

Key Issues and Managerial Challenges in Thorpe Park Amusement Park

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Abstract: *Thorpe Park is an attraction that is aimed at giving entertainment to families, its major activity is the variety of rides for mostly small children and teenagers. This report is on three problems affecting the management of Thorpe Park identified by the writer. The first part of the paper identified problems and challenges related to human resource management, operations and impact management and visitor experience and quality management. The second part deals with the recommendations on how to improve Thorpe Park in the areas of the challenges identified in the first part of the paper. The paper has identified problems of overcrowding which leads to queuing, seasonal staff and not having enough time to give value for the money paid on the rides. There is growth in different visitor attractions globally, this forms opportunities for many industries in the tourism sector flourish successfully. Each visitor attraction needs to deliver quality services and product in order to gain visitor satisfaction which leads to visitor loyalty.*

Keywords: Issues, Managerial, Challenges, Thorpe Park, Amusement Park

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The market for visitor attractions is growing constantly. It creates potential opportunities for organizations to build successful business. The planning and financial resources are crucial for establishing any tourist's attraction but for long perspective effectiveness and financial goals can be achieved only through active and competent management which includes work on all stages and levels. The tourism product has intangible site, more than ever should be emphasised the importance of delivery process and its quality.

Competition among visitor attractions continues to intensify on the international market; in these conditions, competitiveness of an attraction is analyzed in terms of variable factors of influence. An attraction is competitive if it can attract and satisfy potential tourists and this competitiveness is determined both by tourism-specific factors and by a much wider range of factors that influence the tourism service providers [1]. Competitive advantage requires the ability to effectively manage all components of the tourism system to ensure success is achieved. To assist in achieving this objective, many attractions have created a strong management process to provide leadership for the management of tourism in the organisations [2].

Thorpe Park, styled Thorpe Park, is a theme park with a temporary hotel in between the towns of Chertsey and Staines, Surrey, England, UK. It is operated and owned by Merlin Entertainments. After demolition of the Thorpe Park Estate in the 1930s, the site became a gravel pit. The park is mainly geared towards a young adult/teenage audience due to the vast majority of signature attractions being roller coasters and thrill rides. The tallest of these being Stealth, an Intamin Accelerator Coaster, which launches riders from 0-80 mph in 1.8 seconds sending them 205 feet into the air.

Thorpe Park is a resort that offers varieties of activities for recreation, despite having the different activities the attraction is faced with some challenges. I will like to make a critique of three of the challenges in the attraction namely; operations and impact management problems, human resources problems and visitor attraction experience quality problems.

The paper is aimed examining the managerial challenges faced at Thorpe Park. It has the following objectives

- i. To examine the different managerial challenges facing Thorpe Park.
- ii. To offer suggestions that will help in minimising the challenges and help in improving the quality of product and services.

2.0 ISSUES

The following are the issues affecting the park in the areas of operations, human resource and visitor experience and quality of product and services.

2.1 Operations and Impact Management problems

Operations is the day-to-day management of an attraction, it is organising the attractions resources which includes the staff, physical equipment to give the customer full satisfaction of services. [3] Operation is a key in achieving competitiveness in any tourist attraction. It entails production and service which must be delivered to customer satisfaction [4]. The aspect of tourist experience in an attraction is very important; the input is the production aspect of operations while the output is the service aspect of the operations. Inputs involve visible resources in an attraction while the output involves the services offered by the various resources [5].

Impact management is very important in every visitor attraction because most attractions are formed on specific natural, built, manufactured or cultural assets which are major parts of the products. When visitors visit such sites, they sometime compromise what they come to see or experience leading to negative impact such as overcrowding, congestion of traffic and pollution. This shows that the more an attraction is exposed to visitors the more is its potential for negative visitor impact [6]. The effect of overcrowding is as a result of an attractions' carrying capacity, when an attraction is overcrowded queues will begin to form, overcrowding usually occurs in peak periods of an attraction [7]. When visitors exceed the carrying capacity in attractions, this leads to forming of long queues giving negative impact on the visitor experience. Visitors experience is impaired because of the time spent on queue; some may turn away due to the long queue [8]. Thorpe Park experienced the problem of overcrowding in 2006; the park has to be closed because it could not accommodate more than 1500 people. Only visitors who booked earlier were allowed, many went back disappointed and the image of Thorpe Park was damaged.

Problems related to operations and impact managements were experienced by our team when we visited Thorpe Park on the 21st of March 2012. The problem related to operations is that of the tickets which our lecturer earlier booked but could not be found on our arrival, we were delayed for forty-nine minutes outside Thorpe Park, there was no communication on the part of the staff to explain things to us. This shows ineffectiveness of information processing system of the park. [3] states that many of the issues of operations management in tourists attractions are as a result of the inability of staff to solve problems as soon as possible.

