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Brunel's ss Great Britain

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Case Study- Brunel's ss Great Britain



Figure 1. Brunel's ss Great Britain (Mandy Reynolds)

Background and context

Brunel's ss Great Britain is an award-winning UK heritage attraction based in Bristol. The ss Great Britain was designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel and her super-sized iron hull made her the biggest, strongest ship ever built – before Brunel's last ship the Great Eastern. When the ss Great Britain was launched in 1843 she had the most powerful engines of any ship, could carry enough fuel to get to America, and Australia, and also featured an innovative steam-powered propeller. Covering nearly a million miles at sea, the great ship carried emigrants from Liverpool to Melbourne in the 1852 and 1875, troops to the Crimean War, the first England cricket team to Australia in 1861 and was converted to a sailing ship, before ending her working life as a floating warehouse; she was then scuttled in the Falkland Islands in 1937 before being salvaged in 1970 and towed back to Bristol to the dry dock where she was originally built, to be welcomed by 100,000 local residents who lined the River Avon and the Floating Harbour.

The ss Great Britain is operated and cared for by a registered charity the ss Great Britain Trust and receives no government support. It has three income

streams – ticket sales, venue hire and fundraising but has to cover ongoing conservation costs of over £1 million per year. Its mission is *‘to preserve the ship, the ss Great Britain, and her building dock for all time for the public benefit of all, and to place the same upon public display as a museum for the enhancement of public understanding and appreciation of her social, commercial, scientific and technological context and significance’* (www.ssgreatbritain.org).

By the late 1990s it became obvious that the ship was at serious risk from corrosion and in 2001 the Heritage Lottery Fund backed the £11.3 million scheme to save the ship, conserve and restore her. The ‘re-launch’ of the ship and dockside museum as ‘Brunel’s ss Great Britain’ took place in 2005. Since 2005, Brunel’s ss Great Britain has succeeded in attracting 170,000 visitors per year (peaking at 200,000 in 2006) and has won a staggering number of awards, including EnjoyEngland Excellence Award’s Visitor Attraction of the Year 2007, the Gulbenkian Prize for Museums and Galleries 2006 and Best Industrial Museum in Europe 2007, and this year ‘Outstanding Customer Service’ in the EnjoyEngland awards.

The visitor experience

The ship herself is encased in glass to conserve Brunel’s iron, and the first part of the visitor experience involves going ‘under water’ to the dry dock beneath the great structure. Visitors are instructed ‘hold your nose you’re going under water’ and suddenly the object is transformed into an experience. Standing beneath the bow and beneath the glass, the ship appears old but above the glass it is pristine and ready to sail. Once back above water level, visitors enter the dockyard museum where they use their ‘passenger ticket’ to experience a reverse chronology. The first stage involves an object-rich, product-focused learning experience featuring an interactive steering game and other interpretive devices such as video, audio and a dressing up box. Children are guided through by their own character in the form of Sinbad the ship’s cat, who poses a set of tricky questions such as ‘why are propellers better than paddles?’ At each of four ‘timegates’ the visitor can collect a unique stamp on their ticket, which effectively demarks the four timezones into which the museum is split. On boarding the ss Great Britain the visitor must choose how to make their voyage to Australia- as a first class passenger, as a steerage class passenger or as a marine archaeologist- children have their own Sinbad the ship’s cat audio companion. Visitors collect the appropriate audio guide and hear the announcement ‘today is a day that will change the rest of your life’ as they step into the role of a Victorian passenger. This stage of the visit, which involves exploring recreated spaces such as the Promenade Deck, the Engine Room and First Class Dining Saloon is almost entirely experiential, with audio material taken from diaries and letters of the ship’s Victorian passengers and crew. The experience is enhanced with sound (e.. animals on deck and a mysterious talking toilet), themed aromas (newly-baked bread, disinfectant in the Surgeon’s Cabin, vomit in the Stewardess’s Cabin) and subtle appeals to engage with the everyday lives of passengers such as a noticeboard with requests for writing paper and ‘lost and found’ items. The audio guide conjures up a vivid picture of life on board,

from the birth of babies and the onset of serious diseases to the apparent suicide of Captain Gray. There are auto triggers at key points for the audio guide, ensuring that the most important pieces of information are not missed, but numbers arranged on the ship in the style of cabin number plaques, allow visitors to take manual control of the audio companion if they wish. The appearance of Isambard Kingdom Brunel himself provides an additional dimension to the visitor experience. Providing excellent first person interpretation, he wanders around the ship and the dockyard museum engaging visitors in conversation – which again is individualized according to nationality, age and interest- and generates even more excellent photo opportunities.

An Experiential Approach

Once visitors have paid for an initial visit they can revisit as often as they like during the year without charge ('Travel Back in Time Again and Again'), generating opportunity spend at each visit as well as advocacy. Events such as murder mystery dinners, Christmas lunches and parties, and the promotion of the ship as a wedding venue, have succeeded in attracting visitors from new adult and corporate market segments, alongside family events such as Vile Victorian Trails, Sinbad Sea Chest art workshops and Extreme Knotting. Over 16,000 schoolchildren visit each year and some of the children's individual interpretation of artefacts can be seen in the form of laminated panels in the Dockyard Museum.

The interpretive strategy employed by the attraction is consistent then with an engaging, experiential marketing approach. However, *'simply having an intrinsically, inherently experiential offering is very different from actively marketing that offer in an experiential manner'*, (Williams 2006). In terms of marketing strategy, phase one centred on the re-launch but the second phase is now clearly focused on a sustainable commercial drive and to this end current and planned marketing initiatives are aimed at broadening the visitor base and providing a rich and individualized visitor experience. Some examples of promotional activities are bus advertising, banner ads on the VisitBristol website, editorial in newspapers, voxpop interviews on local radio and bespoke ads in specialist publications for the events, corporate and education markets. In May 2009 their marketing campaign 'A True Story' reached the finals of the Museum and Heritage Awards for Excellence. The campaign focused on the real elements of the visitor experience, with stories taken from passenger diaries, newspapers and official reports. The glamorous history of the vessel was represented in the form of a movie trailer, incorporating TV, bus and print advertising. At the same time Mr Brunel took the 'Gert Big Stink Challenge', using the ship's onboard smells, out to the streets, shopping centres and football grounds of Bristol and Bath. Costumed interpreters, introduced people to elements of a visit to the ship, challenged their preconceptions, and name-gathered. Subsequent market research demonstrated successful cut through with a high proportion of visitors reporting that advertising and leaflets had prompted their visit. Brunel's ss Great Britain was the first visitor attraction in the world to introduce a You-Tube style 'bolt on' to its website, enabling visitors to post their own

comments, images and videos, and has plans to fully embrace web 2.0 and incorporate experiential marketing wherever appropriate.

It is evident that the adoption of an experiential marketing approach has proved highly successful [we have always had a national and international appeal – a third of our visitors are from Bristol, a third from the south west (excl Bristol) and a further third from beyond the south west]. Interpretive planning, marketing communications, pricing and visitor orientation combine to provide a compelling and absorbing experience and visitors also have the scope to co-create their own individualized experience or 'experience space' (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004) to suit their own needs and level of involvement.

There are clear implications for innovative experience design in other parts of the heritage or wider tourism sectors in terms of the proven success of this integrated experiential approach.

References

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