

# FESTIVAL SPACES AND THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

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## Introduction

A festival implies a special use of space for both the organiser and the visitor. On the practical level of events management, it is a series of temporary performance venues presenting special organisational problems. For the festival-goers, it is a space set apart to which they come seeking an extraordinary experience. This experience can have an emotional and symbolic significance, which they then come to associate with the place itself.

For this reason, festivals and special events are increasingly used as part of strategies to regenerate or reposition urban areas or coastal resorts. Events attract additional visitors, creating economic benefits for retail, leisure and other businesses. The publicity can be used for place marketing aimed not only at attracting visitors but also new businesses and investment to the area (Jago *et al.*, 2003; Morgan *et al.*, 2002). They can also give a boost to the cultural or sporting life of the residents and increase local pride and self-esteem. Festivals are part of the area's 'experience economy' to use Pine and Gilmore's (1999) term, creating a temporary 'creative space' which can attract visitors (Richards and Wilson, 2006).

But how should that space be designed to optimise the experience of the festival-goers and contribute to the success of the event? Answering this question requires an awareness of how festival-goers perceive the impact of the location and its layout on their enjoyment of the event. The role of space can best be explored within a wider conceptual framework that maps the visitor experience of the event.

This chapter is based on research into the 2005 Sidmouth Folk Festival, a long-established event which saw a significant change in ownership and organisation from previous years. This sparked a lengthy discussion on an enthusiasts' internet message board about how successful it had been. One

aspect of this was the rival merits of a festival based in a showground and one spread over existing venues around the town. An analysis of these discussions was used to explore the elements of the event experience and the ways in which festival-goers evaluate it. The results of this research have been published elsewhere (Morgan, 2006a) so here the focus will be on how spatial issues impact on the experience.

### *The event experience*

Research into events has tended to focus either on the economic and social impacts (Getz, 2000; Edwards, Moital and Vaughan, 2004) or on the motivations of the visitors (Kim, Uysal and Chen 2002, Van Zyl and Both, 2003; Mason and Beaumont-Kerridge 2004). What is less understood is the nature of the event experience itself.

Experience literature can be seen as having two converging strands. From the organisational viewpoint, experience management can be seen as a way of creating competitive advantage in price-led markets. Whereas product and service quality are taken for granted and the internet enables customers to search for the cheapest offer, a memorable experience can still add value and distinctiveness. As experience products, such as tickets to events and admissions to theme parks, have defied these pressures towards recommodification and risen in price and volume, Pine and Gilmore (1999) see them as a model for other sectors to follow. They and other management writers (Schmitt, 1999; Shaw, 2005; Smith and Wheel, 2002) draw on examples like Disney and Starbucks, on Schechner's (1988) Performance Theory and on Grove, Fisk and Bitner's (1992) service-as-drama metaphor, to propose a new approach to business. This recommends attention to scripts, staging and role-playing as a way of creating memorable customer experiences (Jackson, 2006). From this viewpoint, the festival space is an extended performance area stage-managed by the organisers.

The other strand focuses on the consumer viewpoint. The experiential perspective first proposed by Holbrook and Hirschmann (1982) criticises the overemphasis on consumer behaviour as rational information processing, and sees consumption experience as a subjective state of consciousness shaped by hedonic responses, symbolic meanings and aesthetic criteria — or, as they put it, fantasies, feelings and fun. The experience is at its most satisfying and memorable when it achieves the state of total absorption that Csikzentimahalyi (1992) calls flow. As Lee *et al.* (1994) found, even unpleasant and challenging incidents can later be seen as positive experience, because they allow the individual to overcome them and gain feelings of control and mastery (Beard and Ragheb, 1983).

To understand this experience fully requires more than the conventional surveys which measure customer satisfaction with a checklist of aspects of

the service delivery, such as Parasuram, Zeithaml and Berry's (1988) SERVQUAL. Instead, as Arnould and Price (1993) suggest, consumers bring vague expectations of intense emotional outcomes (e.g. joy or absorption), and satisfaction emerges over the time frame of the whole event, interpreted within the broader narrative context of the consumer's life.