Furthermore, the operations system in Thorpe Park has some issues, when we had the roller coaster swan ride, we decided to come and buy copies of the pictures that we were snapped since we were not allowed to carry our cameras for the rides, unfortunately for us we were told that the system do not store pictures snapped before a ride. The staff told us that the picture we were seeing on the screen was for those who just finished their ride, and since we finished before them the system has deleted ours without storing the data. As we were there, our colleagues that we saw their picture came and before they processed it for them the system has removed theirs showing a different set of people.

[9] explains that one of the variables covered by operations management in attractions is safety and security of visitors. Safety and security must be of major consideration for in any new attraction, machineries should not pose a threat to operators and visitors. He further stated that operations process should not pose security and safety threat.

The impact management problems of Thorpe Park have to do with the issue of overcrowding and long queues, there were long queues of people waiting to take rides, buying drinks and souvenirs and also when using the toilets. The waiting on queues affected us by not been able to enjoy as many rides as possible because we waited for thirty minutes to take the new rollercoaster swan ride which lasted for thirty seconds. Barlow [8] states that overcrowding and long queues in visitor attractions have negative impact on the attraction because it impairs visitor experience

2.2 Human Resource Management problems

Managing human resources is concern with finding, organising, training, motivating and rewarding personnel required by the organisation in order for them to put in their best meeting the needs of the tourist that come to the attraction [9]. Tourist organisations needs to take the issue of personnel management seriously if not weak labour markets and the inability of most tourism firms to provide career structures for employees will conspire against establishing comprehensive performance management programmes [10].

The quality of staff in visitor attraction is very important for the attraction to meet it aim and objectives, it is evident that most of tourist attractions now a days find it difficult to recruit and retrain good staff, this leads to the problem inability of human resources in visitor [3].

The issue of having staff who work in seasons, or on short term basis of employment affects the staff in a way that they do not put more commitment to the job and this type of job lacks career prospects for the employees [3]; [10]. Thorpe Parks operates from March to November, most of their staffs are seasonal staff who are contracted to work, and they are not permanently employed. The only permanent staffs as we were briefed when we visited are the managers and the administration staff. Casual staff who have received little training usually have little commitment for the job, this affects their quality assurance by not performing their duties effectively at all times [9].

The tourism sector attracts younger people as workers because the pay level is usually low, this is as a result of people having fewer job opportunities and taking advantage of what is available. Staff easily get bored and lack interest because they do the same job every day which makes customer care to be low in the visitor attractions [3]. The pay in Thorpe Park for a staff in customer services host is £6.10 per hour (www.njobsuk.co.uk, 2012). Most of the personnel in Thorpe Park are young people who do not have better opportunities somewhere; they have shifts and lack motivation in the job which is done every day. This can result in high staff turnover if better offers are met somewhere.

Swarbrooke [3] elaborates that if staffs are not motivated, they do not put in their best in the jobs, the effect of staff motivation is seen on the way they carry out their daily duties and relate to customers. If an organisation has high profit turn over and the effect is not felt among the staffs, they lose interest in the work by feeling being exploited, as such their loyalty to the organisation is reduced.

2.3 Visitor Experience and Quality Problems

Tourist experience is about the experience of the individual which may be affected by individual, environment, situations and personality related factors as well as the level of communication with other people [11]. The experience of visitors within the tourist attraction is very strong and cherished by how they interact with those who provide services to them [12]. The welcome assistance received by tourist on arrival to a destination determines whether they will return or not [12]. Tourists need to be given value for their money, this can be due to the variety and quality of the attraction and also how long time they spend in the attraction. Visitors who are not satisfied with the services and products in an attraction do not repeat their visits [3]. The success of a visitor attraction depends on a positive visitor experience. If the visitor encountered a good experience there is tendency of him or her repeating a visit and also recommending the attraction to friends and relatives. Staff of visitor attractions need to be knowledgeable and trained in the area of visitor experience because they are involved in service delivery (MTSP, 2006). The food and beverages in Thorpe Park are expensive and lack varieties of restaurants that will meet the different needs of the visitors. Though some of the staff that work at Thorpe Park are friendly, there are still some staff who are not friendly at all and do not have the skills of customer care.

Swarbrooke [3] further explained that attractions should be designed to achieve the objectives of the organisation; there should be consideration for those with special needs. The vision and mission of Thorpe Park is to create a high growth, international, family entertainment company with strong brands and portfolio. This is not so as most of the activities are for kids and teenagers, people need to walk for a long time from the gate to where the rides are the experience may not favour family that visit with the old who find movement to be difficult. There are also no activities for those who choose to participate in passive leisure as the attraction lacks relaxation places. Adults do find the place boring as there are no benches to rest.

