

Durlston A Marketing Approach to Project Development

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Aerial view of Durlston near Swanage

Introduction

Durlston Country Park near Swanage in Dorset is a 280-acre cliff top paradise of international importance for its habitats, wildlife and geology. At the eastern end of the Park is Durlston Castle. This was built between 1887 and 1891 by locally born stone merchant and philanthropist George Burt as the centrepiece of his Durlston estate. The castle has spent recent years as a pub, restaurant and nightclub but with funding from the South West of England Regional Development Agency (SWRDA) the lease returned to Dorset County Council in 2003.

Dorset County Council and its partners now have the opportunity to develop the Castle as an integral part of the Park and establish a world class 'Gateway Centre' for visitors to Durlston and the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site, England's only natural World Heritage Site.

In December 2006 the Project was awarded a Stage One pass from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) with a £3.27m grant earmarked as part of a £5.85m project. The stage two bid is being submitted in March 2008. It is anticipated that work on

site will start in spring 2009 with the Castle opening 16 months later.

The marketing approach

It is still perceived by many that marketing is a functional activity and relates primarily to advertising, promotion or branding. In addition it is often thought within service industries and the countryside sector that marketing is about generating a profit and is not applicable to countryside recreation and public services. There are few marketing texts of particular reference to countryside sites; I find *Countryside Recreation Site Management, A Marketing Approach* by Ian Keirle (2002), to be the most useful.

The current definition of marketing, as used by the Chartered Institute of Marketing, is 30 years old and is "the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably".

In its November 2007 Journal, the Chartered Institute of Marketing's research and information department suggested a new definition of marketing: *The strategic business function that creates value by stimulating, facilitating and fulfilling customer demand. It does this by building brands, nurturing innovation, developing relationships, creating good customer service and communicating benefits. By operating customer-centrally, marketing brings positive return on investment, satisfies shareholders and stakeholders from business and the community, and contributes to positive behavioural change*

and a sustainable business future.

So how does marketing relate to the project development of a £6m new interpretation facility on England's only natural World Heritage Site, the Jurassic Coast? And is the proposed new definition of marketing applicable to this project? Over the next few paragraphs I hope to explain why I think it is!

Customer demand

The first issue to consider is who are the customers. What is particularly distinct about the Durlston Project is the variety of customer groups that have an interest and involvement in the success of the project. The marketing technique of segmentation is widespread and used by the providers of a wide range of products and services. Market segmentation is defined as the subdividing of the market into distinct and increasingly homogeneous subgroups of customers, where any subgroup can be selected as a target market to be met with a distinct marketing mix. For the Durlston Project this process of segmentation can be applied not only to users of the Country Park but also to the broad base of stakeholders who have an interest in the project. This creates a great variety of customers to whom a different approach or marketing mix needs to be applied.

The range of customers with particular needs or demands includes:

- The site owner - Dorset County Council (DCC)
- Site managers - Dorset Countryside
- Supporters - Friends of Durlston
- Users - locals and visitors
- Local community - Swanage Town and Community
- Partnership, Swanage Town Council, businesses (accommodation, suppliers, transport, creative industries)
- Local authority - Purbeck District Council
- Funders - including: HLF, SWRDA, DCC, Dorset Wildlife Trust (DWT), charitable foundations, businesses
- Partners - DWT, World Heritage Team, Jurassic Coast Trust
- Other interested bodies - Dorset and New Forest Tourism Partnership, Dorset AONB, Dorset Gardens Trust, English Heritage, Natural England

Before the particular approach or marketing mix can be determined there is a need to understand the situation and the needs of the customer.

In 2003 detailed on and off-site survey work was undertaken by the Market Research Group from Bournemouth University, this research used face-to-face questionnaires to Durlston visitors establishing their demographics and asking their views about current provision and ideas for the future. The same interviewing technique was used in the local towns of Swanage, Dorchester, Weymouth and Poole to establish their awareness of and visiting patterns to Durlston and their general preferences for visits to countryside sites. This research has proved invaluable to support funding applications, generate

economic impact assessment and shape design solutions. With the launch of the Project publicly in 2004 a stakeholder meeting was held in the to be opened Lookout café, this provided the opportunity for informal discussion.

As well as this initial research, opportunities existed for continual feedback from visitors. The Lookout café had on each table a feedback form that customers could complete to give both their satisfaction on the café and their comments on the proposed Durlston Project. During the first two years of the café operation over 500 feedback forms were received.

