Theme Park Master Planning

By

Peter Alexander
President
[Totally Fun Company](#)

So you want to build a theme park?

What do you do? Where do you start? How about taking some cool rides, and putting them together with some good restaurants, fun stores and pretty landscaping? Well, you can do exactly that, and some people have, but if you want to make your theme park work you'd better do some master planning.

The Numbers Game

If you want to build a theme park, the safest place to start is by doing a feasibility study. This study will tell you what kind of market your park will draw upon, what kind of attendance you can expect, and therefore how big to make the park. Now, this is sort of a Catch 22, because unless you have some idea of the type and quality level of the attraction you plan to build, you can't really pin down how many people will visit it. But given that you have some general idea of what you want to do, a good feasibility study can narrow down the parameters about what you should plan.

There are a million formulas we use when we do these studies, but at the end of the day, they all boil down to one number: The Design Day. To calculate the Design Day, you have to figure out how many people will be coming to the park during a day in peak season, and how many of them will actually be in park at the peak time of day. That number basically tells you how big to make everything-from the size of the walkways to the size of the parking lot. It tells you how many "entertainment units" (i.e. ride, show and game capacity per hour) you need to plan, how many restaurants and stores you'll need, and just about everything else, except maybe how big to make Mickey Mouse's ears.

The money guys will use this feasibility study to help them figure out if you are going to make a buck on the park, or go broke. There are two key factors here: your total attendance per year, and the per capita income you can expect from each guest. A lot of this depends on what kind of attractions you have, and how long you can entertain the guests. At a big theme park, like the Magic Kingdom or Universal Studios, there's more to experience than you can do in one day, so you can charge more for a ticket, and people will spend more on food and merchandise because they stay longer. At a small park, it works the other way.

Even considering all the science and statistical formulas we use, a feasibility study can only provide an educated guess at how big to make your park. For example, at Universal Studios, Florida, despite the fact that the park had a "rough opening," it exceeded the highest feasibility study attendance projection in the first year, and just kept growing from there. That is to say, more people came than we projected in our wildest imagination! What that meant for the park guests is there were some long lines at first. These exceeded our wildest expectations as well. For example, I had designed the E.T. ride with a pleasant indoor queue themed like a pine forest, but the actual lines stretched well outside the building. Our quick response to that was to improve the queue line experiences with videos, bigger shade structures, and live entertainment, but from a master planning point of view, so long as you leave space for the queues, you are pretty well covered.

The Theme

A "Real Theme Park" needs a theme, which is a funny thing to say, but have you ever noticed that a lot of the places we call "theme parks" don't have much of a theme at all? That's because a lot of them are not really theme parks, they are just amusement or thrill ride parks with some pretty scenery stuck in between giant iron rides that look like Martian machines from The War of The Worlds. For this discussion, we are going to stick to "Real Theme Parks," a term which describes Disney, Universal, many of the Busch parks, and certain others such as De Efterling in Holland.

Sometimes you start with a theme, and sometimes you evolve one over time.

For example, at Universal Studios Florida, we started with the theme that we were a working movie studio. Thus, when you arrive at Universal, the first thing you do is walk through the "studio gate." Now it so happens that the original Universal Studios in Los Angeles never had a studio gate. To get on to the Universal lot, you just drove past a guard shack and waved at a guard named "Scotty." However, since Scotty passed away, we decided to "borrow" the Paramount Studio main gate for Universal, Florida, and a replica (somewhat improved) of that is what is there today.

The rest of Universal in Florida follows the layout of a standard studio. Once you enter, you are on the "front lot," which looks like a bunch of sound stages. Some of them are real, and some happen to be rides cloaked in "sound stage themed" (i.e. concrete box) buildings. But if you turn right on to Hollywood Boulevard, like most people do when they enter a theme park, you find yourself on the Back Lot, an area themed to look like the exterior shooting sets of a movie studio. If you walk behind a set, as you often do when you are standing in line for a ride, you'll see the structure that holds it up-unlike Disneyland-because that's what you see when you walk behind the façade of a shooting set in Hollywood. It's all Movie Magic at Universal, and everything in the park flows from that theme.

In other cases, you might end up "finding" your theme after you've been in the design stage for awhile. One example of this is Disney's EPCOT. Walt wanted to build an

Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow, that is, a working city showcasing future technology. But by the time I arrived at Disney in 1979, that theme had morphed into what it is today: a permanent World's Fair.

It doesn't matter how you get to the theme. It might evolve, like EPCOT or be someone's brainchild, but however you get there the theme determines everything else that you do. And why? Because, as our Executive Art Director at Disney, John Hench, used to say, if you are a real theme park, you cannot have "visual contradictions." What Mr. Hench meant, basically, is that if you are standing on a 19th century Main Street, you can't have Space Ships landing in front of you, it ruins the experience, and your theme provides you with the guidance to make these kinds of design decisions.

Of course, there are always exceptions to the rule, but we will get to that in our next section, park layout.

Park Layout

When people think of Master Planning, a lot of them think of how the park is arranged, which is what we call "park layout."

There are as many ways to lay out a park as there are designers who do it, but a few have been used more often than not, so we'll touch on those first.

The Disney approach, seen in the Magic Kingdom and Disneyland, is what could be called the Icon Design Philosophy. The big Icon for Disney is the Castle at the end of Main Street, and that is also the one "visual contradiction" in that park-as there aren't a lot of fairytale castles at the end of most American Main Streets. That visual contradiction is designed to "pull" you down Main Street, and that's basically what the Icon Design Philosophy does-it provides you with big, visual landmarks that pull you through the park. Once you enter Tomorrowland, for example, you'll see Space Mountain, which is located at the back of that "land" and pulls you to that point. The other Icons, the Matterhorn and Big Thunder Mountain work the same way, and they

also help you figure out where you are in the park. If you see Big Thunder ahead of you, then Frontierland must be that way.

