

Project Title

BeWILDerwood

Category 09

Museums, galleries, events
and visitor attractions

Client Company

BeWILDerwood

Design Consultancy

Purple Circle

Current Date

3rd June 2009



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With BeWILDerwood we created what is officially one of the world's best children's adventure parks.

Starting with the rather unlikely ingredients of a swamp in Norfolk and an old Etonian whose Dad was the arch enemy of James Bond, we built a brand from the ground up that has won worldwide awards and delivered huge commercial success.

We designed an adventure park that was built on real values. Values that were about real play – the kind we did when we were kids. Climbing trees and scraping knees in a safe and benign environment. A million miles from the Playstation and DS Lite distractions. All this with an undercurrent of getting kids to read books that they would love and an overcurrent of simple good fun – to get the parents to play alongside them.

Commercial success

Commercially, BeWILDerwood has been massive. Against a business plan break-even of 60,000 visitors per year, we saw:

110,000 for year 1.

136,000 for year 2.

25% above target this year (year 3) which will equate to 175,000 for the year if it continues at the same rate.

We also have a Feefo customer satisfaction ratio of over 96%.

All this in a market that attracts Heritage Lottery funding because attractions can't seem to make any money – The Eden Project being a prime example.

And to top this, BeWILDerwood has won a Themed Entertainment Award (TEA) as the best small attraction in the world for 2008, collecting a prize alongside the Kennedy Space Centre and the team behind the Chinese Olympics opening ceremony. A TEA is the industry equivalent of an Oscar.

In addition The Observer rated it as “one of the 50 most fabulous places in the world” to visit.

Not bad for a little swamp in the middle of nowhere.



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Outline of project brief

Our first meeting was one of the strangest we have ever had before or since. Meeting in a smoke-filled, run-down riverside shack in the heart of the Norfolk Broads, Tom Blofeld (the son of one of Ian Fleming's much disliked school friends – hence the name of the Bond baddie) outlined his brief.

‘Look. I have loads of f*ing land and no f***ing cash. This estate that I am about to inherit hasn't made money in years and we are slowly going broke. We need your help to make some bloody money’.**

So our primary objective became:

To break-even in year 1

Which meant a target of 60,000 visitors

Our secondary objective was to reach 140,000 visitors by the end of year 5.

Description

The 50 acres in question, which was accessed via a long walk through some filthy marshes wearing waders, was an ancient wood that Tom had played in as a kid.

We set out to build an attraction that would be loved by children and loved even more by their parents.

Overview of market**Strengths:**

- A potentially great idea.
- Experience in branding from scratch.
- A good target market understanding.

Weaknesses:

- No experience in this sector amongst any of the senior team.
- A lack of cash and no external investment possible due to the untried nature of our project.
- Nothing built to use in pre-marketing.
- Trying to build in a protected area with massive potential planning issues.
- Awful transport infrastructure around the site.
- Small catchment area.
- Short potential trading year.
- A market that believes kids in front of Playstations are safe.

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Opportunities:

- The chance to create and define a new sector.
- A cash-positive business if we could get it off the ground – one that could be rolled out nationwide.

Threats:

- Planning may reject it out of hand.
- Local backlash from increased traffic levels.
- The British weather.
- Foreign holidays.
- Seasonality – we'd only be busy in the summer and school/public holidays.