#### *Co-creation*

From this perspective, the consumers are the co-creators of the experience (Pralhad and Ramaswamy, 2004). Rather than treating them as 'human props' in a carefully-staged managed performance, the organisation should provide them with a 'creative space' in which experiences can happen. These will be more likely to be remembered and valued if they lead to the personal growth and transformation which Pine and Gilmore (1999) say is the ultimate goal of experience.

The importance of this interaction in creating a unique and memorable positioning for the festival and the destination has recently been highlighted by Richards and Wilson (2006). They point out that event-led cultural tourism strategies are now so frequently employed that their ability to create uniqueness diminishes. Increasing numbers of cultural events and festivals have led to a commoditization effect. True distinctiveness, they argue, can be achieved more realistically when visitors have the opportunity to participate in creative activities themselves. Creative tourism, as they term it, gives a more lasting form of experience, while for the destination it provides an opportunity to embed experiences in the locality. If tourists are transformed by their creative experience they will continue to associate it with the place where it happened. Participative folk festivals are a good example of creative tourism in this sense.

#### *A place apart*

Abrahams (1981) distinguishes between the everyday flow of experiences and those 'Big Events' which offer 'Extraordinary Experiences', such as rites of passage, moments of self authentication or of communal celebration. Festivals are clearly in this category, evolving as they have from religious occasions. They have the characteristics Schechner (1988) noted in performance, the movement of people to a place set apart where objects (props and sets) and people (actors, audience) are assigned symbolic values and roles; where all attending observe rules and conventions which are different from those of everyday life. The event can be both a rite of intensification (Coon, 1958, cited in Arnould and Price, 1993), subjecting the attendee to extremes of emotional or physical experience leading to greater self knowledge, and also a rite of integration, where interaction with the others present consolidates shared cultural values and instils a 'temporary sense of closeness' or 'communitas'

(Turner, 1974). Both stress the importance of the shared nature of the experience, the interaction with others, as a source of satisfaction.

However, this kind of interpretation can give too earnest and serious an account of the festival experience. As Suvantola (2002) said of tourists, the separation from everyday life and the playing of different roles can be exactly that: play. A folk festival, where urban computer programmers dance dressed up as Cotswold villagers, or sing of the hardships of mining life, is a good example of what he would call postmodern tourism. The hedonic appeal of dancing, drinking and singing in good company should also not be underestimated.

This reminds us that, unlike a religious rite with preordained processions, today's festival-goers' use of space is influenced by their individual preferences and interests. There is no single type of visitor. For example, Bryan's (1997) Recreational Specialisation Framework places visitors on a continuum of behaviour from the general to the particular [broadly from the casual visitor to the enthusiast] reflected by the skills, the equipment and the commitment to the activity they possess. Each individual will chose their own path around the festival location, centred on venues where they feel most at home with the music, activities and company. Humanistic geographers such as Suvantola (2002) would describe this as the festival-goers creating their own experiential or existential space or domain (Nordberg-Schulz 1971) within the physical location.

#### *Mapping the experience*

Understanding the complexity of the visitor experience, therefore, requires a model that brings together on one side the external event management elements of the festival design and operation and on the other the internal benefits and meanings the visitor derives from it. The experience prism (Morgan, 2006) used here, based on Crompton's (1979) distinction between push and pull factors in tourist motivation and Kapferer's (1998) prism of brand identity, attempts to create a holistic model of the interaction between the event management (the brand owners) and the visitor (the brand consumer). It explores the extent to which, as well as giving simple hedonic pleasures, the event has symbolic significance and meaning that the visitor seeks to be associated with. These meanings are "shaped by their own memories, interests and concerns as much as by their encounter with the attraction" ????(Kavanagh, 2000; Voase, 2002). The meaning is created by the interaction of the visitor's own cultural background and their understanding of the historical and cultural significance of the event or location (Chhetri *et al.*, 2004).

