

Maximising Retail Sales at Visitor Attractions

The days are shortening, the tourist season is starting to wind down and it is time for a little reflection on your business over the past year. Did your retail outlets do as well as you had hoped? Did you achieve the spend per head that you had budgeted? Did the product offering in your shop meet customer standards?

Paul Wareham, RGA's retail specialist, argues that giving time and effort to developing a carefully planned approach to your shop can reap significant benefits for your revenue stream. This article aims to provide a brief overview of the key areas you should consider if you want to up your visitor spend.

Visitor Attractions

Most visitor attractions also operate as retailers, featuring anything from a small selection of distress purchases (emergency food and drink supplies, batteries for digital cameras and, more rarely these days, film) right the way through to the full range of gift stores found at larger venues. With the seemingly endless growth in the popularity of shopping as a leisure pursuit in itself, we have also seen the development of a number of retail tourism destinations over the past couple of decades, of which The House of Bruar is probably the best known Scottish example.

What are the implications of this ever-growing fascination with shopping and recent High Street trends for visitor attractions? Tourism destinations might be tempted to see their retail activities as a necessary evil to provide funds in support of the main purpose of the attraction, be it educational, recreational or a bit of both. We would argue that giving time and effort to developing a carefully planned approach to your shop can reap significant benefits for your revenue stream. This article aims to provide a brief overview of the key areas you should consider if you want to up your spend per visitor.



It is not possible to provide a typical benchmark retail spend per head figure that all attractions should be aiming for, as the nature of the attraction and the visitor profile both have a significant impact. For example, a country park with a visitor centre but no entrance fee might produce a retail spend less than 20 pence per visitor, whereas a distillery providing tours can generate up to £20 per visitor. A typical historical palace, castle or house might expect to take around £2.30 in their shop for each person who pays to visit. All of these figures are ex VAT.

Our experience suggests that attractions could up their shopkeeping game by giving attention to the following key areas.

Product

It is stating the obvious to say that if a visitor to your shop sees nothing they want to buy, then you will not make a sale. So, what do visitors want to buy? The limited research in this area strongly suggests that people are looking for some linkage between their visit and the products in the on site shop. This does not necessarily mean going out and buying lots of items with iconic images of your attraction on them, or

slapping your logo on everything in sight, although there may well be a place for a carefully selected range of branded products.

Find out from your visitors what they have enjoyed most about their visit or what has made the greatest impression on them. Then think creatively about bringing in unique products that relate to these experiences and discuss your ideas with potential suppliers. Working closely with suppliers, particularly small local manufacturers, can bring a greater flexibility to order quantities, helping to avoid costly overstocks and the consequent impacts on cash flow. You are also more likely to end up with a distinctive range of merchandise that will appeal to you visitors.

Any range should be structured to take account of different budgets, so care should be taken to ensure a progression of price points designed to appeal to your particular visitor profile. It is also critical that each product purchased fits into a well planned shop layout. All too often, we have seen gift shops looking like a shambles because too wide a range of mismatched merchandise has been crammed into inappropriate fixtures and fittings.

Once ranges are defined and initial stock purchased for a season, you should ensure that systems are in place to monitor sales and replenish stocks as and when required. These systems might be paper based in a small attraction, but larger and multi-site operators will need some form of electronic point of sale (EPOS) system. Make sure that you know your average transaction value, spend per visitor, average price per item sold, sales per category and number of people passing through your shop if at all possible. From this information you will be able to identify opportunities for improving performance and develop ways to enhance these key performance indicators.

Position, Layout and Product Displays

The location of the shop within the site can have a dramatic effect on sales. Making the shop unavoidable on the way out of the attraction is the best position, putting merchandise in front of visitors while their visit is fresh in their mind. If this is not possible, then make sure that the location of the shop is clearly signed and that staff throughout the site are primed to point it out and remind visitors that it is there.

We have already identified the fact that a lack of linkage between buying and space planning can result in chaotic displays. The saying “less is more” is never more relevant than in retail planning, and with visitors often time-pressed – “The coach is leaving in five minutes” – it is essential that visitors are able to see what you are trying to sell to them. Keeping displays simple and not being afraid to pile up popular items in key locations can simplify the decision making process for your time poor visitors.



It is not necessary to group all similar products together – for example books might be divided between shop areas themed to different aspects of your attraction. What is crucial is that there is some logic to your shop layout that can readily be followed by customers, whether products are grouped by type (i.e. books or food) or by theme (i.e. house or garden).

It is a common criticism that shops at visitor attractions fail to live up to the attraction itself and this is often down to the lack of any visual excitement in the retail area and

the failure to make any linkage between the shop and the attraction itself. While care should be taken not to detract from the visual impact of products on sale, using graphics and artefacts to liven up standard shop fittings combined with effective lighting can make a huge difference to the ambience of a shop.

Above all, make sure that you have defined basic standards of tidiness and cleanliness for the shop and principles of product display, making it somebody's responsibility to ensure that these standards are checked and maintained throughout each trading day.

Customers

Depending on your location and type of attraction, your visitor profile might consist of few or many repeat visitors. Either way, don't forget that customers/visitors/guests are the single most important people in your attraction and that failing to give them what they want is the best way of destroying a service business. Listen to what they say, whether it is positive or negative. Encourage them to provide feedback, either through self-completion questionnaires or by talking to as many of them as you can to gauge their reactions to their visit – including perceptions of your shop. Consider whether a structured market research study might provide valuable information to provide you with opportunities to improve the visitor experience, which if acted on will almost certainly lead to increased revenues from your commercial activities, including your on site shop.

For further information or advice regarding commercial operations at your planned or existing visitor attraction, please contact:

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