

## Less zeal; more appeal

David Hayes describes how his company learned the hard way that interpretation with a commercial edge needs to do more than satisfy its creators' enthusiasms.

The first of many over ambitious interpretive projects, the Landmark Centre at Carrbridge was set up in 1970 with the grandiose 'mission' to interpret the history and natural history of the Highlands. Facilities then included a multi-vision show and exhibition on 'Man in the Highlands', shop and restaurant. Outside the first nature trail in Britain wound its way through the Caledonian pinewood.

Some years later, without surveying our existing customers, we created Scotland's first Forest Heritage Park. We thought that the park, by interpreting the human story of Scotland's forests, would complement the nature trail and attract more visitors.

The initial exhibits included a working steam powered sawmill and a 70 foot high fire tower. We intended to follow these up with major exhibition stations on timber felling, timber extraction, milling, propagation, management and products: everything anyone might ever want to know about timber. Full of enthusiasm we completed the felling exhibition, describing the benefits of the straight-backed Great American toothed saw over the salmon-bellied peg-toothed saw.

Few of our customers shared our enthusiasm. Many by-passed the felling exhibition; those that did venture in paused but briefly to glance at our superb collection of early chain saws. We were providing information that no one needed and creating a facility with minimal appeal and marketability.

Since then we have focussed on attractions that are highly repeatable, have maximum appeal to our main market – families with children aged from 3 to 15 – and as far as possible are appropriate to a woodland setting at the edge of a National Park.

As a result of this more customer orientated approach we have trebled admission income and now provide the equivalent of 70 full time jobs. Landmark is a sustainable visitor attraction, not dependent on public sector funding, that creates substantial local, social and economic benefits.

At the Camera Obscura in Edinburgh we very nearly went down the same false route. The property, with its views out over the city, seemed the natural place to tell the story of Edinburgh. Imbued with interpretive zeal and a desire to emulate Patrick Geddes we drew up detailed plans for an urban interpretive centre.

Luckily we also put in a temporary 'Magic Gallery' exhibition on optical illusions. When we saw how much people were enjoying themselves there we realised that by following a conventional heritage interpretation route we would be creating yet

another unnecessary facility, providing visitors with information that was not directly relevant to their enjoyment and appreciation of the city.

Since then we have concentrated on the optically related themes of seeing and illusions. This more commercial, visitor related, strategy is paying dividends. Admissions are well up as is admission price. The tower echoes to peals of laughter as visitors of all ages and nationalities enjoy themselves.

At Inveraray Jail, by contrast, heritage interpretation has a pivotal role. The early 19th century courthouse and prisons are the real thing. This is the place where men and women were sentenced and briefly imprisoned before being transported to Australia. Prisoners picked oakum and made herring nets here. Some female prisoners gave birth while in jail. Interpretation here is highly relevant to the visit and greatly enhances the visitor experience.

The mistakes we have made over the last 35 years are still, however, being repeated. Substantial buildings have been put up to interpret themes that have no site significance and insufficient popular appeal. Facilitated by government grants and lottery funds, grandiose ill thought out projects have got off the ground too readily. Quite apart from the Millennium Dome, we have science centres, clan centres, archaeological centres, and music centres. Few are sustainable or attract the visitor numbers they originally project. Many have already closed. Others require regular injections of public money to keep them afloat. A far more rigorous approach to the assessment of potential projects is required if we are not to continue to create massive white elephants.

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In the modern world of business, it is useless to be a creative original thinker unless you can also sell what you create.

*David M. Ogilvy*