The issue of delays on queues always has a negative effect on an attraction; it is good to provide information for visitors when these occur and some entertainment to keep them busy [3]. We experienced a long queue without being entertained while waiting or given an apology for waiting long. Time was wasted on queues making it impossible to enjoy the rides because Thorpe Park closed earlier that day. Another issue is the time spent on rides, the rides last for thirty seconds making it not worth the waiting and the price paid.

Gilbert and Joshi [13] clarifies that promises made by service providers in their marketing and promotional messages need to reflect quality offered. Swarbrooke [3] states that if visitors do not discover the quality that is being advertised they become dissatisfied, support services such as restaurants should have different varieties and quality, toilets should always be kept clean and available for visitors to use. Thorpe Park had to work on their new roller coaster because the test dummies returned without legs (www.telegraph.co.uk) when I took that ride, I discovered that my neck was banging the back of the

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Operations and impact management

Overcrowding problems always lead to long queues, there should be strategies to manage long queues so that visitors will not become impatient; queues can be designed in form of snake shape which the curves make it appear not to be long. There should be notices posted to inform visitors of expected time to be spent waiting, and there should be entertainment to keep the visitors busy and more lively. Longer operating hours should also be encouraged during peak periods [14].

Swarbrooke [3] states that attractions should be able to meet accommodate people with special needs; parents with small kids needs changing facilities, older visitors need places to rest and be entertained, and people with special diets need appropriate catering services.

3.2 Human Resource Management

The problems of human resources management are related to training, recruitment, and motivation of employees. Training and development are processes planned to affect positive changes in employees' attitude, knowledge or skill behaviour so as to improve performance. Training is a response to satisfy current labour needs of the organisation while development involves activities that prepare employees for future or higher job responsibilities [10]. Thorpe Park should develop a strategy that will give proper training and developments of its staffs, there should be provision for education through staff empowerment, this will make them different from their competitors. There should be career development plan on skills and communication. There should be training on customer services which will help the staff in handling challenges without seeking assistance from the management. Staff should be given short term training and train the trainers schemes should be encouraged to develop the staff, student's placement can also help in developing other staff because students can assist staff with learning market research techniques [15].

Most of organisation do not use staff incentive schemes, such as cash bonuses or 'employee of the month' programmes, which help in keeping the staff in the organisation and motivating them to put in their best to [3]. Thorpe Park needs to motivate its staff by giving employee of the month award, individual achievement award. There should be performance appraisal of the staffs where the weaknesses of the staff are worked upon to become perfect. The pay rate should be increased so that the staff will be motivated. Lee-Ross & Pryce [10] is of the opinion that performance appraisal can be carried out yearly or twice yearly, however, it is wise to have a fixed format staff hit targets and reach goals on a more dynamic frequent basis. The performance management system must be able to reward achievement accordingly.

3.3 Visitor experience and quality management

The issue of effective information processing needs to be put in place. The ability of employees to deliver quality service according to the specification needs to be closely monitored and staff trained [15]. Thorpe Park should be able to offer high quality personnel and services so that its customers will be satisfied. This can be done by giving proper training on utilising technologies [15]. There should be total quality management which makes production and service delivery process to be effective through continuous improvement to meet the objectives of Thorpe Park. This involves all staffs in all the departments [3].

Visitor experience can be identified by carrying out customer satisfaction research [3]. Thorpe Park should carry yearly survey to find out issues on visitor experience and visitor satisfaction. The findings should be critically looked into and solutions should be immediately taken to solve the problems discovered.

There is need for pricing structure and products in tourist attraction to be re-evaluated once in a while, this is to ensure that the organisation offers value for money; tourist must feel the effect of their experience being worth the money they have spent for the trip [16]. Thorpe Park makes discount online for people coming in groups or has an annual pass. Though this is a welcome idea but the problem of not having all the rides on arrival is an issue. To help in reducing this problem, it will be good if more attractions are added and the site expanded [17].

4.0 CONCLUSION

The satisfaction of visitors should be the priority of every visitor attraction, consideration should be given to the quality of product and services, the food should be of high quality and different varieties that will meet the need of the different visitors coming to Thorpe Park; there should be food to cater for those with special diet needs, children, adults and different religion. The personnel should be willing to help the visitors when the need arise and they should also be friendly [16]. Tourists derive satisfaction from all activities they do in attraction so attraction mangers need to make their experience a memorable one [18].

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