



Chapter 8

Visitors Want Great Experiences and Made to Order Moments

Imagine

... driving along a scenic highway enveloped in majestic trees and suddenly emerging into the sunlight. You're overlooking an ancient, broad, lush valley, where on a clear day, it appears you could see forever. A doe and her fawn are quietly grazing, appearing not to notice your presence. You stop for a moment, emerging noiselessly from your car and take a few minutes to listen to the silence.

... horses clopping past your window and a fire crackling in the fireplace, as you relax in an authentic, original house right in the middle of an impeccably restored historic village. This is your residence for the next few days while you explore the oldest plantations on American soil.

... watching sunlight shimmering across the bay on a crisp, golden afternoon, waves gently lapping at your feet, while a sailboat glides by. You've settled into chair in a waterside village for a few quiet moments, before having dinner in a restaurant that author James Michener rated the highest of any in the area, that has maintained a reputation as the finest for decades.

Travel and tourism are about life punctuated with experiences like these, inspiring and filled with unanticipated "made to order moments."

For decades, restaurateurs, entertainment moguls, retail mavericks, sports teams, hospitality icons, cities, towns, and more, have viewed themselves as selling a product, tickets, a meal, a history lesson, or a hotel room. Tourism marketing organizations thought they were basically working to entice visitors to buy whatever others had on offer. Turns out, they were all wrong.

All the above have been in the experience business, they just didn't know it, and didn't act that way. When visitors begin searching for a trip they want to take, the first thing they do is search for what they want to do, what they want to experience. Suppliers then must be in the business of developing and delivering experiences, a part of which just happens to be a hotel stay, a movie, a shopping trip, a restaurant meal, or a sports event, or even a driving tour.



Some marketers are making good progress. In a presentation to a sports marketing class, the head of ticket sales of the Philadelphia 76ers basketball team never once used the words ticket sales. Instead, he focused on the fact that his organization was delivering customers an “experience,” one third of which happened to be a basketball game. He stressed the importance of the entire engagement of the customer with the team, from start to finish, and follow up before the next game.

Possibly, as the first interaction the organization has with the customer, the current game can serve as the gateway to the development of a lifelong relationship with a fan who may engage with the team for a season, a decade, or longer. What occurs in that one experience can determine whether a ticket holder becomes a continuing source of revenue, or a word-of-mouth advertiser for the team.

Whether the visitor's first stop is a resort, retail shop, attraction, historic town, hotel, or visitor region, the second the visitor arrives, their experience begins unfolding and continues, for good, bad, or indifferent, until they depart. Often no signs indicate the visitor is welcome. Nothing points the visitor in the right direction. A front desk attendant who didn't get enough sleep the night before can begin the visitor's experience with a surly interaction. Shopping areas with plastic plants and poor lighting deliver the signal that visitors are not important enough to keep the physical environment in good shape.



Granted, every visitor experience has a lot of moving pieces and parts. And all experiences are not created equal. Those that occur in a community, or at a shopping mall for example, depend on others to deliver the experience with little control over what occurs. Outdoor experiences are beholden to the weather. Things are further complicated by such high turnover rates staff are rarely all trained at the same time. The expectations created by the latest technology have raised the bar for customer service and engagement even higher.

Even organizations in the tourism industry that have great products specifically designed for their ideal customers struggle with visitor service issues. There may be a great historical story that visitors can be engaged in. Yet, the tour guide knows the story, but does not convey it with any excitement or engagement in the delivery. A restaurant has the best local food in the area, but minimum wage wait staff may not be motivated to serve diners well. Someone left a small heap of trash outside the trendiest shop in town.

Immediately visitors get the wrong impression, and the experience gets off on the wrong foot. The collection of perfect marketing materials and the block filled with fantastic shops are for naught. Even small details and service snafus can make or break an experience, if the visitor believes they are significant.

If what visitor see, hear, and do, has not been thought through completely, their experience may not be a good one. When that happens, all the money spent to attract the visitor will have been wasted, because that individual is not likely to return, and may even tell others about their less than satisfying experience.

Delivering experiences requires careful thought about the entire process, including dealing with the unsavory issues such as poor quality, poor attitudes, and poor service. This is all made much more complicated because it includes all

the elements visitors interact with in the community, ranging from the accommodations they choose, restaurants they eat in, attractions they visit, the shopping they do, roads they drive on, where they stop for gas, and even, what they read while on a trip.



Experiences Can Be Many Things

A series of interactions: standing in front of a painting in an art gallery is an experience. Strolling in an arboretum or looking out from the crown of the Statue of Liberty, is an experience. Yet, surrounding each of these core events is a whole chain of interactions that it takes to get to and from the location, and through it, that are all part of the experience.

A happening in time: since any experience takes more than a nanosecond, every experience occurs in a space of time, spanning a series of interactions that take place over a short period of time or, a longer period, such as the wait between making a reservation and participating in an experience, that can be weeks or even months later. An actual tourism experience can often span several days yet planning it can stretch for six months or more.