Externally the two sides meet in the social interactions between visitors and staff, performers and each other. There is also an internal interaction

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between the brand values of the festival and the cultural values of the visitors. The experience will be more positive if the visitor supports what the festival stands for, for example the preservation of traditional art forms or the celebration of a particular cultural identity.

The headings for analysis (Figure 1) were therefore chosen to include:

- design and programming elements which create the personality of the event;
- operational elements which make up the physique, the practical attributes of the event

These create the opportunity for:

- Social interaction between the visitors and the performers but also with other visitors.

As a result the attendee will experience:

- personal benefits such as enjoyment and self-development;
- symbolic meanings: a sense of integration and identification which is derived from the individual's attitude towards —
- the external meanings and cultural values of the event

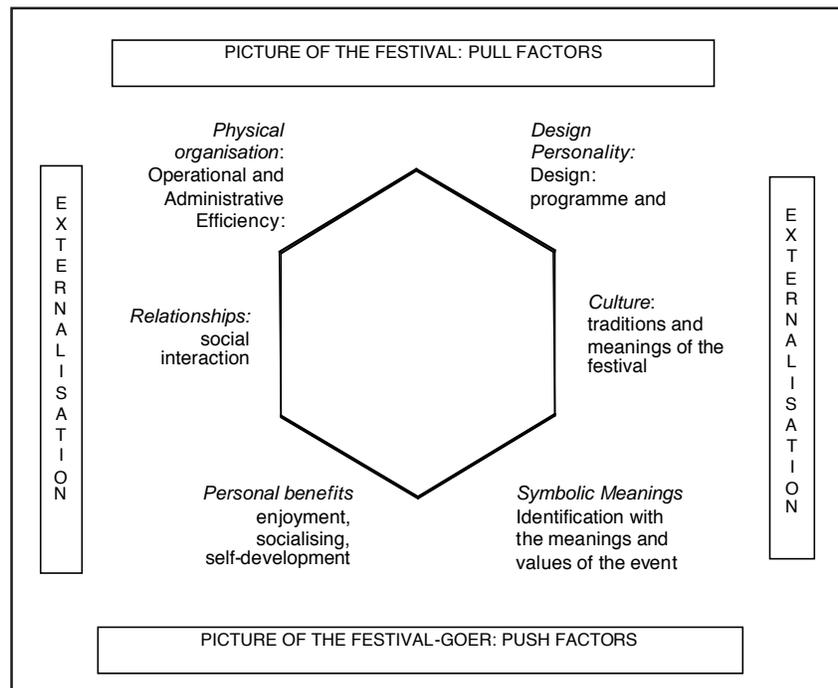


Figure 1 The prism of event experience (adapted from Kapferer's (1998) brand identity prism)

While all of these individual elements have been covered in previous research, the prism metaphor emphasises that each of these ‘facets’ are ways of refracting and analysing a single stream of experience. The way each impacts on the totality of the visitor experience can only be explored through qualitative methods. The ‘netnographic’ research used here provided an opportunity to get a detailed impression of how perceptions are formed through the course of the festival and to place them in the broader cultural narrative (Durgee *et al.* 1991) of individual values and interests.

### **Case Study — Sidmouth Folk Festival 2005**

The Sidmouth Folk Week takes place in the small resort of Sidmouth, South Devon, England in the first week of August each year. It began in 1955 as a seaside holiday for folk dance teams and soon developed into a folk song, music and dance festival (Schofield, 2004). The festival now consists of nearly 300 events over eight days — concerts, dances, workshops and music sessions — in and around the Devon seaside resort. Venues include marquees, theatres, halls, hotel and bar rooms as well street events, processions and a craft fair. Major names in the folk world perform in ticket-only concerts but many of the events are informal sing-arounds and music sessions in public bars. Visitors stay on a festival campsite or in local hotels and guest houses. Previous quantitative research into the 2001 Festival (Mason and Beaumont-Kerridge, 2004) had identified a range of motivations for attending: social stimulation, family, entertainment, learning, escape, authenticity and uniqueness.

