the consumer feeling in control, even if this only illusionary. This means understanding your customers.

Irrespective of class, age, culture or creed, one thing consumers expect is a quality memorable experience –value for money and commitment of their time. Being just satisfied will no longer suffice. As providers, there is a need to offer something that yields the greatest sense of satisfaction and happiness for the consumer. In turn this hopefully leads to a good economic return. There is some suggestion that this might be best achieved in the future by focusing more attention on managing meaning rather than people, things or the resources. However, this idea requires further exploration.

The meanings of recreation and leisure are far from uniform and some formidable but exciting challenges are looming on the horizon. In thinking about the future, the thoughts of the late George Torkildsen, as expressed in the fifth edition of his book *Leisure Management* come to mind. George argued that it is not possible to change what we do by more money, facilities, or bureaucracy. Rather it will require all our imagination and ideas, confidence and vision - a willingness to critique, challenge and move beyond our current practices. Perhaps this means both resisting as well as embracing the ideals of consumerism!

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