A defining moment: according to the Heath brothers writing in “The Power of Moments,” an experience that rises above the everyday and provides insight into oneself can cause us to rewire our thinking in the moment. Insights into other cultures often deliver a defining moment when we compare another to our own.

An optimal experience: in the business classic “Flow,” the author relates that some of the most transformative experiences occur when a person’s body or mind is stretched to the limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something challenging yet worthwhile. Optimal experiences, he believes, are something we make happen when we get into a state so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter, and the consciousness of passing time recedes.

Loaded with emotions: a visit to a restaurant where each touchpoint involves a physical action laden with a wide variety of emotions, as the experience is planned, anticipated, and finally takes place.

Thrilling: reaching a mountain summit or kayaking a raging river that gets the adrenaline moving.

Devastating: when a disaster, accident, or natural catastrophe occurs.

Entertaining: a show or musical production that is engaging and inspiring.

We're Deep in the Experience Economy

In The Experience Economy, Pine and Gilmore proffered that through the past century, America's economy has proceeded up the scale, starting with the extraction of commodities such as coal, oil and gas and growing food, to making products, delivering services, and on up, to staging experiences. The various levels, they believe, are based on the value added delivered at each stage:

Level 1: If you charge for basic ingredients that go into other products, you are in the commodity business. Coal, steel, grain, and canned vegetables are commodities.

Level 2: If you charge for tangible things and sell products, you are in the goods business. Walmart, Target, and car dealerships are in the goods business.

Level 3: If you charge for the activities you execute, you are in the service business. Accountants, babysitters, and housekeepers are in the service business.

Level 4: If you charge for the time customers spend with you, you are in the experience business. That puts hotels, attractions, resorts, spas, movie theaters, and more, in the experience business.

Level 5: If you charge for the demonstrated outcome the customer achieves, you are in the transformation business. This puts hairdressers, consultants, financial advisers, and others who aim to deliver an outcome different from where the customer is at the start, are, at least somewhat, in the transformation business.

Adding a fifth level, Pine and Gilmore believe that an organization can guide the "transformation" of an individual through an experience.

The Newfoundland/Labrador Visitors Bureau describes these levels in the experience delivered by one of the wineries in their region:

Level 1: The grapes are the commodity used to make the goods.

Level 2: Wine is produced from the grapes, creating the product.

Level 3: Services such as online purchasing, shipping, tours to learn about the vineyard, and wine tasting on the property, surround the product.

Level 4: An experience planned to surround wine tasting.

Level 5: A transformational inspiring event that includes meeting the vintner or sommelier in a personalized, hands-on event, complete with a story that connects the visitor to the land, the people, and the wine. The experience can be further enhanced with a chef serving an exquisite meal that perfectly pairs the food and wine.



The Bureau goes on to say: Travelers really want to go beyond spectating. There are driven by a deep emotional motivation to experience new people, culture, and places, and perhaps discover something inside themselves along the way. They want to immerse themselves in the local culture and participate wherever and whenever they can.

The head of the Minnesota Historical Society believes that “one of the things that our field realized in the last few decades is that we’re in the experience business. A lot of us fell in love with the content, took out a big stick to poke it down people’s throats, and then couldn’t figure out why they didn’t like it. History gets exciting when it’s personal, when you see your slice of a story and connect it to other things you know. We must serve up experiences centered on the people who come to learn.”

The gift of experiences has even transformed the Father’s Day major tool sales holiday into an experience event. Over \$3.2B worth of sporting events, concerts, dinners, and other experience activities are purchased by children who want to offer Dads something unique and thoughtful, while also spending quality time together.

Technology has also transformed experiences that surround us daily. Television began with three channels on black and white screens. High definition and surround sound now immerses us in events with action taking place on a 5-foot screen. Advertising that used to appear only in print is now deployed on a smart phone in real time at the point of purchase. The Model T car with the front crank engine start has evolved into a driving experience during which the car slows down automatically to avoid impact, swerves to avoid obstacles, maneuvers itself into a parking place, and in some cases, even drives itself.

Recently, watching a presentation on augmented reality, a screen placed over a flat two-dimensional magazine article rendered a little dinosaur in 3-D, who hopped across the page. The presenter reached under the screen, tickled the dinosaur on the side and the little guy responded by moving over and making a little sound! Wow! A virtually delivered experience that was not even real!

We are aware of some very perceptive Bed and Breakfasts who aid their guests to assemble their entire experience in the community mostly to manage their expectations and send them to places they are confident that will avoid a bad experience affecting their whole stay. Yet there are few others who help to put a whole experience together. Good group tour operators make sure the visitors whole experience will be a good one, but most travel agents no longer deal with the details because they are not paid a commission on each element.



All Great Experiences Have that “Wow” Factor

In Platform, Michael Hyatt states that every great experience has “an unanticipated surprise that creates delight, amazement, wonder or awe.” It is the part of the experience that stays with us every time we recall it and tell the story to others. That wow is what makes the experience feel special and the insight that it delivers, is what we remember for years to come.

