Branding for a global destination: How London Venues can unlock competitive advantage

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According to results published from a major international study by MasterCard, London is forecast to receive a Globally dominant 18.7 million visits this year, which equates to an 8 per cent surge in tourism in 2014.

The findings indicate that London has maintained and even built on its post Olympic allure, but what does this mean for the capital's venues and how do they manage to be heard above the noise?

Firstly in so many cases it's not about the aesthetics or even the location. It's about the visitor experience. Creating it, branding it and selling it.

It's no secret that the branding and marketing of an experience is a complex art. Dubbed as "marketing the invisible", a customer cannot touch or feel a service like they can a product, and the service experience itself can vary depending on a myriad of factors, including staff competence, weather and even the mood of the customer. Services also cannot be 'stored' other than as memories, so it's important to make these exceptional.

The London venue and live entertainment industry has a global reputation of excellence. Unsurprisingly the market is saturated; there are now approximately 25,000 venue and entertainment businesses in London, although VisitBritain has predicted a 4.2% growth in value for inbound tourism this year, so the opportunity for venues to capitalise on this healthy growth is immense.

In our experience at Underscore what most venues are lacking is that special "spark". This isn't achieved by promotional activity or through experiential marketing strategies. It is achieved by developing an emotional connection with your target audience that is used to nurture and develop a relationship for the long term. Here are a few key considerations to help location brands to better connect with audiences.

Know your audience

It can be easy to get caught up in "the way things are done around here" and forget to prioritise the very people you are trying to attract, your customers. Think first about the demographics and behaviours of your target audience. Where do they come from and how do they travel? What are their spending patterns? Where do they work? What else do they do in their free time? How much time do they have available for leisure? What level of education do they have? What gets them out of bed in the morning? What does happiness look like to them? Every piece of information you gather will help you understand who you are marketing to and most importantly what they want to hear. Never assume. It's always better to ask.

Many people attend cultural venues because of a hedonistic drive to seek experiences that bring them enjoyment. Knowing this is one thing, but if you do not know what enjoyment looks like for your customers, you cannot communicate with them clearly. Preferences on venues, attendance motivations and arts and culture differ significantly just by age group and gender alone. Throw in some special interest groups, cultural preferences and competitors' offerings and things get more complicated. Make the effort to really get to know your customers. Survey them and test your assumptions and concepts on them. Check if your story resonates with them. Does it truly create an emotional connection?

Know your front line

Remarkable insights can be gleaned by asking the opinions of people who live and breathe the brand every day; the employees themselves. When Alexandra Palace commissioned Underscore to revisit their positioning we facilitated sessions, which challenged their teams to find a way to connect the original vision of the Palace to their own experience. The result was "Alexandra Palace – the people's palace", which ensured their staff felt like custodians of the brand and this was then supported by a customer call to action of "Discover your Ally Pally". This defined the venue as a familiar and welcoming destination for discoveries of the young, the old and everyone in between. There is always a reason why your brand is special, you might just need help articulating it, so why not start at the front line to see your own people become living, breathing brand ambassadors.

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Develop your distinct difference

For venues in particular, making marketing visible and memorable can be difficult. There is consistent pressure to reconnect with old audiences, expand reach, attract a completely new audience and achieve record visitor numbers. But simple is always best.

Once you've got to know your people, clarify your own objectives; the best experiences are authentic experiences so be honest about who you are and what you stand for. Over promising and under delivering is hugely detrimental to your brand as you cannot be everything to everyone. But you can be something special to enough audiences by offering an experience that's true to your brand and therefore memorable for all the right reasons.

Carve out your niche by taking the time to identify what makes your brand special and different, and cement it. Bounce ideas off existing customers or other stakeholders to challenge yourself even further, and you will be surprised what you can uncover.

Plan ahead, and collaborate to execute effectively

Whether you're a destination venue or an Estate landlord it's important to remember that first impressions last.

You can ensure a great start by ensuring that your welcome messages are clear and on brand, and that the visitor experience is uniform and universal wherever possible. To achieve this you may wish to consider teaming up with surrounding businesses to offer more choice and to strengthen the offer of the wider area as a destination in itself.

The right combination of commercial and leisure offerings supported by themed events creates a series of short stories that contribute to the overall brand experience, and The Cadogan Estate is a great example of this approach.

Amidst a full calendar of events for which Underscore has provided brand support, "Chelsea in Bloom" has become an annual event that offers the landlord and the retailer a chance to collaborate. As a result 26% more visitors this year took their chance to explore a world of exclusivity, excitement and spontaneity during the RHS Flower Show week.

So in many ways unlocking your brand story is a complex process. It's a collaboratively driven period of getting to know your customers and your employees, and then making some concrete decisions about yourself. But in doing this, even in the 'crowded' London market, any location can unlock their competitive advantage and make a lasting connection.

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Hello there we're underscore. An award winning agency team of creative thinkers, branding strategists & digital designers. Nice to meet you.

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