

HUMANITY'S SEARCH FOR MEANING: *What Education has to Teach Entertainment*

By Joseph Wisne

We believe there is a demand for more genuinely authentic, physical, real things to do.

For years now we've heard all about the supposed confluence of museums and entertainment, about the blurring lines between institutions of learning and attractions dedicated to fun and profit. As part of this trend, we've seen museums wrestle with their identities as they strive to upgrade or re-spin their core experiences, borrowing techniques and approaches from themed entertainment in an attempt to draw and retain an audience in – what's the phrase? – an increasingly competitive market.

Sounds good, and no doubt much of that is true. These considerations are played out in museum boardrooms and at executive strategy retreats from coast to coast. Many museums have adopted (or attempted to adopt) the "tricks" formerly known only to themed attractions, including (gasp!) calling their visitors "guests." I believe the museum field has learned important lessons from these experiments.

But what if we turned the tables?

Are there trends, values and design attributes traditionally held in the domain of museums

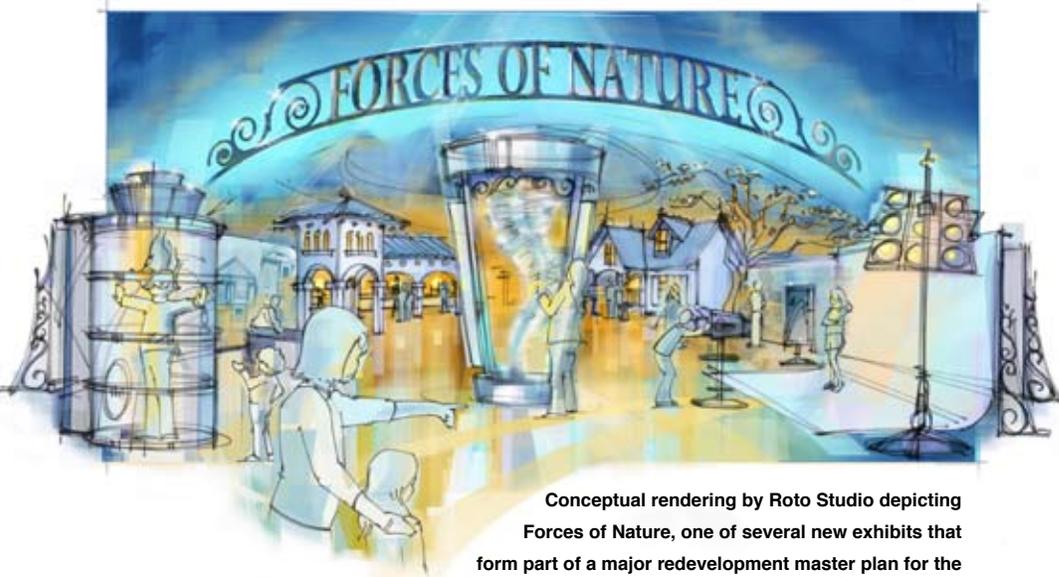
that theme parks and FECs can (and should) learn from? Are there "tricks" of the museum business that the attractions business can adopt, not at the expense of their profit-motivated goals, but in pursuit of them?

Let's explore some possibilities. Of course, as we do so, we should remember that no complex arena such as "the leisure industry" falls into such neat categorical boxes that any useful generalization won't instantly run afoul of myriad exceptions. For every "typical" museum that acts like a museum, there are examples of museums – even the stodgier ones – that share key behaviors and characteristics with their commercially-oriented entertainment brethren, and vice versa. There really are not two distinct markets here, but rather a broad array of location-specific destinations, each with its own unique set of attributes. We'll use the typical stereotypes, whilst acknowledging the limits of their application.

Authenticity – The Public Knows the Difference

One of the primary "classic" differences in these two broad market categories is authenticity. Museums tend to offer "real" experiences through collections, hands-on experiments with physical phenomena, and opportunities for genuine personal expression and creativity. Themed attractions, especially those with creative ambitions that outstretch their capital, tend to offer fabrications, simulations. You touch a meteorite at the American Museum of Natural History and you know it's actually from outer space. The facsimile at the theme park has rather more terrestrial pencil-rod strung through it.