From 1987 to 2004 the Sidmouth Folk Festival was run by Mrs Casey Music (MCM), a music promoter and event management company based in Derbyshire, who took over from the voluntary-sector English Folk Dance and Song Society when the growing size of the festival needed professional management. Over this time, MCM rebranded it as Sidmouth International Festival and aimed to attract a wider audience through headline acts from outside the traditional folk genre, such as Lonnie Donegan, Tom Robinson and Rolf Harris.

In 2004, during the 50th festival, MCM announced that they could no longer afford to underwrite potential losses due to bad weather, and as the East Devon District Council had refused to increase its grant, they were withdrawing. To save the festival a number of organisations, public, voluntary and private, came together at short notice to promote events in the usual first week of August in 2005. Thus from a professionally-run event with big commercial sponsors, the festival reverted to one run by volunteers and supported mainly by the local business community.

The 'new' format saw changes not only in ownership and funding, but in the way it was run and the way the visitors experienced it. There was no longer an inclusive season ticket to all events. Instead tickets for individual shows were sold on the door or through the overworked local Tourist Office. The lack of subsidy meant that there were no overseas dance teams or stars, leaving essentially a festival of English folk music, with a few Scots and Irish performers. The main spatial change was that there was no Arena Showground in the town park, which had been the venue for big open-air concerts, often including overseas dancers and musicians. This had also been the location for a tented shopping village, craft tent and mobile catering vans which provided an additional revenue stream for MCM but was seen as competition by local businesses. The Showground with its adjacent car park provided an attractive day out for casual visitors who could attend a concert, browse the stalls, enjoy dance displays and a children's fairground without leaving the site.

Another feature not provided in the reduced scale 2005 festival was the dance marquee which had been situated out of town near the campsite and so could be used for late night events. This had created another experiential centre within the festival, with people spending most of their time between the dance tents, the showground and the campsite.

With these alternative centres of attraction missing, the 2005 festival was located mainly within the town centre and seafront with festival-goers eating and drinking in local cafés, restaurants and bars. The changes in festival layout and experiential geography are shown in Figures 3 and 4. These show how the festival changed its nature from one which, in part at least, was based on a temporary out-of-town site to one which was largely staged within the town using existing permanent facilities.

The threat to the future of the festival and the changes in organisation and layout meant that regular visitors were all consciously evaluating the new format and reflecting on their experience of the festival. This makes their insights particularly rich and useful in exploring the underlying issues.

## **Methodology**

Their views were publicly debated on a number of internet message boards including The Mudcat Café ([www.mudcat.org](http://www.mudcat.org)), a folk music web site which contains a database of 8900 lyrics of traditional folksongs and a forum which allows people to ask questions or discuss issues relating to folk music. On 31 July 2005, the first day of the festival, a thread 'Sidmouth 2005: the verdict' was started by a poster who had just returned from a day there. The topic attracted a range of messages, which provided unprompted and

revealing insights into how the respondents evaluated the festival experience. Many of the replies gave short narratives of their festival.

Over the next eleven days, a total of 95 messages were posted by 59 separate names. 45 were registered members of the Mudcat forum and 15 were shown as Guests. Ten made between two and six postings responding to the debate, while the rest made just one during the period monitored. While no demographic details are available through this kind of research, it was possible from comments made to build up a behavioural profile of the respondents (Morgan 2006). While six admitted they had not been to the festival, and four had only been for part of it, most had attended for the full week, attending concerts and participating in song, music or dance sessions. Seven identified themselves as volunteer stewards, session organisers or concert performers. The debate revealed differences of skill level and commitment among the visitors (Bryan 1977) but all had a strong interest in folk music.