Project launch date

June 2007

Size of design budget

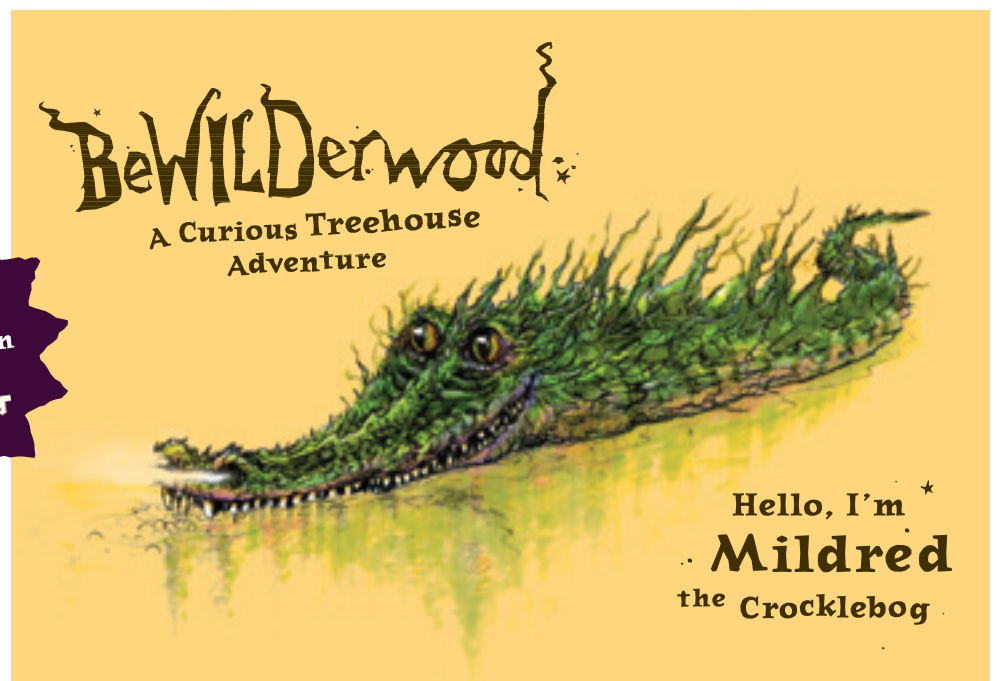
£96,138.13 ex vat to date

Outline of design solution

We wanted to be safe, fun, imaginative and adventurous, but at the same time healthy, inspiring, familial, exciting and liberating. All this and behave in a way that was apparently commercially naïve - because it felt in keeping with the ethos.

For us, truly-held beliefs are always easier to work with because they ooze out everywhere and allow you to create a far more coherent offer.

And ooze out they did at every conceivable touchpoint – from unconventional no smoking signs, to inked logo stamps for the stationery to out of office email messages. Absolutely every detail was thought through and delivered using an identity system which made it look as if they had no identity system – irregular type, wonky edges, tone of voice; all came into play to achieve this.



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Visitor numbers**Year 1**

June to December 2007

Target 65k

Actual 110k

Year 2

2008

Target 110k

Actual 136k

Year 3

2009 to date

Target 140k

Actual to date 25% ahead of target

This would translate into 175k visitors by year end

So how were the targets arrived at?

The nearest comparable attraction is the Dinosaur Adventure Park which is 18 miles away from BeWILDerwood – and a 50 minute drive (the roads being a bit basic around these parts).

The Dinosaur Adventure Park had been established for 15 years and was attracting 140,000 visitors per year. So a first-year target of less than half this figure was realistic and the 5 year target was to match their visitor figure of 140,000.

We didn't undercut them on price either with a price for kids and adults of £10 each all year round. By comparison the Dinosaur Adventure Park charge between £7.50 and £9.95 depending on time of year.

With this in mind BeWILDerwood was built on a break-even figure of 60,000 visitors.

Our build and launch cost was tiny at only £1.8m – a fraction of the cost of a single ride at Alton Towers.

The year 2 target was positioned at the actual figure for year 1 for 3 reasons;

- First we knew it would deliver a good profit.
- Second we knew there would be plenty of changes necessary to fine tune the offer.
- And thirdly we were much further ahead than we thought we'd be in hitting 140,000 visitors by the end of year 5.

Year 3

With this target we were bold!

A target of 140,000 – our initial 5 year magic number

To date we are 25% ahead of target and if this trend runs for the rest of the year we will hit 175,000

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Rocket fuel

Visitor numbers drive everything else. In particular the other 2 main income streams.

Retail spend

Years 1 and 2 averaged at £1.50 per person

To date this year we are at £1.82

Catering spend

Years 1 and 2 averaged at £2.80 per person

To date this year we are at £3.48

The catering spend national average for venues with a similar dwell time (3 to 5 hours) is £2.20 (Figures provided by Martin Barratt – Vision XS, Former Director of Merlin).

'Dwell Time' being how long people stay at a venue.

So was it the design?

- We defined our customer.
- Defined our values.
- And created an identity which let those values ooze out at every opportunity.

Customer definition

We first defined the customer as being the 'organic mum'; you know the type – the one who believes that nothing is too good for little Charlie or Evie. They feed them organically, school them before they even start school and never let them out of their sight.

They tend to be older parents who understand how precious their child is, because they were late coming. They want to do the very best by them. They feed them organic avocados, care about leaving the earth in a better state for them and have tutors to help them with their SATs exams. They have money, but even more importantly they understand what play used to be like and worry that it seems to be heading in the wrong direction.

They are the very people who panic about letting their children out of their sight but are looking for a solution to all their hopes and fears. And that's what we set out to give them.



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Our values

Our brand values were so clear and so well defined that it began to shape even the smallest commercial decisions. One great example came with the choice of ice cream supplier.

Logic said that with our limited experience we should go to the experts. Walls were pushing hard to become our supplier. Our own values said that we had to use locally sourced and organic food, so instead we chose a little-known local supplier called Paravanis.

They had never supplied a trade customer, relying entirely on their own ice cream vans for their business. But Tom had eaten their ices as a child and knew they were just lovely. It brought three massive benefits:

- They tasted nicer, so people bought more.
- We were their biggest customer by far and as such, got a fabulous deal.
- It gave us great local PR and proved we would practice what we were preaching.