The key here is that the public knows the difference. There is an overwhelming number of family leisure-time options that are largely



Conceptual rendering by Roto Studio depicting Forces of Nature, one of several new exhibits that form part of a major redevelopment master plan for the Whitaker Center for Science and the Arts in Harrisburg, PA.



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At the Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds UK. Theming, interactives & models by Paragon Creative Ltd.

synthetic or virtual – from home theater and the internet, to the landlocked crab shack restaurant and haunted spookfest. Against this backdrop, we believe there is a demand for more genuinely authentic, physical, real things to do. Ironically, the most authentic parts of a theme park experience (thrill rides, corn dogs) are often subsumed by our preoccupation with storytelling, which tends to wrap these real components in shrouds of further fabrication and unreality. Fake sets, fake characters, fake events: they have their place, but let's not forget that often the most memorable are the authentic activities that you cannot do or see anywhere else. We should celebrate them, and on occasion, we should think about telling real stories, for their entertainment value if nothing else.

Quality, Hospitality and Design

The term “museum quality” is supposed to represent the highest standard of production, and fabrication budgets for museum experiences are generally higher on a per-visitor basis than those for entertainment attractions. However, the apparent quality of the finished product is often more directly the result of the quality of the design, which occupies a fraction of the overall project budget in both types of markets. Museums tend to pay close attention to design quality, hiring firms and individuals with track records and portfolios clearly in the top quartile of the field. Resulting spaces, whether built on a shoestring or a river of gold, tend to look better, feel better, work better and last longer.

Once again, the public can tell the difference. One quick tour of recently-built, “museum quality” environments on the Las Vegas strip illustrates my point. The public senses and recognizes quality, and will pay for it. And nowadays, that quality is most often the result of strong contemporary interior design (as opposed to finding the lowest bidder). That one or two extra percent of budget devoted to design can create the needed edge.

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As traditional sources of tax-based and philanthropic revenue have shrunk over the last decade or so, museums are also increasingly focusing on true customer satisfaction in order to earn their bread. While guest service still gets a big push at major theme parks, especially through hospitality/resort operations, it seems a great proportion of regional and metro entertainment venues are missing

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this vital point, and therefore, these attractions are frequently eclipsed in the minds of the customer by a truly well-managed children’s museum or zoo. Call me a “guest” all you want, but when every queue is tiresome long, the floors sticky, the “cast” mindlessly untrained, then I know I’m really just a ticket stub. Watch out: the buzz in leading museum management circles is all about creating “brand customers” from among the larger population of typical visitors. Entertainment attractions need to compete for these same dollars, and therefore for many of these same customers. (Sound familiar?) The public recognizes quality service as well as design.

Why Museums?

A final thought. Why do people go to museums in the first place? Why, for hundreds of years, have humans built temples to preserve collections of old things, large and small? Why do public coffers across the US continue to spill out millions in tax revenues for gleaming new riverfront interactive discovery centers? If you ask museum visitors why they came, the top answer isn’t generally “to learn something,” so purely educational motives don’t explain the attraction. What does?

I think the answer is at the core of what drives much of the human experience. It is the same reason some people read books, raise families, go to church. Perhaps what distinguishes our stereotypical museum experiences from entertainment is meaning - or to make a more complex noun, meaningfulness. We’ll go to the aquarium to feel a connection to the environment, the science center to ponder mysteries of the universe, the zoo to witness the truth of our evolutionary human ancestry. We go to quench a thirst, fill a void. And we’ll pay money to do it.

Thus, a competitive advantage that one themed attraction may possess over its rivals - a quality that can help drive guest satisfaction, spur repeat visits, and strengthen support for a higher ticket price - may simply consist in a greater infusion of authentic meaningfulness. Of course, many TEA members know this instinctively, and even at our most cynical moments on entertainment projects yearn wistfully for more.

We call it *heart*. 



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