This methodology has been termed *netnography* — ethnographic studies using internet sources (Kozinets, 2002; Langer and Beckman, 2005). It allows a relatively cost-effective way of obtaining large quantities of qualitative material from which rich insights into consumers' opinions, motivations and concerns can be obtained. Kozinets claims it is less obtrusive than other methods and provides a window into naturally occurring behaviours in a context which is not fabricated by the researcher. It allows an insight into how consumers evaluate their experiences in a way that conventional satisfaction surveys based on expectancy-disconfirmation cannot.

An issue with netnography is whether comments on a public internet message board are in the public domain in the same way as letters to a newspaper (Beavan and Laws, 2006; Langer and Beckman, 2005; Sudweeks and Rafaeli, 1995 ) or whether the researcher should reveal themselves and seek permission from the contributors (Kozinets, 2002). As the Mudcat Café is an open access site with a tradition of vigorous debate and no personal or sensitive topics were discussed, the former view was taken. Equally or more important is the issue of reliability and validity. Kozinets says that care should be taken to check the trustworthiness of the comments through long immersion in the on-line community (screening out known 'trolls' who make provocative remarks just to annoy other contributors) and triangulation to check facts (in this case by participant observation of the festival itself).

Such studies cannot be taken as representative of the festival-goers as a whole but enable an in-depth study of how a particular group of committed and involved folk-music enthusiasts used the festival space and evaluated the experience.

## Analysis

The messages were printed out and analysed using the prism framework. The main issues are shown in **Figure 2**. The theoretical basis for this analysis, and the detailed findings, have been discussed in an earlier paper (Morgan, 2006a). This chapter will concentrate on discussing the insights the research provides into the visitor use of festival spaces and the implications for leisure and event managers.

### *What makes a good festival? Enabling movement*

While there were plenty of comments on aspects of the physical organisation and the operational management of the festival, they were not made in isolation. Comments about ticket availability and validity, location and

