

Ed Brooker Urges America's Park Operators to Modernize and Tune In

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Campground consultant Ed Brooker sends a consistent message, whether it's in conversation or in one of his books: Campground operators may never be as successful – nor profitable – as many of them would like if they don't focus on offering what today's customer's really want.

Trouble is, Brooker maintains, many campground owners and managers are operating on outdated assumptions about just exactly whom the customer really is. Forget about the 1960's, when camping was revered as a fun-filled – and cheap – family vacation. Brooker claims those days are gone, and they're not coming back, not in the U.S. or anywhere else.

(Most of) Today's campers, he says, want a luxurious stress-free camping experience, not only because they're more affluent than previous generations, but also because they're overworked victims of a changing economy, fast-paced Internet technology and the frenzy of endless 24/7 work weeks.

So take Brooker's advice: Give today's campers a break, and help them find a way to relax because they need it. And come to terms with the fact that most parks need a gameplan to improve their facilities and amenities. And, more than likely, they'll need to raise rates to pay for all those improvements.

These are the latest ideas contained in Brooker's latest book, *"Profitable Parks: Using Foresight to Gain Insight."* The title itself is a clever play on words, using the name of Brooker's Kitchener, Ontario-company, The Foresight Management Group, which has produced two other books, including *"Campground Entrepreneurship"* and *"Strategic Marketing: Winning the Marketing Battle"*.

What Makes Brooker an Expert on Campgrounds?

So what, one may ask, makes Brooker an expert on campground management?

"A lot of people have gotten into the industry from another background," Brooker told *Woodall's Campground Management*. "But I'm one of the few in the industry that actually went to school for this."

Brooker, 50, has been studying public and private park operations ever since he was 17, when he took a summer job at Esker Lakes Provincial Park, north of Toronto. "I was placed in the junior ranger program sponsored by the Ministry of Natural Resources," he said. "My program was to work in the park in various maintenance tasks."

Brooker subsequently enrolled in a two-year forestry program offered by Sir Sandford Fleming College in Lindsay, Ontario, and later held management positions in several other provincial park units, including the Credit Valley Conservation Authority and the Cataraqui Conservation Authority, before founding his own campground consulting business 15 years ago.

Brooker, however, says he never stopped studying. Taking correspondence courses as he worked, he eventually earned a bachelor's degree in Environmental Studies and Geography, a post-graduate certificate in Tourism and Recreation Resources

Management and a master's degree in Local Economic Development and Eco-tourism. And he's currently pursuing a PhD through the Rotterdam School of Management at Erasmus University in The Netherlands, where he's studying "the international use of foresight and innovation within the outdoor hospitality industry."

"My research is in radical / disruptive innovation," Brooker said.

Radical innovation in the campground business, a field that's still full of mom-and-pop operators and thousands of other small entrepreneurs?

That's correct. And what Brooker has discovered through his campground-specific research and travels around the world may come as a shock to North-American campground operators.

Today's Campers Seek Upscale Park Experience

The Australian's, he said, have already come to terms to a greater extent than their North American counterparts with the realization that today's travelers are looking for an upscale camping experience, not the rustic, bare bones experience of yesteryear.

"I've spent a fair amount of time with Australia's 25 top parks, looking at how they operate and their level of innovation," Brooker said. "What I found is that they are very upscale. They are going after the vacation market. And they compete directly, if not ahead of hotels, motels, and B & B's. I think the park model industry could learn from them. I think we're hung up by regulations to a degree. Our understanding of the cabin market is that it's emerging. But we're missing the point that the aging population is looking for an upscale, outdoor experience.

"They (Australian parks) really compete with each other to see who can outdo the next park," he continued. "They even have two-story cabins with flat-screen TVs, spa bathrooms and state-of-the-art kitchens with stainless steel refrigerators, stoves and microwaves. Some of their top end cabins go for \$3,500/week. Our campgrounds would be happy to get that for a season."

