



# ups & downs

recession-proof your marketing strategy

by Adam Graves

The current economy may be negatively impacting many industries, but it is likely it will help and not hinder the small to medium sized theme parks. Nevertheless, marketing strategies need to be shifted to meet the changing needs and behaviors of your customers.

The first step is identifying those changing needs and behaviors. Industry-wide research is showing that families are not about to sacrifice their family vacation in down economy. They are, however, seeking more economical ways to travel. They will likely drive, and they'll drive farther than they did last summer since gas prices are more affordable. Finally, their destination should offer economical

opportunities in terms of lodging, activities and dining.

A smart strategy should focus on repeat business, smart product pricing, revised geographic markets and cost effective ways to broaden your reach.

Refresh your brand: The challenge in driving repeat business is fulfilling the need to deliver a new experience each time a family visits even if you don't have a new attraction. Reinventing the park brand gives the perception of a new experience. Unlike corporate branding, where comfort and consistency are critical messages, a theme park is communicating new and exciting experiences. By reinventing

your brand each year with a new seasonal tagline, an adjusted color palette, fonts and photography, your park will accomplish this without sacrificing the integrity of your brand. At Silverwood Theme Park outside of Coeur d'Alene Idaho, the brand personality and logo will remain constant, but we'll adjust the creative to fit within that personality. For example, we always use the tagline "65 rides and attractions" but each year, we develop a new sub heading. This year it will be "Turn your summer upside down" to promote the new upside down roller coasters from last year.

There are ways to offset the additional costs a refreshed brand will incur. For example, there is no need to do a new photo shoot each year.

Conduct a photo shoot once every three years and cherry pick the best 25 images. Use 8 or so images the first year, and save the others for the following years.

Maximize your direct mail budget by combining multiple messages into one card. Design one postcard with full color art and the core message in black. The printer can change out the black plate with the various targeted messages, while running the full color side in bulk. This will save when you are sending direct mail to various groups such as season pass holders, groups, and group planners.

Season pass sales will drive repeat business and guarantee revenue for the park. Parks will want to implement this program if new, and shift more resources to it if it has not been a priority in the past. Parks like Silverwood Theme Park are seeing an increase in pass sales and to a more expanded geographic market. With families looking for better deals, a season pass may make more sense for them. Depending on how your price structure is set up, anyone coming for a weeklong vacation will save money by investing in the season pass. The park still benefits from the incremental revenue once they are here.

Review the ticket pricing strategy. Small to medium parks will be able to remain firm because they compete well in terms of price with the larger parks. The larger parks will have more leeway in their pricing and will likely institute price incentives such as free birthdays and/or free nights, relying on the incremental revenue it will bring in. At Silverwood, we work with local partners to offer discounted ticket vouchers. The further out geographically, the better the discount.

Speaking of geographic markets, considering the current state of affairs, and the aforementioned behaviors, parks will likely be taking a rifle approach to target markets to economize, and will be expanding the drive market to 5 or 6 hours, where as last summer it might have been 4 hours maximum.

Good strategic alliances in a targeted public relations will truly leverage your marketing budget. A positive third party testimonial about a trip to your park will bring a much bigger ROI than a purchased advertisement. Silverwood Theme Park contributes to a cooperative public relations effort with partners that fit their brand – a summer mountain resort, the local chamber and an in-town lodging option. The park leverages their smaller pr budget into one united, more successful effort that eliminates duplicate efforts with a common goal to drive tourism to the area and tell a bigger story. This effort allows them to target markets they can't otherwise afford. By focusing on inviting writers and their families to visit, and write a story, the co-op has seen media coverage in Scholastic Parent and Child, Calgary's Western Parent and aol travel stories to name a few.

Small to medium parks shouldn't have much to worry about in a down economy if they maintain a smart marketing strategy that targets repeat business. Don't forget the nature of a true brand to deliver on that experience from the marketing materials to the arrival through to the departure experience. Enhancing your visitors' experience and providing something new at each visit, will entice them to come back again and again. **ipm**



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*for Silverwood (and frequently, he has had to do it without a new exciting ride!) and have helped to increase park attendance 7% every year. He can be reached at adam@rangeus.com.*



Chime Long Waterpark, China



Six Person Raft



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