The 'value' achieved by the Durlston Project can be considered in terms of ongoing and future user support but importantly at this stage of the project the buy-in from capital funders. The success of the project relies on a wide range of funding from individual donations, foundations, trusts and businesses to major contributions from organisations such as SWRDA, DCC and the HLF. The principal funder identified for the project was HLF. Early discussions were held with development officers and a Project Planning Grant (PPG) application for £50,000 for funding towards conservation, audience development, access and interpretation studies was awarded early in 2004. The success of this bid, although not a guarantee of future HLF support, was encouraging.

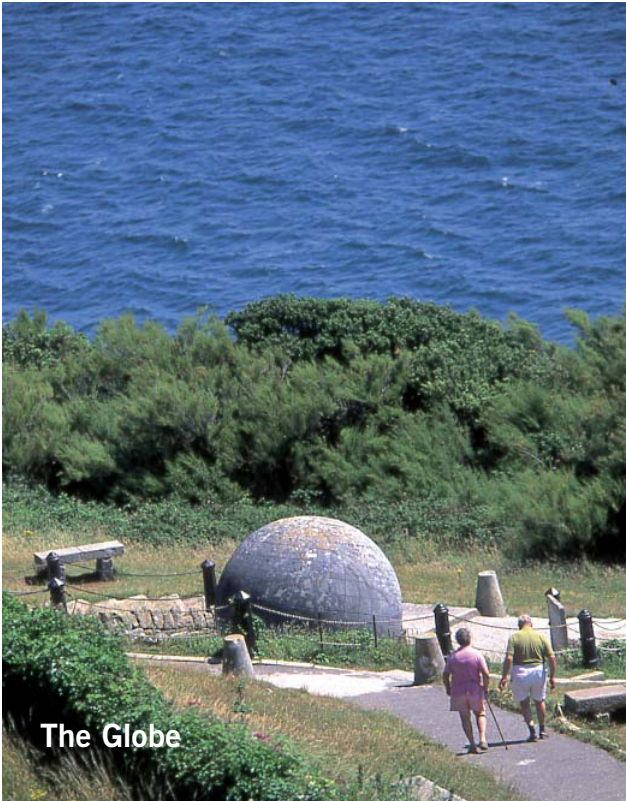
After successful completion of the PPG work there was further discussion with HLF officers regarding the scale of the bid and the scope of the work, this led to the project being reduced in cost from £7.8m to £5.8m. In April 2006 a bid for £3.27m was submitted to HLF for development and capital funding, a stage one pass was received in December 2006.

It is important to remember that funders are in the business of giving their money away, that is their remit and goal. However they will only want to give money to projects that best meet their needs. Although projects shouldn't be changed to meet a funder's requirements, most major funders have properly researched and considered objectives e.g. to improve access, so these needs must be considered throughout the process of project development.

Building brands

A number of initiatives were undertaken between 2004 and 2006, designed to showcase the new activities that Durlston could offer. Arguably the most important, considering the importance of catering for the future economic viability of the Castle, was the opening of the Lookout café in the Castle's lower annexe. The Castle's reputation for catering had been variable during its 30-year history as a pub and restaurant so to change the public's perception of the Castle it was essential that this initial catering operation was successful. With a focus on local produce, fairtrade supplies and a strong environmental awareness the café's success has grown since it opened in 2004. In 2005 the café won the Taste of the West Silver award in the tea room/café category in Dorset, in 2006 it topped that

with a Gold Award and entry into the regional finals. Other activities at Durlston have included arts events (including open-air theatre) and the 'Dawn to Dusk' open day that attracted 3000 people.



The Globe

Nurturing innovation

Due to the complex nature and individual circumstances of any development project it is difficult to find a project management tool that is applicable to any one project without being cumbersome and catch all in its approach. What can often be more suitable is a bespoke plan based on a strategic approach, it was this approach that was developed for Durlston, i.e. a structured approach that set out a forward strategy but one that still allowed flexibility for changing circumstances and new opportunities.

As part of the forward planning process it's important to know what problems might be encountered early on in the process and then consider how these could be mitigated or overcome in the future through the project's development.

