

By Michael McCall



Of Zoos & Baseball

We live in interesting times. According to several notable authors, we are living in the Experience Economy, the Entertainment Economy, the Dream Society and the era of Experiential Marketing, and Emotional Branding. These societal shifts, centered around higher impact leisure experiences, challenge cultural institutions, especially zoos, to compete on a whole new level for consumers' leisure time and the financial attention that follows.

On the continuum of cultural destinations, with opera at the high-end of guests' average education and income, zoos are at the opposite end. According to Smithsonian research, guests of zoos have the lowest average education and income. In other words, zoos are the most populist of the cultural attractions. By definition, they are most impacted by the American population's shift in leisure paradigms.

The Baseball Effect

Within this milieu, zoos are like baseball:

- Everyone knows what the experience is.
- Everyone knows how to access it.
- Everyone says they like it.
- Yet, people do not do baseball or zoos as often.

Neither leisure alternative is as compelling to consumers as they once were.

Aging and stressed consumers constantly allocate of their precious time in the zero sum game of life. Relative to other entertainment opportunities, zoos, like baseball, are perceived by many to be more passive, lower impact experiences.

Zoos and baseball share the common venue descriptor: "park." Both zoos and baseball are pleasant ways to spend the afternoon. For an increasing number of people, however, a pleasant park experience, of whatever theme, is no longer compelling enough. The park problem can be seen vividly in the success of aquariums over the past twenty years. Aquariums are generally air-conditioned buildings, convenient department stores of sea life entertainment, requiring far less physical effort, less dirt and sweat, and less time. Yet, aquariums usually charge more than zoos, as the consumer is willing to pay for user-friendly leisure.

As the national pastime, baseball may well be past its prime; so too, are zoos challenged. However, baseball has the multi-billion dollar media industry as a powerful, motivated booster. Most zoos rely on a perpetual hand to mouth financing, with fewer and smaller external advocates, less willing to invest.

Age Compression

Layered on top of the impact of the Baseball Effect, zoos, perhaps more than any other type of cultural destination, are also being impacted by Age Compression: the phenomenon that kids are growing up faster, evolving out of childhood content and acquiring teenage-type attitudes earlier in their physical age. As Age Compression is adversely impacting such American mainstays as Barbie dolls and Disney animation, it surely has reduced the mainstay of the zoo market: the family with young children. The demographics might be there, but the psychographics are diminished.

Commercial Competition

Commercial enterprise has entered the reality-based enrichment purview of museums, aquariums, science centers and zoos with smart-money zeal. The competition in the content-rich leisure market has multiplied manifold in the last decade. Disney has developed a zoo as a theme park; National Geographic is not a magazine, it's Ventures; and, Discovery Communications is a whole host of Channels. Today, all of these distributors of enrichment compete in the zoo's leisure learning space.

Home Sweet Home

In-home entertainment has become exponentially ubiquitous and compelling. High definition visuals and surround sound audio, high-speed bandwidth and hundreds of cable channels are only the obvious factors. Computers have become home multimedia creative tools and world events make cocooning ever more attractive. Home isn't what it used to be; it is far, far better.

Endangered Leadership

In the competitive environment filled with force majeure, only the fittest, only the most committed, creative and nimble, will succeed. Zoos must learn to adapt by adopting the strategies and tactics that the commercial competition employ, and they need to be clever and flexible to finance such change. The governance, leadership and management of zoos must first perceive the threat, and then be willing to tackle the changes, while taking the risks. This is a tall order for not-for-profit organizations, governed by boards of community volunteers, and managed by zoological professionals bred in the zoo's far more traditional times.

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