

SHUGBOROUGH REBORN

You know your attraction is wonderful, but how do you persuade the public to visit and discover that for themselves? The team behind Shugborough estate explain how changing their marketing has increased admissions spend by 46 per cent

THE CHALLENGE



**BY NICK BOOKER
AND JANET LANG**
DIRECTORS, ATTRACT
MARKETING LTD
 (formerly Booker & Hopkins
 Attraction Consultancy)

Shugborough is a country estate owned by the National Trust, but funded and managed by Staffordshire County Council, which regards it as its flagship visitor attraction. In 2001/2002, the estate was attracting an estimated 250,000 visitors a year, although many of these were either walkers or visitors to the many events held in the grounds. Despite these numbers, it was in financial deficit.

For many years, Shugborough had been packaged and promoted as one venue, but without any clear view of what it represented. The major building on the estate is the Mansion House, built for the Anson family and administered by the

National Trust, and where the late Patrick Lichfield occupied an apartment. In addition, there's the County Museum, which occupies the original servants' quarters, Shugborough Park Farm and mill, as well as formal gardens and parklands that include neo-classical monuments. There's also a restaurant, a café at the farm and a National Trust shop. Shugborough also runs a rare breeds programme. The grounds were used for numerous events throughout the year, including outdoor concerts and shows.

Following a strategic review in 2001/2002, the county council realised it needed information to guide Shugborough's future business development. In June 2002, Booker & Hopkins Attraction Consultancy (now Attract Marketing) was appointed to undertake a programme of market research.

Market research

The research was split into two parts: firstly, a quantitative element to give topline results on awareness, general views on the site and frequency of visiting. Secondly, a qualitative element to drill down into motivations and detailed opinions and experience. This yielded the most interesting and useful data.

As Shugborough's mission statement is '...to preserve and promote Shugborough as a high-quality regional, cultural resource.... accessible to all the people in Staffordshire', the council was anxious to sample people in Staffordshire. So, the quantitative research stage consisted of more than 700 on-street interviews in eight town-centre locations in Staffordshire.

We also recruited people who hadn't been to Shugborough, invited them to a focus group, sent them off with free tickets and incentives to Shugborough, and then invited them back to participate in another group. From these groups, we were able to determine pre-visit expectations of Shugborough, and people's likes and dislikes when visiting visitor attractions, and then review their experience of Shugborough.

Identity crisis

While the research overall showed that Shugborough had very high awareness levels, running at around 85 per cent, and that nearly 100 per cent enjoyed their visit, some serious negative issues were revealed. Namely, that there was a lack of knowledge of what was on offer at Shugborough.

For example, Shugborough was perceived as a place where Lord Lichfield lived and was good for events, but was much the



(Left) Shugborough now markets itself as 'The Complete Working Estate', taking visitors back 200 years



Shugborough's Mansion House (above) appealed to the older market; now younger visitors are appreciating it (below)

same as other places. It had no clear identity. To quote from the research: "Shugborough is Shugborough, you take it for what it is: a house with historical connections." Shugborough needed to clarify who it was for and what it was offering. It needed to differentiate itself from the competition in the crowded visitor-attraction and events market.

There was also a problem with promoting Shugborough to the people of Staffordshire, in that they are as disparate an audience as the overall UK population. The Shugborough proposition needed to be tailored to suit the defining characteristics of the target audience.

A further problem was that the whole site cried out for more interpretation. Shugborough was acceptable for most adults, especially the empty nesters and grey market but, except for the farm and parts of the museum, it wasn't a place for children. The public has become accustomed to sophisticated displays, and changes in the farm's and museum's displays, according to the seasons and temporary exhibitions, were needed to encourage repeat visits.

