

**The European theme park industry is climbing to dizzying heights. Its 300 amusement parks generate around €2.5bn every year,** and a recent report by

PricewaterhouseCoopers estimates that by 2009 the industry in Europe, the Middle East and Africa is set to take off and produce annual revenues of €4.2bn.

This prodigious growth is being fuelled by new openings and modernisation across the continent, as ever more parks fight for their share of the market. According to PricewaterhouseCoopers, this pressure to keep modernising parks has been a key catalyst for the industry's growth, as seen in the high-tech glitz of Europe's top five parks. The UK's Blackpool Pleasure Beach pulls in 6.2 million visitors per year and is the second best-attended park in Europe. It is followed by Denmark's Tivoli Gardens, Germany's Europa Park and Efteling in the Netherlands, which attracts around 3.2 million visitors annually.

Trouncing them all though, is Disneyland Paris, which had 10.2 million visitors skipping through its gates in 2005. It is the only European venue in the top-10 best-attended parks in the world but, despite its success, it has long been financially off the rails. When it opened, 14 years ago, the park was publicly pilloried for its high prices and all-embracing American influences. Construction costs left it with a debt of \$2.4bn (€1.9bn), which was restructured last year as bankruptcy beckoned.

With repayments beginning in three years' time, the park's priority is to increase turnover enough to service its burden. Revenue rose just 2% last year to €1.07bn, but the park may

have a lucky star in the form of some very wealthy corporate sponsors. Admission sales generally bring in about 55% of a park's revenues, with food and beverage comprising around 20%, games and merchandise 15% and other sources close to 10%. But, by leveraging its impressive attendance, Disneyland Paris has concocted an innovative new revenue stream.

In an environment where guests are relaxed and receptive to whatever is thrown at them, the opportunity for product placement would make any marketing executive's mouth water. And that's exactly what happened to Olivier Danan, Director of Brand Communications for GM Europe, when the car maker was approached in 2000 to supply hundreds of cars from its Opel brand to Disneyland Paris for ferrying VIPs and staff around.

That deal was a start, but for Danan the big attraction was the chance to partner on an auto stunt show that Eurodisney was developing. The attraction itself is like a stunt show on steroids: each half-hour show is performed up to five times every day in front of 3,000 spectators in a custom-built auditorium. Cars chase after motorbikes, turning like ballet dancers on point, pirouetting perfectly in formation and missing each other by only millimetres. There's also a giant jump across the set, which culminates in a car flying through the air backwards and landing on a truck.

All the cars are specially modified and loaded with trickery, but crucially they are all clearly identifiable as part of the Opel brand. "The deal for us was to have a very strong presence of the Opel brand. The second element was to use all cars in the shape of current cars," says Danan. The black enemy cars are Corsas and the hero's car resembles a cross between

With the school holidays well under way, Europe's theme parks are a big business. Christian Sylt investigates.

# Park Life





Disneyland Park: Space Mountain Mission 2



the Speedster, Tigra and Vectra. The cars were built at Opel's design workshop in Russelsheim and Danan adds that "Disney worked very closely with our engineering department, so it was a combined effort."

He refuses to say how much Opel is paying for its involvement, except for stating that it is well over €10m, a figure that he justifies with the assertion that the sponsorship delivers for Opel in four dimensions. "The first dimension is similar to what you can get from other sponsorships, which is awareness and image," he says. "The second thing we look at is familiarity, which is much more relevant than in other activities because our cars are not on the side of the event but at the centre of it. So we have the possibility to promote our cars as the hero of the event."

The show also has a promotional appeal, since Opel gets an annual allocation of rooms at Disney's six on-site hotels, as well as access to special rates reserved for its clients. And finally, Danan says that the show's targeted audience is a crucial factor for Opel because the company is targeting its mid-market cars at families and, as he says, "families and theme parks go very well together."

It has long been common practice for parks to badge their rides in return for sponsorship cash, as seen with the Pepsi Max Big One at Blackpool Pleasure Beach, but Danan's "four dimensional advantage" suggests a future of theme park revenue streams that are far more integrated into the whole experience. And as more parks open and competition increases, these extra revenue streams will become all the more important.

"Quite simply, the winners in the future will be those that are most skilful in raising their prices as they add value," says Michael Jolly, Chairman of StarParks Europe, which runs seven parks across Europe and is the third largest European theme park group after Tussauds and Disney. And adding value means understanding customers and responding to their needs.

"The over 50s don't spend their leisure time doing what their parents did when they were over 50," he explains. "They do what they liked to do when they were younger, and they liked

Star Parks:  
Walibi Aquitaine  
Kosmic



## There is evidence to show how powerful nostalgia is as a motivator of spending

to go to parks." Special "no rides" tickets may help to bring in older visitors in the future, and parks may begin to change their content because; "there is plenty of evidence showing just how powerful nostalgia can be as a motivator of behaviour and spending."

And as Jolly says, rides shouldn't be the only new technology pulling in the next generation of punters. "Taking home a printed photograph of you on the flume may rapidly seem as antiquated as going to the telephone kiosk to make a call," he says. Guests at StarParks' Dutch venue Walibi World can already send multimedia messaging e-mails to family and friends from the park, and one possible development could see guests given radio-tagged passes that are tracked by cameras in parks, creating a personalised photo suite of the whole day.

As the quest to appeal to visitors and integrate revenue continues, the possibilities are endless. "We now have a growing generation for whom the real stars, stories and themes will have first seeded in their imagination via the games industry not the cinema," says Jolly. "This will not only need to be reflected in our future use of theming attractions, but may also lend itself to innovations like 'play the ride at home.'" After all, why should people leave the park experience when they leave the park? Especially when playing at home can help to keep the stars, stories and themes fresh, and keep the visitors coming back for more.

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