Durlston Castle's use as a pub by a private operator caused years of problems for Country Park staff and for residents on the exit roads, so support for appropriate redevelopment of the Castle was strong. But Durlston is in an area of Dorset much affected by traffic congestion; it has limited public transport links and can only be accessed by car through the seaside town of Swanage. The potential transport problems associated

with the redeveloped castle were of concern to local people, planning authorities and funders. In response to these concerns a 28-day trial was launched in 2005 to demonstrate the possible effectiveness of a frequent shuttle bus service from Swanage to Durlston. The service was free, although donations were welcome, and a total of 2,500 people were carried. The shuttle also linked to an on-site four-seater 'golf buggy' that provided a service along the steep hill between the Lookout café, car parks and Visitor Centre. Both of these proposals have been incorporated into the plans for Durlston and will be further developed as part of a detailed Travel Plan to be produced for the site before the Castle opens.

Developing relationships

As well as gaining the views of current users and non-users it was essential to gain the support of a whole range of organisations. With a project that will take seven years to completion it was important to take a long-term view and during the initial stages regular meetings with key stakeholders were held. Stakeholders were given a tour of the Castle, project presentation or cliff top walk to show them the future role of the Castle and Durlston. As the project progresses it will remain paramount that all those involved feel that progress is being made and that the proposed operation will be successful.

In such a long-term project the internal relationships between the project team and its associates are vital. A project such as this is not achieved by one person, but by a group of complementary people working together to a shared vision. What's important is that the right people make the right decisions at the right time and that they are committed to the project's success. External consultants and advisory staff worked with the existing Durlston staff and the Friends of Durlston, an organisation now in its twentieth year with 700 members, a significant number of whom provide invaluable volunteer work on the Park. These volunteers have aided the project through professional input, fundraising, research and practical work.

Creating good customer service

There has been a lot of talk over the last few years about CRM or Customer Relationship Marketing. Various different thoughts exist as to what this is, ranging from detailed and accurate database and purchase recording systems, to the importance of excellent customer service. My view is that accurate records and systems of communication support and re-enforce the messages communicated through one-to-one relationships. The strength of Durlston is the knowledge and commitment of its staff and volunteers, with their customer skills expressed through the Visitor Centre and guided events. As part of the development of the project this will be expanded through the training of volunteers to be 'live interpreters' positioned at strategic positions around the Park such as the Castle rooftop observation deck where they can provide 'real-time' interpretation to visitors.

Communicating benefits

It was important that as the project developed people were kept up to date with progress (which to many was seen as painfully slow) and to have the opportunity for further comment and input. In addition to regular media releases to cover new events or the achievement of milestones a variety of other communication methods were used. Update seminars were held and supporters received a quarterly Project Update newsletter. Friends of Durlston were kept informed through their monthly newsletter and through regular on-site meetings and presentations. Part of the Lookout café was set out as a display on the Castle and its history with a separate display on the Jurassic Coast World Heritage site. Within the local free magazine a full page on Durlston was agreed with a linked advert for the Lookout, this provided a confirmed and regular slot for project news. Being part of Dorset County Council enabled Durlston to be featured regularly in the quarterly Council publication Your Dorset, which is distributed to homes across Dorset.

Conclusion

The November 2007 Institute of Marketing definition is not as pithy as the original 30-year-old definition but it does provide clear guidance in one paragraph about what marketing is really about. Hopefully the illustrated case study above provides an insight into how a marketing process can relate to project management by:

Building a brand, helping develop innovation, developing beneficial relationships, creating good customer service and communicating benefits.

The Durlston Project by operating customer-centrally, has brought a positive return on the County Council's investment with over £4.5m in funding, helps to meet the authorities Corporate Aims, has provided satisfied stakeholders from across a range of organisations and has now set in place the foundations for positive behavioural change and a sustainable business future for Durlston Castle.

There are many challenges ahead for the Project but through continuing this marketing-led approach the development of a remarkable facility and 'world-class' venue are achievable.

Profile

Martin worked as Durlston project manager between 2004 and 2006, a role that included submitting the successful £3.2m HLF stage one bid. Since August 2006 he has worked as project management consultant on the Project for Dorset County Council through his own business Heritage & Leisure Management www.heritageandleisure.co.uk

Further information

Durlston Country Park www.durlston.co.uk
Jurassic Coast www.jurassiccoast.com
The Jurassic Coast Trust www.whct.org.uk

References

Keirle, I (2002) 'Countryside recreation site management, a marketing approach', Routledge, London, 221pp.

Chartered Institute of Marketing (2007) 'Tomorrow's Word, Re-evaluating the role of marketing', The Marketer, November, pp 43-48.

Photographic References

*Aerial View credited to Roy Eggleston
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