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[TradeOnlyToday](#) > [Columns & Blogs](#) > [Marketing Insight](#) > A sprinkling of marketing magic in the pixie dust: some lessons from the masters at Disney

A sprinkling of marketing magic in the pixie dust: some lessons from the masters at Disney

Posted on April 19th, 2016 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



I lived in Orlando for 32 years and, like most locals, loved the magic and the pixie dust.

Our family regularly invested in annual passes to Walt Disney World. By the time my daughter was 6, she had spent so much time on that property that she could have given an escorted tour.

When relatives or friends came to visit, we sent them on their way in the morning and would join them for dinner at Disney or Epcot, followed by fireworks.

When Florida resident specials were advertised, we'd pack our bags for the weekend, stay in one of the Disney hotels, use the various forms of transportation (buses, monorails and our favorite, the boats), swim in the pools at night, visit the spas and pretty much act like tourists, even though home was a mere 20 minutes away.

One of the advantages of having friends who were Disney employees was learning the insider secrets. We knew when the crowds were light, as well as what dates and months to avoid, such as the crazy Christmas holiday season, or those muggy, sweltering summer days when the park drips in humidity and the lines and waits seem endless.

We were Disney fans and we thoroughly enjoyed the benefits of being next-door neighbors. For me, however, Disney also served as a living, breathing marketing laboratory that teemed with cool ideas. For 13 years I owned and operated a full-service advertising and PR firm in downtown Orlando. At least once a year our agency team spent a day at Disney — not only for team building, but also to observe the marketing genius firsthand. On such occasions each of us was charged with finding and sharing one marketing initiative. We came to the park with a different set of eyes than most and we always returned with new ideas.

So I was excited when I learned that my boss, Freedom Boat Club CEO John Giglio, was planning to take our senior management team to the Disney Institute for a one-day leadership and visioning session.

We had two assignments prior to our arrival. The first involved a team exercise in which we were asked to collaborate and address a series of questions regarding our goals for the session, the areas of

business we most hoped to impact and how change would affect our business, employees and members. We were also challenged to define how we envisioned success and to discuss the risks associated with failure to change, plus the barriers and obstacles standing in the way of progress. We invested a half-day together in pre-event preparation, and it paid off.

The second requirement was individual. We were asked to choose the Disney character to whom we most closely related and share the rationale behind our selections. Easy enough, right? Man, I wrestled with that assignment. I even posted a question on my Facebook page to ask my universe for their recommendations. In case you're wondering, I chose Figment, the spry little purple dinosaur who reigns in Epcot's Imagination Pavilion, although the Fairy Godmother was a close second.

When the day finally arrived, we embarked on the 2.5-hour drive from southwest Florida to the Disney Yacht & Beach Club, the perfect choice for our boating industry crew.

After a short respite we met with our Disney Institute hosts for an amazing dinner at the Yachtsman Steakhouse, followed by fireworks from neighboring Epcot.

We arrived early the next morning at the Disney Institute complex in Celebration, the planned community that Walt imagined.

We spent the first part of the morning viewing brief introductions to Disney with some videos that demonstrated how cast members create experiences that matter for their guests. It's all about service with a personal touch — making guests feel special by creating an emotional connection and driving their engagement.

The session was coupled with a moderated visioning activity aptly titled, "We're All Ears: Tell Us Your Story!" We were tasked to articulate our future by examining our current state, revealing our ideal future state and identifying the barriers and challenges in our path.

We also were introduced to Disney's approach to quality service. We learned that Disney's primary service framework requires the company to design and "over-manage" a service culture to include a defined common purpose, service standards and behavioral guidelines. The over-managing concept was really compelling. Disney intentionally over-manages and pays extraordinary attention to what matters to its guests. This includes an intense focus on people, processes and places.

We also learned Disney's approach to employee engagement, which includes selection, training, communication and care. The company understands that its cast members make or break it for guests, so it over-manages the employee experience.

Later that morning we boarded a private shuttle and went behind the scenes at the park. We were each given a set of ear buds, and our facilitator was able to speak directly to us as she guided us through the park, giving us insight every step of the way. This field experience was downright fascinating. We got a firsthand play-by-play of the "business behind the magic," which reinforced the strategies we had previously discussed from both an "onstage" and "backstage" perspective.

We talked trash. Literally. In fact, we were asked to count the number of garbage cans as we strolled down Main Street USA. As a guest, you never even notice the garbage cans, and that is because waste collection is over-managed. Garbage cans line both sides of Main Street, and their liner bags are collected by "mobile guest relations members" (read janitors) when they reach the halfway mark.

Nothing is left to chance. Based on attendance, the park knows exactly how long on any given day it will

take to fill the trashcans to the halfway point, and they're emptied like clockwork. We watched the operation from the sidelines; it was flawless. There were many other examples we observed that demonstrated the successful over-managing of the guest experience, right down to where trees are positioned and how often the flowers are changed.

Perhaps my greatest delight was the opportunity to explore the "underground tunnels" I'd heard about for so many years. Walt designed the tunnel system years ago, making sure they covered the entire park. Legend has it that once when he was in Disneyland (in California), he spotted a character in a spacesuit walking through a cowboy-themed area. He made the decision that in his next park the guests would never see characters or cast members where they didn't belong. Disney World was built on top of the tunnels, and earth literally was moved and built up to make it possible. The tunnels are off-limits to guests and used expressly by "cast members" (employees). They include miles of lockers, break rooms, cafeterias, offices, restrooms and more.

After the tunnel tour we returned to the Disney Institute to wind up our afternoon session. Here we debriefed on the field experiences we'd just shared and discussed the many insights we'd gained.

We then wrapped things up with a brainstorming session in which we split into two teams and charted key issues relevant to our business.

I left Disney World with an even greater respect for its business and leadership practices. Several of its core business principles made a lasting impression. Check out some of my favorite takeaways below, and ask yourself how your business compares:

- Disney's management culture proactively searches for people who are doing things right. The goal is to catch them doing the right thing and recognize it.
- I love Disney's intentional approach to customer expectations and the way it over-manages to ensure success.
- I was moved while viewing a Disney advertisement that showed a bus driver bending down on one knee to a child dressed in a Cinderella costume. In typical Disney style, he asks whether the young princess is ready for her carriage ride. Loved it!
- I share Disney's belief that if you genuinely care for your employees, they in turn will treat your customers well. It starts with the culture, and that stems from leadership.
- One of our team's most favored messages was Disney's uncompromising stance on safety, which we share: "Safety is non-negotiable." It's a creed every cast member lives by.
- And lastly, as we were leaving I snapped a photo of our team standing next to the life-size statue of Walt. Beneath his likeness are the words known as the Disney Purpose: "We create happiness by providing the finest in entertainment for people of all ages everywhere."

Having the opportunity to attend this visioning exercise allowed me to better understand and catch but a small glimpse of what it takes to create Disney magic.

Perhaps we could all benefit from a little more pixie dust in the boating business.

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