Australian parks, he adds, also do a much better job of catering to tenters, providing them with their own private kitchen and bathroom facilities, among other amenities. "Tent sites have on-site washrooms and toilets," he adds. You've got access to an outdoor kitchen. And you've got your own on-site washroom. It's an individual washroom with a toilet, sink, and shower. You can keep your toothpaste and brush there for a week and no one else is going to use your facility."

North American campground operators, Brooker noted, could also learn a lot from park operators in Europe. Consider Roompot, a 41-unit park system in The Netherlands. While Holland's private parks experience the same kind of seasonal slowdowns as North American parks, Roompot parks for example have partnered with local hospitals to provide recreational accommodation for a variety of patients, thereby boosting their occupancy levels after the peak season.

"It's a quadruple win," says Brooker. "For the customer, it enables them to avoid long waiting lines, so they can get their (medical treatment) done quickly and they can recuperate in a recreational setting as opposed to an institution. The park wins because the shoulder season is now occupied by a new market. The facilities are also being

used year round. And insurance companies benefit because they now have the opportunity to service a larger clientele.

Brooker Urges Park Owners To Better Understand Clients

Although it's an off-the-wall example, these are the kinds of radical innovations that campground operators in Europe and Australia are pursuing, said Brooker, adding that it would behoove North American park operators to develop similar innovations. But first, he says, they need to better understand their customer, their parks and what they need to do to improve their operations. "The campground / RV park industry is changing, and a number of parks are falling behind in reacting to the changes that are taking place, Brooker writes in "*Profitable Parks*."

Unfortunately, he adds, most campground operators have not even begun to assess the strengths or weaknesses of their business or to develop a plan for the future. "The need to plan is a concept theoretically understood by many, but in reality, is rarely undertaken," Brooker wrote. "As I speak at various campground and RV industry conferences, the concept of planning usually comes up. When I ask the audience how many have undertaken a business plan, the show of hands is usually less than 20% of the group. What about the other 80%?"

The "vast majority" of today's campers, Brooker writes, are looking for comfort. "If they want to 'rough it', they will go to a government operated park or camp on federal lands. They've come to you, the private commercial park operator, for some luxury."

And what do today's campers want from North American private park operators? "They want large, level sites. They want water and electric hookups. Even today's tenters want water and electricity. They would like some privacy. "Do you have any idea why RVers and campers don't come to your park? Are your rates too low? Are your sites too small? Maybe few campers know where you are or how to get to your park. Do you know the answers to these questions? Have you stopped to think about them? How many camper nights did you have last year? Is that number going up or down from previous years?"

Then, adds Brooker, determine a long-term vision of what you would like your park to look like in the future. "Where could your business be?" he continued. "Set goals. With a vision in mind, determine a path that will get you where you want to go. Your goals should be clear, measurable, challenging and realistic."

Outside consultants are often helpful in these situations, Brooker explained. "Take a page out of the playbook of the successful operators in the industry," he said. "What do they do? They bring someone in who has no emotional attachment to the property. Consultants have a different perspective based on working with a number of other parks across the country. They've seen things that you've probably never considered. Bring them in. Allow them to offer a different opinion. Chances are they'll present an idea to you that will address a problem you've been wrestling with for some time."

After that comes a plan with measurable goals: Your plan should outline how you plan to position your park along with specific improvements and rate increases to cover the costs of improvements and to make your park a more profitable operation. The plan should outline strategic details, your pricing, your marketing tactics as well as your gameplan for customer service improvements.

Brooker, Not Surprisingly, Does Advocate Outside Consultants

Regarding outside consultants, Brooker noted, Roompot, the campground chain in The Netherlands, referenced earlier, hired experts to develop relationships with local hospitals. They didn't try to do it on their own. Similarly, campgrounds should use outside experts to handle specific tasks that may be beyond their level of expertise.

Next up is development of a pricing strategy to pay for improvements: "Too many operators within the industry seem to have a 'let's-not-rock-the-boat' attitude," writes Brooker. "Let's not charge more than our competitor or we may lose a customer. Pricing strategies are therefore based on fear – a fear of losing clientele."