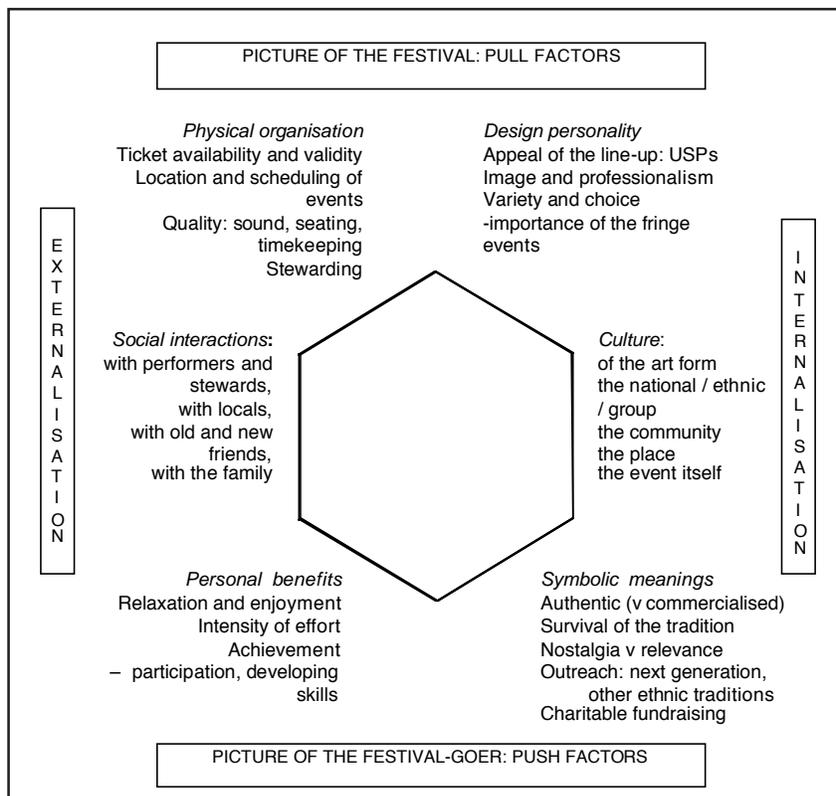


Figure 2 The Sidmouth experience prism: main issues raised by

scheduling of events, seating and timekeeping were all made in terms of their effect on the ability of the visitor to move about the festival from event to event, to follow their own paths and create their own domain. This opportunity to sample and discover new performers or even new styles of music was what made a festival different from a single concert:

The main thing about a season [ticket] is having the freedom to try anything. This year I tended to stick to the things I knew I'd like ... so I didn't have any of those moments of amazement I have had in the past because of that freedom to roam.

For others, this freedom is tempered by the worry that they will not be able to get into their chosen shows or workshops, and for these the ability to pre-book events was seen as an improvement. Both views show the same desire to "pick and choose" to get the best out of the rich variety on offer. This desire can become obsessive:

The atmosphere was more relaxed this year. People weren't dashing madly from place to place to get their moneysworth out of a season ticket.

#### *In town or out of town*

The extent to which the festival's events are concentrated in close proximity or dispersed will affect this freedom of movement and choice. As Figure 3 shows, in previous years, the Sidmouth venues stretched from the seafront to the Bowd Hill two miles in land. This meant that the festival combined an out-of-town set of locations — the campsite, the dance tent and the Arena Showground in the park — with a town-centre set in the theatre, halls, pubs and seafront. While most season ticket holders moved between the two, it had been possible for day visitors to come to the Arena Showground for a big name concert, use the temporary car park nearby, spend the day there eating and shopping from the mobile traders and so not spend any money in the town itself.

In 2005 (Figure 4) most of the out-of-town elements disappeared. As one message put it:

Instead of the usual trek Campsite/Arena/Campsite/ Late Night Extra, people actually came further into town and found the promenade, the sessions, the [marquee] and the [theatre] complex.

The message board debated the different experiences of the out-of-town festival showground and the in-town festival using local shops and catering