Probably the most popular park layout is the "loop" which was first developed by Randy Duell for Six Flags Over Texas, and can be found in more theme parks than any other kind of plan. The "loop" is exactly what it sounds like, a big promenade that circles the park. The good thing about it is that you never get lost, because you are always somewhere on the loop, so if you want to find the exit, just keep on walking. The bad part comes when you decide that the next ride you want to experience is on the other side of the park, and then you have a trek in store to reach it.

Beyond these layouts, there are dozens of others, notably the Universal Studios front lot/back lot plan, and then a whole lot of "I kept growing and growing so this is how I turned out" plans. Those are the places you get lost in, unless the directional graphics are really good.

But no matter what kind of plan you end up with, what really matters most to the guest is how much fun they are going to have, and that is determined by your "attraction mix."

The Attraction Mix

This is your big decision: what kind of attractions are you going to offer, and at what level of quality and professionalism?

Part of this depends on your competition, and just how good you need to make the park to be the best in its area. For example, today, Universal Studios and particularly in Florida, is known for it's high tech, story oriented rides. But, if the Disney company hadn't beaten Universal to the punch and opened their MGM Studio Tour before Universal's in Orlando, none of those rides would have ever been there.

Universal had planned an upgraded version of their California tour, with a front lot "walking tour" with shows for entertainment, and a super-duper version of the Tram Tour on the back lot. In fact, before we opened Universal, Florida in 1990, the company

had never before built a ride, and didn't much want to be in that business. But Disney got to Orlando first with their own improved version of the Universal Hollywood tour. The competition, Disney, had stolen Universal's thunder, so the only way to compete was with high tech, state of the art rides like "King Kong," and "Back to the Future."

In the long run, it was good for both companies and good for the theme park business, because the state of the art of theme park attractions took a huge leap forward.

Now, everyone doesn't have a Disney park next door, so not everyone needs a "Back to the Future" Ride. But you are going to need something fresh and new, and you have to consider the big factor when you are picking your attraction mix: demographics.

Demographics, the age and income characteristics of the guests, follow attraction mix, and vice versa. If you want a lot of teenagers, you put in a lot of roller coasters. Keep in mind though: even though you're targeting coaster fans DOES NOT mean you sacrifice on theming and landscaping. Families like indoor shows, if for no other reason than they are air-conditioned and adults enjoy being able to sit for a while. Additionally sometimes, the theme park is the sole source of live shows/theatre in the vicinity, so this draws those people that don't feel like going to a big city to find that type of entertainment . And "the whole family" likes high tech, story-telling dark rides and simulators. So your attraction mix determines your demographics, or vice versa.

But probably the biggest factor in determining your Master Plan is the personality of the management. If they are "ride guys" who like those "white knucklers," then at the end of the day you are going to end up with a park full of thrill rides. If they are from "show business" you'll probably be exploiting some sort of intellectual properties (books, movies, films, etc), like we did at Six Flags with the Batman Stunt Show. If they are risk takers, your park will feature custom, one of a kind rides, or if they are more conservative, they'll guide you in the direction of selecting proven, off the shelf equipment. In theme park design, as in most other fields, you follow the Golden Rule: He Who Has The Gold Rules. But it's essential that the theme park designer educate the management so they understand the downside of under cutting the theming,

landscaping and ride variety---eventually it will catch up with you and guests will stop coming in DROVES thus the "gold" dwindles.

You will notice that I did not mention budget as a primary factor in determining the Master Plan of your park. That's because budget follows the risk profile of the management-the high rollers will go for the biggest budget they can justify, the more conservative managers will pinch the pennies. There's no one answer, as both well funded, and very lightly funded parks can achieve success. For example, at Six Flags when they were owned by Time Warner in the mid nineties, all the Batman, Looney Tunes, Dennis The Menace, Police Academy and other movie themes were added, increasing both attendance and per capita income, while the capital budget was actually CUT.

When you put all these factors together, and your park is sized properly for the market, your attraction mix is right, you have just the right amount of food and merchandise, and the parking lot is big enough to handle your largest predicted crowd: look out! It's probably going to be a big hit, and the owner will be asking you why you didn't make the darn thing a little bigger!

And that's the last element of a good Master Plan: room for expansion. Given the fact that you are going to have to add new attractions after you open, having space for them without making the place so darn big that you exhaust the guests trying to walk the park, is quite a trick. But a good Master Plan allows plenty of space for new rides, shows or even whole "lands." When you don't have enough potential for well-themed additions, you end up planting your new roller coaster over a parking lot, which can ruin the whole effect of adding a new ride.

There are a million factors that you need to take into account when developing a good master plan. For instance, food concessions need to be plentiful and located in the busy sections of the park, so that guests are not waiting in long lines. There are too many of these factors to delve into in one short article, but there is one final design element that should be mentioned. Probably the most important factor in making sure your guests

enjoy their day at the park is employee training, so don't forget to design a good "cast center" where your employees can learn what it takes to serve the guests. You can have the best attractions in the world, but if your staff is rude, indifferent, or incompetent, all the rest of your design goes right down the drain.

If you take all of these factors into account, however, you'll have one heck of a park.

So, you want to design a theme park? Well, now you know a few tricks of the trade, so have at it!

To learn more about theme park master planning, or to inquire about a possible project, contact Peter Alexander of the Totally Fun Company.