Our report ran to more than 80 pages. In it we proposed:-

- Clarification of what was being offered. For example, what visitors could expect to find on a visit
- Adoption of a corporate identity/branding that could be used throughout all visual communications
- Revamping the museum and servants' quarters



"THE WHOLE SITE CRIED OUT FOR MORE INTERPRETATION. SHUGBOROUGH WAS ACCEPTABLE FOR MOST ADULTS, ESPECIALLY THE GREY MARKET, BUT IT WASN'T A PLACE FOR CHILDREN"

- Changing displays according to the seasons and making the public aware of these to generate repeat visits
- A better shopping experience
- Better levels of customer service
- Improved marketing at all levels
- Better catering
- Segmentation of the product offering, and the development of niche markets

We submitted our report and made our presentation at the end of 2002 to a lot of head nodding and appreciative comments, but not a lot else happened. However, following a restructuring within the council, Richard Kemp was appointed as general manager in March 2004, and was delighted to get a report that detailed Shugborough's problems.



THE SOLUTION



Richard Kemp, dressed for the part

BY RICHARD KEMP
GENERAL MANAGER, SHUGBOROUGH

My first season's offer was to be dominated by low-income, resource-hungry events at Shugborough, which required an internal team of at least four to administer. Each event wanted pride of place in front of the house, usually with their temporary toilets backing onto the house itself – much to the late Lord Lichfield's disgust. There were also many vast, cheap-and-cheerful craft fairs charging, very confusingly, a fraction of our price, and held on lucrative bank holidays. To top all this, visitors thought these were our events and complained to us about poor value for money.

I decided, after about three days into the job, that this wasn't going to be a matter of tweaking around the edges: it would require root and branch realignment of the entire business.

The first job was to focus on the intrinsic qualities of the site, and work out what we had that was of natural value. The core assets at Shugborough are good: it's a complete historic estate, largely unchanged since 1805, with house and gardens, servants' quarters, a working model farm, walled garden, extensive parkland and internationally acclaimed monuments.

We defined our proposition as 'The Complete Working Historic Estate'. From this, a new business priority emerged that now dominates every action, sign, procedure, letter and piece of print. Our newly rediscovered core qualities led us to define a new core customer. From that day on, the only person who mattered was the day visitor (the DV).

What flowed from this was huge: a new strapline, logo, leaflet, pricing policy, signage, catering operation, sales technique, site transport system, car park and access arrangements, ticket office and toilets, staffing structure (almost every role has changed), pay structure, customer-care policies, procedures and training. We now host only events that add to the DV experience.

Culture shock

Above all, we changed the culture. We removed the option for visitors to choose the cheaper element of the site and instead moved towards selling a single ticket for the experience of The Complete Working Historic Estate.

And it's working. We now have a fully funded business and development programme and are working to it. Our admissions



Visitors are taken through a 'linked and invigorating' story;



As well as working gardens and kitchens, guests can see how a typical family would have lived and behaved



"AT SHUGBOROUGH, ALL THE SENSES ARE ENGAGED. A HISTORY IS LEARNED WITHOUT A SINGLE GLASS CASE OR LABEL, BUT THROUGH TOTAL STIMULATION"

spend per head went up 27 per cent in 2005 and 'value for money' ratings among visitors (good or very good) went from 55 per cent to 85 per cent in a season. Our visitor numbers are 17 per cent up and admissions income is up 46 per cent. The staff have settled into new roles and everyone on site now sells and delivers the joined-up product with confidence.

We've concentrated on presenting a linked, invigorating story that flows from the core proposition. Rather than dwelling on interpretations of individual sites – the farm, servants' quarters and house – or within each, explaining dates and functions of disassociated objects, we spent some time working on the 'core story' across the site. We decided to explain how the estate helped change the way Britain grew its food and fed its people in the Georgian period.

The story is now told using actors in a series of working contextual areas at Shugborough. This helps differentiate Shugborough from the Chatsworths, the Blenheims and others, which is important in a crowded marketplace, as not many other sites are using this fantastic technique. At Shugborough, all the senses are engaged. A history is learned without a single glass case or label, but through total stimulation.

Booker and Hopkins were hired to assist the strategic marketing of this estate, but their report has been the catalyst for a much greater, even fundamental, change. It's a change that's still ongoing and, in some areas, cultures have only just started to evolve. There's still a confidence problem and there's even a little resistance to new ideas.

However, we now know where we're going and, with a great 2005 season, we're poised to take the world by storm with the UK's only Complete Working Historic Estate. ●