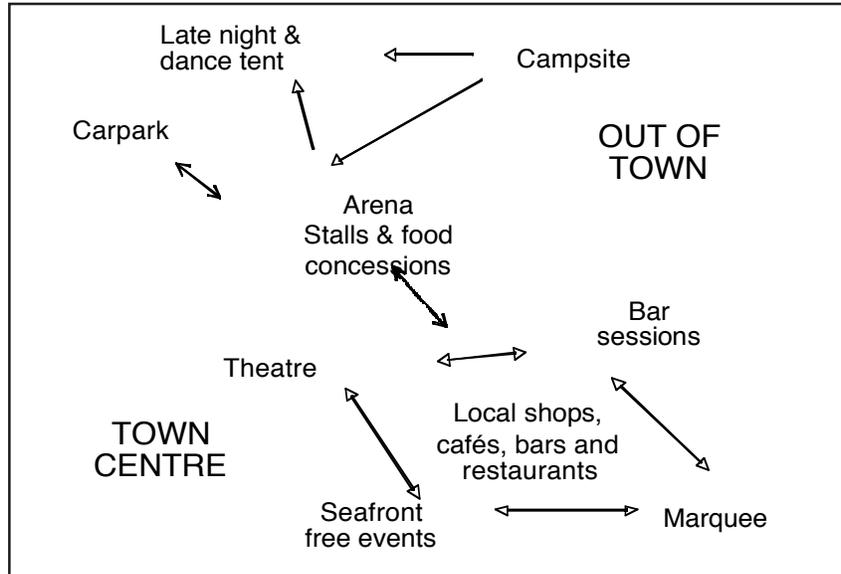


Figure 3 Centres, paths and domains: Pre 2005 — two festivals

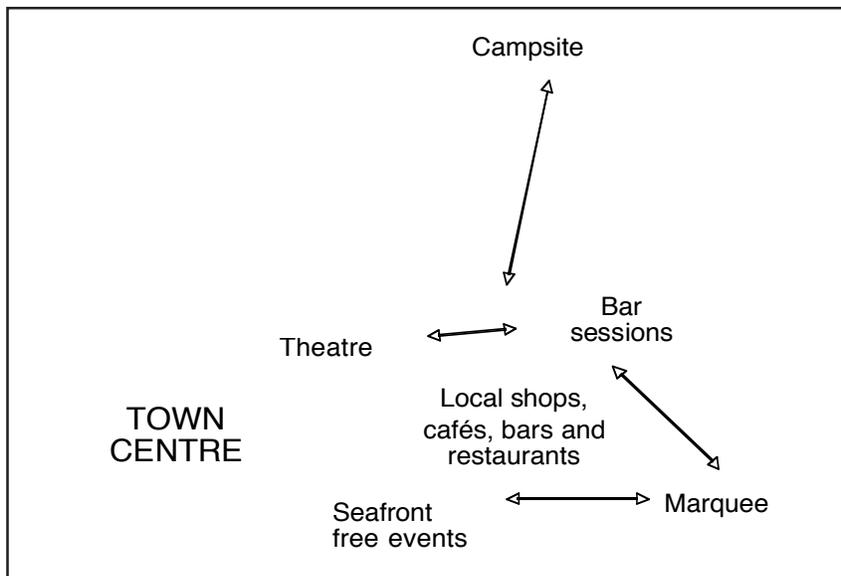


Figure 4 Centres, paths and domains: 2005. The Festival in the town

**Table 1** Needs a title

<i>Out of town festival site</i>	<i>In-town festival</i>
Large marquees and arenas	Permanent venues with limited capacity
Mobile traders	Local shops
Fast food	Local restaurants and bars –'slow food'
Parking in a field	Queues and congestion
Open air	All-weather
Festival atmosphere	Local distinctiveness

establishments, Table 1 shows the main features of each type, both of which have advantages and disadvantages in terms of convenience and of atmosphere.

There was recognition that the festival depended on the sponsorship and support of the local business community and that that was the reason for concentrating it in the town. Visitors noticed a more positive attitude from the locals — 'I was certainly made to feel more welcome than in recent years'.

However, there were many comments that the local cafés and restaurants had not able to cope with the extra demand from festival-goers anxious to have a quick meal before going on to the next event:

Sidmouth caterers have to learn that waiting ten minutes before having your order taken and half hour waits for food are unacceptable.

The lack of healthy options was also a problem: 'It's chips with everything'. This can be seen as an example of the problems that occur when a festival attracts a market which is different both in volume and needs from the year-round market for which the area's retail and leisure provision has developed. Another example from the case study was the landlord who hired a soul band to attract the local youth market, resulting in complaints that it drowned out the acoustic and unaccompanied music from adjacent venues.

### *Social spaces*

Socialising was the aspect of the festival that created the greatest amount of comment on the message boards. The festival was important as an opportunity to meet old friends and to share experiences with the family. The informal atmosphere where well-known performers mingled with the crowd

at the bar or Tibet Monks browsed the antique shops was part of the appeal. For some the social aspects were the festival:

I went for four days, and enjoyed it a lot, but I didn't attend any concerts.

An almost audience-less experience: everyone sang, played or danced, or was with someone who did.

The messages showed that the festival is a setting for reunions and meetings within communities of like-minded musicians, singers and dancers who only come together at these occasions. It is also the one chance for members of a cyber-community, the Mudcatters (regular members of the message board), to meet in person. As one of them said:

Thoroughly enjoyed it except for the cold I acquired through hugging so many good friends.