Great Experiences Engage All the Senses

When I hear, I forget. When I see, I remember. When I do, I understand. This 2000-year-old advice from Confucius still rings true even in the age of everything digital. Engaging all senses, seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling, is part of any great experience. For example, most historic homes only include either a self-guided brochure or a passive docent tour, which involves only seeing and hearing. Think of that same experience when you can touch the exquisite velvet fabrics, magnificent brocade, and tooled leather, tour the kitchen, smell fresh baking, and enjoy high tea served in one of the elegant rooms while tasting the fresh-baked scones. Of course, you would have to pay more for that experience, but it would be worth it!



Great Experiences Evoke an Emotional Response

For a story to be intriguing and an experience to be transformational, the experience must ultimately touch the heart. One must be able to “feel the power of the mountains,” “be moved by the beat of the music,” or “respond to the “gorgeously setting sun slipping below the horizon.” Videos, such as those which let visitors see different cultural traditions and dance to the music, are particularly effective to liven the emotions to promote an experience, but they are never a substitute for the real thing during which the heart is moved.

Great Experiences Have a Feel of Authenticity

Currently, there are few aspects of life that have not been touched by commercialization, the manufactured, staged, and contrived. In their second book, *Authenticity*, Pine and Gilmore noted there are many examples of fakery that we encounter every day and may not even realize it: computer generated actors, people photo-shopped into situations, faked phone calls to leave a meeting early, fake law enforcement and fake drugs offered only to catch people, fake IDs challenging for law enforcement to spot, fake sports like fantasy football, fake advertising delivered by bots, fake sales which yell “going out of business” to generate more visitor traffic with no intent to close, fake music featured in tribute concerts, fake art, and fake fixtures, like thermostats, that don’t work. It’s no wonder that people are seeking authenticity, the original and the real thing.



Great Experiences Let Us Transcend Time and Time Slip Away

As we learned earlier, achieving real leisure necessitates not only physically removing the body from the everyday world, but the mind also must be engaged to blot out thoughts of work. Only then can anyone become fully engaged and fully immersed in an experience that slips the bonds of time, spending an hour or two in complete relaxation, without realizing how much time has passed.

The more participatory and engaging the experience, the greater possibility that time will pass unnoticed. Exhibits with interactivity get viewers involved, elements in motion get viewers engaged. Add sound and smell, and viewers get immersed. One of the best examples of this phenomenon is the Musical Instrument Museum in Phoenix, where you can see the physical instruments and view videos of the culture. When you move past a particular point, the transponder you are carrying signals to start the music, letting you get truly immersed. It is engaging indeed.

Great Experiences Intrigue

The only way to engage the mind in an experience is to make the information delivered intriguing and interesting. Storytelling is critical, but the storytelling must be authentic and factual, while at the same time, inspiring and engaging. This involves “painting with words,” while holding attention to the point where the details of the story can be absorbed. The more text on the web pulls the reader into the story so they can “see” and “feel” themselves in the experience, the more likely they will buy. As an intriguing story is shared with others, it helps facilitate communication between oneself and our families, significant others, and loved ones, to bring true meaning to the experience.



Great Experiences Allow for Unique Outcomes

No experience is ever the same for two people because we respond differently internally to experiences. Promoting and enabling these individual outcomes, through customization and personalization, increases the possibility that the experience will feel special. Take underwater diving for example. Enabling each participant to take their own photographs will enable them to create a unique personal record of their underwater experience. Or personalizing the pre-concert content of a live concert can influence the attitude of the listener during the performance to make the experience more immersive.

Great Experiences Allow for Aspiration and Self-Actualization

Philosophers state that a man is the sum of his experiences and we humans work to create the personas that reflect who we want to be. In the same vein, visitors are seeking experiences to realize their dreams, and move them along to becoming the person they ultimately want to be. Great experiences present the opportunity for individuals to continue this life quest. Even if an experience is not transformational, great experiences allow for individuals to proceed up the levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs toward self-actualization, the highest level of evolution, where achieving our dreams becomes the driving force of our life choices. As people move up Maslow's continuum, they purchase more experiences than material goods.

Great Experiences Touch Our Hearts and Souls and Create Meaning

People don't want just baseline relaxation; they want experiences that make them FEEL different at the conclusion. The goal is to create "Made to Order Moments," engaging visitors in a way that touches their hearts, raises their emotions, and penetrates their souls. People want experiences that have magic, transporting them out of their daily life and into a different world, yet integrated into their

lifestyle in a way that makes sense to their values and what's important. Those experiences afford us knowledge about ourselves.

According to Tufts University, "transformational experiences are defined as experiences that fundamentally challenge a person's assumptions and preconceptions, as well as their beliefs and values, affecting how they understand and feel about themselves, others and the world." That's what we in the tourism industry should all shooting for.

National Travel Center was founded a decade ago to do something meaningful in the tourism industry. Today, as a Delaware Benefit Corporation, we believe we are doing so across the country, assisting communities of all sizes to attract more visitors to increase economic development and improve quality of life.

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