

# 2010: a waterpark odes-sea

By Michael Reid

Opportunities and challenges for waterparks in the future

It seems like new waterparks are popping up all over the world and the statistics seem to agree. According to the World Waterpark Association, there are already more than 1,000 parks in North America that host more than 78 million visitors each summer alone and that number is growing steadily by 3-5% per year. With at least 600 more parks elsewhere around the globe, millions of people now have access to a new, wetter form of family fun.

Like any new business venture, these parks face some pretty hefty challenges in their first few years of operation. However, as we near the end of this decade, there are even more trials and tribulations to contend with such as the current financial crisis, climate change and cultural differences.

## the financial crisis

As the worldwide economy slumps, customers are often forced to make more careful decisions about the way they spend their limited discretionary income. Competition for leisure time has never been fiercer. However, a changing economy is not a new story and ultimately, customers are still looking for value and an enjoyable experience. Quite simply, facilities that can deliver both will be more recession-proof than those that don't.

On the value side of the equation, it's critical to control internal costs while maintaining a

high-quality customer experience. Look for savings behind the scenes that don't impact customers: renegotiate and consolidate suppliers, streamline menu and merchandise items, and examine the return on investment of marketing activities.

Perhaps most importantly, make sure opening hours match actual customer traffic patterns and preferences. Although most facilities already adjust hours seasonally, take the time to re-evaluate this again as the economy changes. When possible, avoid simply downsizing the team (which often decreases guest enjoyment by creating longer queues at the ticket counter, slides and food outlets), and instead lower costs by shortening opening hours slightly in non-peak times. This delivers the same level of service (albeit in a compressed timeframe) with less total labor costs. However, limit revisions to once per quarter and let the public and media know well in advance to prevent confusion.

In tandem with cost reduction efforts, there are a range of tactics that can attract additional visitors without massive marketing budgets. Instead of discounting, introduce loyalty programs to encourage more frequent visits and transform mere customers into park ambassadors. Customers who feel valued and rewarded are far more likely to generate positive word of mouth and bring friends and family back on their next visit.

Identifying your target market and developing an effective marketing strategy is also critical. The challenge of opening a new park is great no matter whether the concept of a waterpark is new to the area, or the market already has an incumbent facility. On Australia's Gold Coast, competition abounds and there are a range of amusement options including waterparks all vying for attention. However, for Shelley Winkel, Public Relations and Communications Manager at WhiteWater World, the key to success in any economy "is to find your niche", which WhiteWater World did right from the outset. "We've found a whole new market in families", says Winkel "and the park has incorporated strong alliances with family brands such as the Wiggles and Nickelodeon to maximize [marketing and media] cut-through." This approach has been extremely successful and the park has succeeded in consistently beating projected visitor numbers despite the tough operating environment.

Finally, during tough economic times, it's important to tailor advertising messages to suit the public mood. This might take the form of highlighting the value of waterparks over other forms of entertainment or demonstrating the health benefits of physical activity and the importance of relaxation, both of which are delivered in abundance at a waterpark. In the case of the latter, a trip to the park can then be seen as vital to overall well-being instead of simply another discretionary expense.

**Wild Wadi Waterpark located in Dubai skilfully balances Middle Eastern and Western cultures to create an enjoyable day out for everyone.**





**WhiteWater World has created alliances with prominent family brands to attract new market segments and features ample shade to enhance water conservation efforts and protect guests.**

How can any other form of entertainment compete?

## climate change

You can't have a waterpark without water. Or can you? Around the world, many regions are experiencing previously unseen weather patterns such as drought and extreme heat due to climate change. As more and more water restrictions are put in place, what can a waterpark do?

WhiteWater World opened at the end of 2006, during the state of Queensland's worst drought. However, the park was able to navigate the water restrictions and has flourished despite the lack of rainfall. Planning for the future has played a large role in their success but there are also other ways to conserve water without massive capital outlays.

Prior to opening, CEO Stephen Gregg said that "responsible and sustainable water management practice was top of mind and that the park would incorporate the very latest environmentally friendly technology available worldwide." The plan was to make WhiteWater World one of the most water efficient parks anywhere by using smart design principals and leading edge technology. This philosophy has led to the creation of one of the most shaded waterparks in the world (to prevent evaporation and protect guests) and includes innovative features such as regenerative media filtration, detention ponds to capture storm water run-off and 'slide splash guards' to reduce water loss.

The park also communicates its message of water conservation directly to guests through signage and has even voluntarily changed some of the rides next door at sister park DreamWorld to be more water efficient. However, Winkel notes that the conservation

methods employed have no impact on guest experience itself. "About 70% of guests come from the surrounding areas that are also affected by the drought. They understand the challenges but the whole community is behind our efforts."

When asked what advice WhiteWater World would have for parks experiencing drought for the first time, Winkel explains that not all conservation needs to be the result of expensive infrastructure. "We water gardens at night [to reduce evaporation] and chose hearty, drought tolerant [perennial] plants." Other techniques used include cutting grass longer to reduce evaporation, using mops and buckets to clean public areas instead of hoses, incorporating water efficient automatic turn-off taps, dual flush toilets and waterless technology in bathroom facilities, displaying water conservation posters behind the scenes as a constant reminder to staff, and using the expertise of the local council Water Inspector to review and evaluate conservation efforts.

Clearly there's no one magic solution for dealing with drought and climate change. However, by using a variety of conservation tactics (no matter how small) and engaging both the public and local authorities, waterparks have a much greater chance of building community support and ultimately succeeding despite the challenges.

## cultural differences

Fun may be universal but our preferences for amusement is often shaped by our cultural backgrounds. For waterparks, cultural and religious differences can play a big role in determining guest comfort when choice of swim attire & gender roles take center stage.

All over the Middle East and Asia, new parks are opening that carefully balance the needs

of different cultures. Wild Wadi in Dubai (located next to the iconic Burj Al Arab "7-star" hotel) and The Lost Paradise of Dilmun in Bahrain are both major tourist attractions for western visitors that have managed to attract locals as well. For example, each has created a weekly "Ladies Night" staffed entirely by women to provide privacy for Muslim women and their children who would otherwise feel uncomfortable visiting a waterpark.

Although gender segregated timeslots are still relatively uncommon in many parts of the world, it's an idea with many ancillary benefits for western waterparks and the wider community they operate in. Hosting a monthly "Mom-and-Me Morning" at off-peak times could not only attract new multicultural visitors but also provide a much needed social event for mothers who hadn't previously considered visiting a park regularly.

Attracting more international customers can provide additional revenue streams but it must also be supported by careful planning to succeed. At WhiteWater World, 85-90% of visitors come from the domestic Australian market, however it has a unique advantage in being able to cater to Muslim guests by providing access to a prayer room and restaurant featuring Halal options right next door at DreamWorld. Muslim visitors are offered a special pass to use these facilities and the park also provides Arabic maps for ease of navigation.

Although not always considered today, ensuring guests from all backgrounds feel comfortable at the park is a trend that will definitely continue to grow in the future. It not only enhances the customer experience, it also makes good business sense.

Even in uncertain times, everyone still wants fun and escapism and waterparks fit the bill perfectly. Despite the challenges of today, with lateral thinking and hard work, the explosive growth of waterparks looks set to continue for the years ahead.

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