These social exchanges take place in the bars, cafés and restaurants of the town and provide the impetus for much of the spending which brings economic benefits to the town. Respondents discussed the merits of different venues and their favoured routines or paths from one to the other. The only negative comments were about closing times. There was a shortage of places to eat late and, in the absence of the old 'Late Night Extra' in the out-of-town marquee, no "convenient late night place where people can wind-down and meet at the end of the day".

#### *On the Fringe*

For many, these fringe events are the real experience.

The sessions in the bars, the lovely local beers, the whole atmosphere. We went to some concerts, saw some dancing, sat in the gardens, and walked on the cliffs.

There's always the moment when you find yourself standing there listening to the sound of half a dozen different types of music coming from different directions. That's what makes Sidmouth magic.

Sidmouth is a festival that has developed organically over 50 years. Many of what are now distinctive and defining features, such as the unaccompanied singing sessions in the Middle Bar of the Anchor Inn, grew out of informal arrangements between a group of enthusiasts and the landlord. The busking and dancing on the seafront is not organised. People just take advantage of the public space available and the lack of interference by police or other

officials. Yet, as this research confirms, these informal happenings are a major part of what attracts the visitors and generates economic benefits. The festival has been co-created by the interaction between organisers, performers, visitors and local businesses. Event organisers and place marketers can learn much from this when planning new events.

*The place is the festival brand*

The above quotations also illustrate how respondents frequently used the name Sidmouth to refer to the festival rather than the place. In their minds the two were inextricable parts of the same holistic experience which involved the senses — the sounds of music, the scenery, the taste of the ale — and the emotions. This is the kind of association of the place with an appeal to the senses and feelings that branding seeks to emulate (Schmitt, 1999). Indeed, it was the place, Sidmouth, which carried the brand values and commanded brand loyalty rather the commercial brand of Mrs Casey Music. It shows how a well-designed festival, with the support of the local business community, can be a powerful tool in giving a place a distinctive image and competitive advantage through creating “unique and memorable customer experiences” (Pine and Gilmore, 1999: 9).

## Conclusions

The overall aim of the research was to identify what visitors think makes a good festival. The main elements and their lessons for event management can be summarised (Morgan, 2006b) as:

- Abundant choice — people enjoy the freedom to choose from an abundance of offers, even if it is more than they could possibly see or do in the time available.
- Moments of amazement —while—most people come with a specific aim to see or buy, they get greater pleasure in discovering something new in the process.
- Shared experiences —the main event is often only the pretext for the real purpose which is to enjoy the company of friends. This can take place in public spaces or cafés, bars and restaurants away from the main venue. Places to meet before and celebrate or chill-out afterwards are vital to the experience.
- The fringe is at the heart —these—moments of amazement and these social interactions are as likely to be found in informal fringe events as in the main attraction

- Local distinctiveness —the landscape and townscapes, the local food and drink can become the sensory cues associated with the experience which give the event or location its distinctive and memorable appeal.
- Holistic evaluation —another lesson is to remember that customers evaluate their experiences not through a checklist of individual attributes and service dimensions but as a whole. For example, they don't complain about slow service just because they expect to be served quicker, but because they are worried that they will miss the start of the next show.
- Creative communities —in terms of the use of space, the festival provides a setting where communities of enthusiasts can meet or form to co-create extraordinary experiences (Getz, 1997; Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2004). They find centres, paths and domains of experiential space within the physical location. The organisers, professional performers and local businesses do not create the experience, they merely facilitate it. The way in which the Sidmouth Festival survived the withdrawal of the event management company and the reduction in public sector support shows this.

In the drama metaphor, the organisers are indeed stage-managers, but a stage-manager comes fairly low in the theatrical hierarchy. The actors are the festival-goers themselves and the drama comes from their interaction with the cultural traditions represented by the music, songs and dances.

For researchers, the challenge is to find ways to get people to articulate the complex meanings of their experiences and to analyse the results. The netnographic methods and prism model used here represent one possible approach that could be tested further on other communities and their extraordinary experiences.

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