Without a decent profit margin, however, it's impossible to implement improvements that are needed to attract customers. Campground operators need to get over this mindset, he asserts, and learn to set fees high enough to avoid add-ons.

Brooker recalled a time he took his children on a camping trip to a franchise park in New England. "I purposely selected that campground because their rates were approximately 35% higher than the competition," he wrote. "Being the curious sort, I wanted to know what they were doing that allowed them to charge the high rates. I soon found out. They had a variety of facilities and programs to keep my children busy all day. We even got a personal escort to our site. As a family, we were so pleased with our experience that we stayed longer than planned. A one night stay soon became a four-night stay, despite the increased cost, and it was worth it."

Having followed his lead thus far, Brooker says, park operators should continually evaluate the results of their plans. This involves comparing the quantifiable, measurable results with what you had planned to achieve with your business plan.

While "*Profitable Parks*" is more focused on basic ideas of how to recognize market dynamics and develop an appropriate business plan, Brooker also offers tips that go beyond the usual recommendations about providing bigger campsites or Wi-Fi service. Among them:

Develop an inviting entrance: "Entrances are more important than the appearance of your washroom," Brooker maintains. "You can have the greatest, cleanest washrooms in all the land, but your prospective clientele will never see them if the entrance to your park is non-inviting."

Non-inviting or unlit entrances, while often unnoticeable, can also turn off the very people you're trying to welcome into your park. "Spend some money sprucing up the entrance," suggests Brooker. "Replace that old sign. Plant some fresh flowers. Hire a professional landscaper to put in some decent shrubbery and plants and rocks. If they like the entrance, the first impression of your park will be positive. Your clientele may even be prepared to pay the higher fees that you implemented just to pay for this quality improvement."

Offer additional bathroom amenities beside cleanliness: "Oftentimes, the big difference between a great washroom and a lousy one is the attention to little details," Brooker says. "Campers appreciate using bathrooms that offer hooks for their clothes in the shower area. They appreciate hand soap and towels of some description. They

appreciate a bench to sit on in the change areas. They appreciate fresh paint. Of course, it has to be clean.”

Offer a choice of amenities: Not every camper has the same needs, so don't offer the same product to every camper. Give them a choice. Brooker recommends a 20/60/20 split, with 20% of the campsites being premium sites, with computer and TV hook-ups, 60% being very good sites, and 20% being basic sites. And price them accordingly.

Develop a competitive advantage: “Why would anyone want to stay at your campground and not camp anywhere else?” Brooker asks. “Your answer to this question is your competitive advantage. It's what sets you apart from the rest. Price should not be a competitive advantage.”

Don't be the lowest priced campground in the area.

Obtain feedback from your guests: Consistently survey your guests to find out how you are doing. Are you meeting their needs and expectations?

Do they come back? Find out what else you can do to improve your park.

The bottom line, Brooker told *Woodall's Campground Management* is that many of North America's campground owners are operating in a state of paralysis, functioning to a certain extent like America's automakers, whose businesses continue to decline because they have failed to satisfy the needs of today's more discriminating consumers. “They're doing very short-term thinking,” Brooker said, referring to many of today's campground operators. “They're really trying to please the customer to the point where they're afraid to raise rates. They need to get rid to this fear and operate with confidence.”

But it takes research and education to build confidence. It won't happen if parks continue to operate in isolation or if they fail to take steps to educate themselves about their parks, their customers and their competition. “Confidence is built on a thorough understanding of trends in the industry,” Brooker told *WCM*, adding that those who have it maintain a completely different outlook and don't worry about their rates.

“The thriving operations understand the niche they're after,” Brooker says. “They're confident to charge sufficient rates to hire appropriate staff, go to conferences and continue to educate themselves without fearing they have to be at their park. Take a look at the very successful parks. What are they doing? Parks in Holland are miles ahead of the competition in terms of thriving. They know what their strengths are.”