And as another benefit, we kept a major brand off site so our offer, was still a 'brand-free' experience. This single decision was loved by parents and a huge number of them tell us in feedback how remarkably unspoilt our offer is. If you look at ANY other play park, visitor attraction or even garden centre, they are wrecked by other people's branded paraphernalia.

We applied the same model to the bread for the sandwiches, the fruit and even the drinks. Everything was sourced as locally as possible with almost nothing from outside our self imposed 50-mile 'safe' zone.

The identity

The coherence of the offer is apparent everywhere; from signage that people love and actually take pictures of; to an amazingly low-impact build where much of the material used was picked up or harvested from the site itself. There is no plastic anywhere and nothing shiny, but everything is bright, friendly and designed to appeal to adventurous kids.



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Recruitment costs zero

Our local consultation (see Research Resources) meant that every single operational team member walked on site and just asked to get involved. Recruitment costs were zero. We picked the best and they helped us bring the site to life.

Parent/Child dynamic

The dynamic is amazing. When parents first walk in they supervise everything their child does. Pretty soon, they see how safe it is and take a seat. The child goes off to explore and comes back to check in periodically. The rangers on site ensure safe play and encourage the parents to have fun too. By the time they leave, they have discovered that they can have great fun together – there's not a tantrum, an over-adrenalin-fuelled kid or shouting parent in sight. Anywhere.

The books

And perhaps the final piece in the puzzle came when Tom confessed that as a boy playing in the woods, he had imagined creatures living alongside him there. He brought them alive in his book and we built our offer off their backs.

The first book has sold over 25,000 copies. Book two has been added along with another for younger readers.

And what about the future?

Discussions are at an advanced stage for two further sites to open in 2010.



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Local consultation

Prior to launch, we listened to anyone who would speak to us. We spoke to local businesses, held an open meeting in the village hall, invited anyone to visit during the build and brought the locals on board from the outset. They were potentially our bread and butter when the tourists went home and we needed them.

On-going customer research

Feefo is a completely independent and transparent customer feedback system. Click on 'See the feedback on our latest users' – the circle at the top right of the home page. Scroll down to Bewilderwood and off you go. See www.feefo.com

Year 2 saw the introduction of Feefo – that helped shape the changes that were needed. We built more toilets, increased the size of the coffee cups (rather than discount) in the food outlets and added Toddlewood – an area for under 5s who we began to charge entry for.

From 1,370 customer responses we have an average Feefo rating of 96%. According to Martin Barratt – a former Operations Director of Alton Towers – the industry average is 80%.

Alton Towers are owned by Merlin Entertainments who own 14 UK attractions including Alton Towers, Lego Land and Madame Tussauds – and Merlin in turn are owned by Blackstone, the US private equity group. Martin is currently a director at consultant Vision XS.

Is there anything else we can compare Feefo with? Yes there is – tripadvisor.co.uk
On Trip Advisor BeWILDerwood is rated at number 1 out of 67 attractions in the Norwich area.
<http://tinyurl.com/lapdv8>

Themed Entertainment awards – see www.themeit.com - and then click on the awards bit
The team collected this award in LA on 7 March 2009.

The Observer – 1 of the best 50 places in the world to visit 2007
www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2007/jan/07/escape2?page=5



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PR

We appointed a local PR agency with fabulous local connections. They helped ensure nothing but positive coverage.

The weeks before the launch

We already had the locals on board but we were thinking bigger. Our PR brief to the nationals was to talk of a mystical, magical place where kids could play safely and parents could relax. To say we hit a nerve would be something of an understatement.

The two-day PR launch saw journalists from EVERY major daily paper, all the regionals and many from further afield. Every parenting magazine came along too and every single one of them brought their kids.

Traditional PR logic says that when you get the likes of Will Buckley from The Observer turning up with his kids, you should escort him round. We thought differently.

We let the kids themselves be the judge and only grabbed people on their way out. They loved it and over the weeks after launch, wrote huge and positive articles in all of their papers, magazines and websites.

The people who built the structures on site

We appointed Treehouse Company to build the structures – experts in their field as their name suggests.

Sector experience

We appointed Nick Farmer to help us add even more magic. His experience in the visitor attraction market ensured that, even with our air of apparent commercial naivety, we delivered a product that was safe, fun and fit for purpose. Nick's expertise helped bring many of the characters from Tom's book to life – eg Mildred the Crocklebog who emerges from the water snarling and spraying water as the boat brings visitors to the jetty.

Illustration

Steve Pearce added the illustration and, perhaps best of all, gave us the name itself, which we're now so incredibly proud of. As soon as we saw it, we all knew it was just perfect for our bewildered state of self-contained wildness.

Collaboration

This project was certainly a collaboration and we do not underestimate the part others have played in its success.

But according to Martin Barratt (remember he's the former Ops Director of Alton Towers) it's the design and the way it's run through absolutely everything that, in his mind sets BeWILDerwood apart from anything else in the industry.

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