

Test and Measure

While waiting recently in the doctor's office, I read a quote in a local business magazine. "Opportunity lies on the other side of fear." Isn't that true! I found a pen, and scratched the comment on a piece of paper, knowing that I wanted to elaborate on this remark later on.

How often are we held back by fear? We can be so afraid to try new things or methods or visit new places that we keep doing the same thing. We're all guilty of that to some degree. There's safety in the tried and true.

I happen to be an advocate however of "turning over rocks and seeing what's there." This seems harmless enough, but it's a method of analyzing what other opportunities are available. Who knows? Perhaps an idea can be formulated to improve one's own situation based on observations made elsewhere.

Now in order for this concept to work, you need to be a bit open minded. No where is this concept more noticeable than in Ashley Gardens Caravan Park in Melbourne, Australia.

I recently had an opportunity to visit some friends in Australia, so I took advantage of my time there to meet with the Executive Director of the Victoria Caravan Park Association who recommended some top caravan parks in the area. That's how I landed up at Ashley Gardens.

The park is a 5 star caravan park with a unique history and future. While most campgrounds and RV parks that start from scratch do so on undeveloped lands, Ashley Garden's did not! Prior to reinventing itself (through extensive redevelopment), the property was a government site - complete with buildings, concrete, and pavement in the heart of Melbourne. How do you turn a government site into a park?

The challenge was to develop a caravan park out of the existing infrastructure. Asphalt and concrete had to be removed to delineate separation between caravan sites. Trees and shrubs were planted. Buildings were remodeled rather than removed to become the administration office, washrooms, recreation center, and laundry facilities.

The park offers a variety of accommodations - everything from tent sites, pull thru's, and cabins. Within the cabin category, one can choose between 5 different types of lay-outs. Three lay-outs come with different sizes.

The park offers a variety of other on site amenities that must make up for the fact that the park is not located on a water body, a beach, or near a particular tourist attraction.

What intrigued me the most of the park was the use of innovation. A number of campsites, although small in size came with a small building on the site. When I inquired as to what these buildings were I was thinking storage it turned out to be a self-contained washroom. A sink, a toilet and a shower. No having to go to the public watering trough! Image that a campsite with its own bathroom! Indoor plumbing. Clean. Very clean.

The retrofit is still a work in progress. Six years after starting, this park was full to capacity for 5 straight months during the peak season. It did not have one spot - not even for tenting - available. No wonder.

O.K. There's the background. Melbourne has a very successful caravan park. How does that impact you? A closer look at their reasons for success is as applicable to them as they are to us. First, the operators (of Ashley Gardens) realize that trends are changing. In Victoria, traditional caravanning is in decline. So this particular campground used the test and measure approach. Six years after opening, "we still don't really know who our market is so we 'test' a form of accommodation and 'measure' the result." If the outcome is positive, the operators put in more. What a unique concept! Test and measure. Try something new (based on an assessment of trends) and try it. See if it works. Evaluate.

Take note as well about the "not really knowing who our market is." While the park caters only to short term campers, i.e. no seasonals or long term residents, the management has not categorically decided what type of park

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they are. They've let the marketplace decide that. How often do we build and operate based on our preconceived ideas as to what our parks should be?

Secondly, the park is in a continuous improvement mode. Six years after opening, the operators are still adding features to ensure that guests are completely satisfied and return. No resting on any laurels for these people. Profits are continuously put back into the park, so that the small details that are so important to travelers are addressed. And while I did not ask, I am sure that many of the improvements are based on feedback from customers.

Thirdly, the park is a member of a recognized brand franchise. The Big 4 "franchise" is a unique cooperation of 160 Australian parks that operate in a bottom up oriented rather than top down management style. In other words, it acts more as a cooperative as opposed to having decisions decreed from a head office. Each park in the system caters to quality and value. Membership in this chain certainly has its benefits from a marketing perspective.

Fourthly, the operators realize that the future in the industry is in "upscale" accommodation. Clientele are becoming more demanding and seek out quality. Based on the "test and measure" philosophy, new forms of accommodation are usually bigger and more luxurious than the previous. Rather than pigeon holing themselves into calling themselves a caravan park, Ashley Gardens utilizes the more expansive term Holiday Village. In so doing, guests are assured of access to a variety of accommodation facilities.

In an industry that has seen a decline in traditional caravanning, it's great to see such a success story.

If you recall at the outset of this article, I referred to the quote "Opportunity lies on the other side of fear." Think about your operation and this quote. Are you being held back because of fear? Are you letting all the negative stories in the press about travel concerns get in your way? Every cloud has a silver lining. Your job, should you decide to take it, is to turn over rocks, and see what opportunities you can take advantage of. Overcome your fear by adopting the "test and measure approach". And, if you ever have a chance to visit Australia, take the time to visit their "better" parks. You too may be inspired and take away some fresh ideas that you can implement in your organization.