



by Marc Bluestone

Bluestone's Retail Strategies

Dumbo, Shamu, Mickey and You...

What We Can All Learn From Theme Parks

There's something about flying over California on an elephant that stimulates your imagination. Likewise, the excitement of looping on a roller coaster, the weirdness of being attacked by imaginary bugs in a darkened theater, or the majesty of a killer whale jumping out of the water on command can cause even the most hardened soul to lighten up.

While theme parks may be fantasy and fun to those of us who visit them, they are serious business to the people who design, build, market, and manage them.

- Their business is a competitive one.
- They don't sell on price.
- They sell on the quality of their product.
- The decision to buy their product is an expensive one.
- People demand a great experience.
- If they fail, even once, to deliver a great experience, there is a good chance the customer might go elsewhere the next time.

Sound familiar? While it might seem a stretch, I would suggest that there is much that we can learn from theme park operators. Here are a few quick lessons...

Theme Parks Know That The Best Defense Is A Good Offense...

What do you do when sales are down? What do you do when a new competitor opens? A theme park builds. They invest. They know that the best story they can tell to keep someone coming back is a story about what's new and what's great. If they slow down or fail to keep up with what's new, they will die. They know that lesson because countless members of their industry have ignored it and disappeared as a result.

Theme park operators know that they can't show up at 10:00 am, unlock the door, and hope for a good day. Instead, they know they need to be proactive in finding ways to fight for growth.

Great businesses of any kind create and execute plans that cause continuous growth. Great businesses believe that they can exercise control over their destiny and set out to prove it everyday.

Grow Or Shrink; There's No Standing Still...

In nearly any business, stagnation is death. There is no such thing as standing still. It's impossible to set, and work towards, a goal of flat sales. If you are not doing things to create growth, then you will shrink.

Successful theme parks never stand still. They add new rides and remove old ones, change food offerings, and create new souvenirs. They infuse new life in their marketing and create new reasons to talk to their customers.

Disneyland is in the process of completely renovating its Space Mountain. This is a multi-year project where the park completely demolished an old ride to replace it with a more modern one. Did they have to do it? No. The old ride worked fine. But it was getting old. Disney knows that it pays to stay ahead.

What are you doing to create growth? How will your business be different next year than it is this year? Have you created a vision of what your business can become? Do you take every opportunity to reach out to your customers?

What else can we do to stay ahead? Can we offer faster order completion? A better guarantee? A larger selection? How about a whole new way of designing and pricing orders? Customers are waiting for one of us

to present a compelling new story.

Expand Your Offerings To Attract More Customers...

Theme parks strive to provide a balanced product offering that will please the maximum number of people.

They have thrill rides for adrenaline junkies, boat rides for the faint of heart, climbing structures for the little ones, and benches for spectators.

When a theme park hits a rut or misses its mark, they invest their way out of it by broadening their product offering. When Disney opened "California Adventure" in 2001, they were widely criticized in the media and punished at the ticket office by what many perceived to be too narrow a product offering. Disney responded by investing huge amounts of money to add numerous rides making the park better balanced for families and more exciting to thrill seekers.

What can a framer do? We can invest in ancillary lines or aggressively carve out niches. Many framers have found that the road to increased sales through framing alone is a bumpy one. Instead, they have turned to gift lines, photo frames, and art to give customers reasons to visit more often. Many framers have also found success in "specializing" by developing a reputation for products like custom mirrors, canvas transfers, or shadowboxes.

It Takes Time...

Theme park operators know that huge attendance figures are not built overnight. Many parks take years to achieve their most conservative expectations. During that time, the management may adjust their plans and modify their focus, but in the final analysis, they realize that the road to success is through perseverance and continued

investment.

Have you ever dabbled in something (like an ad campaign or new product line) only to quit because it wasn't working? Is it possible that it would have worked had you demonstrated greater commitment?

While You Sleep, They Paint...

When the theme park closes, the real action begins. Most big theme parks employ a night crew to perform major repairs and maintenance every night. Did you know that some parks paint railings and frequently leaned-on buildings almost every day?

Theme park operators know that each day is showtime. They must present their best face everyday just to stay in the game. Do we do that? How much maintenance have we deferred on our stores only to have our business slowly, almost imperceptibly, decline from being a showcase to being shop-worn, dated, and barely credible?

It's all a matter of timing and commitment. We need to replace the carpet before it wears out. We need to paint before the walls are screaming for it. For that matter, we need to implement an updated marketing strategy before sales decline, instead of waiting until we're in trouble. Fix it before it breaks.

Put Your Customers First...

Theme parks know that it is all about the experience. Customers will pay the big ticket for admission; they will even mortgage their house to buy a soft-drink. But watch out... if they ever feel that their satisfaction isn't the park's primary concern, they will stop coming back.

I suspect the same is true in our stores. Do we always place customers first? Are our policies constructed to please our customers, or to protect ourselves? Are we flexible when it comes to doing things that will help our cus-

tomers?

When a vending machine for feminine hygiene products broke in a Legoland women's restroom, did Legoland expect its customers to walk to the next restroom to get what they needed? No. They opened the machine and let their guests simply take what they needed. They demonstrated that satisfying guests was more important than a small amount of foregone revenue. Are you losing the war because you're so busy trying to win a battle?

~~If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It...~~ Fix It Before It Breaks...

What's the summary? Theme parks are all about being pro-active. We should be too...

...in the design of our business model.

...in maintenance.

...in investment.

...in marketing.

...in customer experience and service.

Businesses grow when their people go to work everyday with the goal of reinventing, improving and perfecting. Our big box friends and many of our better competitors bring this attitude to work each day. Do you? ■

Marc Bluestone is president of FrameGroup Incorporated, located in St. Louis, MO. With a staff of more than 50, FrameGroup operates 10 custom framing stores, a mobile custom framing gallery, and a commercial framing division. Before starting his own business, Marc held retail management positions in sales, merchandising, and operations and was vice-president of a publicly held retail company.