Chapter 17

How Can a Regional Theme Park Survive in China?
Studying Strategies used by Wuhu Fantawild Dreamland

Jing (Bill) Xu
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, China

Wei Yuan
Hainan University, China

Erdogan H. Ekiz
King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

Doris Shuk-ting Lo
School for Higher and Professional Education, Vocational Training Council, China

ABSTRACT

Theme parks have become a vital component of the tourism industry, providing entertainment and excitement to local residents and tourists. Particularly, more and more parks start their business in Asia. In this competitive environment, investigating the success and failure cases may prove very fruitful implications to other practitioners. Among these implications innovative marketing strategies are one of the most important ones. However, few previous studies attached importance to the study of theme park industry and the service performance in China. Given this lack of attention, this study was conducted in attempts to shed some lights for the park managers all around the world in general but also the ones in Chinese market, in particular. A case study of Wuhu Fantawild Dreamland, Anhui, China, was adopted for the survey and interviews. The analyses suggested China’s theme park visitors had some unique preferences which can be used while creating innovative marketing strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Theme parks have become a crucial component of the leisure and tourism industry, providing entertainment and excitement to local residents and tourists. The theme park industry has been developed into a global phenomenon (Clave, 2007; IAAPA, 2014). With the expanding middle class and the acceleration of leisure consumption, there is also a burgeoning wave of theme park development in Asia and of course, China is of no exception (Geissler & Rucks, 2011). Nowadays in China, it has been noted that a DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8699-1.ch017
How Can a Regional Theme Park Survive in China?

large number of small and medium sized, or, regional theme/amusement parks are now dominating the sector. Nevertheless, latest market reports revealed that more than 70% of the parks in China are losing money while nearly 20% just reach the break-even point, remaining only 10% of them are operating with profits (Beijing Zero Investigation Company, 2010).

A majority of the Chinese theme park investors have a misconception that decent park design and facilities can already guarantee a successful transaction, they have limited attempts to understand theme park visitors, as concurred by the “China theme park forum on development”. It has been considered that the mere provision of park facilities can no longer guarantee customers’ satisfaction in the contemporary China, thus it is important for the Chinese theme park operators to take a holistic view of services as perceived by the visitors that can in reality contribute to their satisfaction. Yet, limited studies on Chinese theme parks could be found. Therefore, the present study aims to examine the service performance of a popular regional theme park in Anhui, China and to investigate how it impacts visitors’ satisfaction.

LITERATURE

Theme parks, considered as a symbolic and leisure product, correspond to the characteristics of post-modern society, in the way that satisfy the family day out with pleasure, escape, fantasy and emotion (Nye, 1981). It differs from the conventional amusement park, like Coney Island, due to the inspired design of the themed environment where visitors can find consistent park identification in a variety of ingredients, artifacts, and styles (Samuelson & Yegoiants, 2001). The theme park industry is actually originated from the opening of Disneyland in California in 1955. According to the market estimations (ERA, 2003), most theme parks are located in North America (35%) and Asia (35%). Most Asian theme parks are developed and operated in the form of public-private partnerships as local / regional level. In China, theme park operators mainly generate revenue from first-time entry tickets rather than repeated consumptions; its theme park industry is predominantly supply-led with little attention given to visitor needs. As stated by Ap (2002), many parks in China cannot generate perceived value for money and experience satisfaction.

Quite a number of previous researches had examined visitors’ perceived importance of various theme park attributes to investigate visitors’ choice criteria for theme parks and had made detailed assessments of theme park attributes (Lewis, & Clacher, 2001). Both Moutinho (1988) and McClung (1991) conducted researches regarding the factors influencing the choice criteria of theme park and amusement park. In Moutinho’s (1988) study, findings showed that visitors ranked “fun rides” as the most important attributes, followed by “little waiting” and “good climate and a nice environment”. McClung (1991) segmented the respondents of the study and found that influential factors for choosing a theme park were different between park visitors and non-visitors. Results indicated that park visitors viewed both “family attractions” and “thrill attractions” as more important than non-visitors did. Thach and Axinn (1994) investigated issues relating to theme park attributes. Visitors were asked to rate their desirability of 42 listed amusement park attributes. The study found that the breadth (the number of different parks that the visitors had visited) and depth (the number of visitations of the visitor to a single park) of experience with amusement parks did have some implications on the ranking of attributes. They further identified the core attributes (cleanliness, variety of rides and scenery) and discriminating attributes (price, proximity and convenience) in theme parks. In addition, two main findings from this study were also consistent with Moutinho’s (1988) study. Both studies concluded that family and friends were the most important