

A Destination Marketing Dilemma: How Do You Sell a City like Sheffield?

Just before I toddled off to Australia for a couple of weeks in mid-February, I read an interesting interview on Sheffield Blog with Wendy Ulyett, tourism manager for Marketing Sheffield.



Among the topics covered were why Sheffield is now being promoted separately from Yorkshire South (and let's face it, promoting a non-existent entity called 'Yorkshire South' was always an appalling idea in the first place) and aspirations to make Sheffield one of the top five cities to visit in England.

Problems that were highlighted included Sheffield residents not talking about the city positively to outsiders and that Sheffield's best aspects are often off the radar.

I find the task of selling a city like Sheffield to tourists a fascinating one. It's a global thing; in Australia, cities such as Wollongong and Newcastle have to try to entice people away from Sydney and in France, the likes of Nancy, Lille and Metz have to try and slice some of the cream off Paris.

Essentially, it's a case of persuading people to step beyond the obvious. And some places do this much better than others.

The Competition

I'm not originally from Sheffield, but I have lived here for two three-year stints; once at university

and again since February 2008. It'd be fair to say that I know the city well enough to identify its strengths and weaknesses from a semi-insider, semi-outsider perspective. And while I'll never say I love the city, I do like it a lot.

The problem with Sheffield is that it sits in the pack. If you're going to go to the north of England, you can do the whole urban cool experience far better in Manchester, and if you want touristy things to do, then York wins hands down. Given that both are less than an hour away, it makes no sense to pick Sheffield ahead of them.

Promoting the Mediocre

And, unfortunately, years of cack-handed, hope-over-reality marketing has not helped. Wendy Ulyett falls into the perennial trap with this quote:

"Because Sheffield has such a wide appeal – events, live music, indulgent experiences such as spas and golf, outdoor and extreme sports, there are actually few cities who are direct competitors because there are so few cities that can offer such a range of experiences."

Essentially, she is saying that Sheffield is OK for a lot of things. Unfortunately, no-one chooses to go somewhere because it's 'OK' at a lot of things – this is not even a vaguely compelling reason.

An even worse habit is promoting something that the city is OK at as something the city is good at. It's just embarrassing – the equivalent of a deluded mother shunting her rosey-voiced brat forward for the X Factor auditions and saying the poor kid is going to be a global megastar.

Bad Marketing Gambits

Time and time again, this applies to how Sheffield is marketed. Regular gambits include: "It's on the edge of the Peak District", "It's got the largest theatre complex outside of London" and "It has a great live music scene."

Let's deal with these, shall we? Part of the Peak District is indeed within Sheffield's boundaries. One of the best things about Sheffield is how green and occasionally wild it is. But nobody goes to the Peak District for the bits that are within Sheffield. And if you're going to the Peak District why not stay, um, in the Peak District?

The second-biggest theatre complex thing is weasel words. Sheffield has a decent, occasionally good theatre scene, but just because two big theatres are next to each other and marketed under the same umbrella, it doesn't mean that Sheffield is a better theatre destination than Manchester, Brighton, Edinburgh, Glasgow or, more importantly, London. You can't push the fact that Sheffield is only two hours and seven minutes away from London by train, and then say only London has a better theatre complex. It's likely to send more Sheffielders to London than Londoners to Sheffield. It's utterly counter-productive. Why go for the second best (that isn't actually the second best), when the actual best is relatively close?

Then there's the live music thing. Sheffield has, as you'll hear all too frequently, produced the likes of Def Leppard, Heaven 17, Joe Cocker, Pulp and Arctic Monkeys. That's a decent line-up, but it hardly makes Sheffield the musical capital of Britain, does it? Any city that constantly wheels out John McClure from the execrable Reverend and the Makers to bang on about how great the city music scene is has instantly, inextricably lost the argument. While Sheffield does have some pretty good live music venues, it's also true that a lot of the smaller ones that are needed to foster talent are struggling or closing.

And while we're on the things that the city constantly tries to promote: Anyone who comes to Sheffield purely for shopping is an idiot and there are some good restaurants, but it's not - yet - a culinary destination

Focusing on the Distinctive

Dwelling on and over-promoting what a city is mediocre at will never sell it. To get people to come, you have to offer something distinctive; a unique reason to pick one place over another.

Wendy Ulyett alludes to this in her interview: "The choice we make when planning a short break is often led more by what we want to do/see - the experiences we'll have, with the location of where we might see it/do it a secondary factor."

Bang on. Therefore the experiences that are unique to Sheffield, the ones that offer a truly distinctive reason to pick Sheffield over anywhere else, are the ones that should get the marketing focus. The rest is just ballast.

To my eye, there are four angles that make Sheffield stand out. Please, Marketing Sheffield or whatever you're calling yourselves this week, start shouting about them more:



ONE: Beer

As a general rule, anyone who has been to Sheffield will link the city with having a really good night out. It's rare to find someone who has been and not enjoyed themselves. This is partly because it's a generally friendly, inexpensive city, but a big part of it is down to the large, ever-growing swathe of excellent pubs.

I'd argue that Sheffield does proper beer better than any other city in Britain. The Kelham Island area is the spearhead, with numerous pubs selling an extensive range of cask-conditioned ales, but

the concept of getting punters in by providing drinks they can't get anywhere else has long since spread to other pockets of the city.

There are so many excellent local breweries - Thornbridge, Kelham Island, Abbeydale, Bradfield, Wentworth, Acorn, Sheffield Brewery Co - that are the envy of the rest of the country. You can have a great weekend doing little more than sampling different ales from pub to pub.

Importantly, from a marketing perspective, if Sheffield is doing real ale far better than anywhere else in Britain, it is also doing it far better than anywhere else in the world. Remember my point about unique and distinctive being the way forward? Well here's a screaming stand out. It's an angle you can sell across the planet. The Welcome To Sheffield website should invest in some suggested sampling routes as a matter of urgent priority.

TWO: Industrial Heritage

If anyone from overseas has heard of Sheffield, it is usually because of the steel industry and - in particular - knives and forks. The Made In Sheffield brand is still surprisingly strong - and there's a hell of a lot more that can be done with it in terms of tourism potential.

Sheffield's one stand-out, genuinely excellent attraction is the MAGNA Science Adventure Centre. It's inside a gargantuan former steelworks building that's impressive in itself, and the interactive, flashy, push-button displays are engrossing for kids and big kids alike. Alas, MAGNA is way out on its own (it's actually technically in Rotherham), and unless you've an encyclopedic knowledge of bus routes, you're going to need a car to get there.

The Kelham Island Museum is a surprisingly good journey through the city's industrial past, present and future too. It's not a destination attraction in itself, but it's engaging, well thought out and offers the opportunity to watch genuine craftsmen hand-making the cutlery as it has traditionally been done.

Another attraction or two of a similar theme and quality, and you've got something really strong.

But the real trick Sheffield is missing out on is the transformation of former industrial sites. I'd urge anyone involved with selling or rejuvenating Sheffield to head to the conurbation of Sheffield-or-smaller sized cities that make up the Ruhr region in Germany. What's happened there is truly extraordinary. In Essen, the Zollverein colliery complex has been turned into a world class collection of museums, arts studios and tourist attractions. On a smaller scale, there's the giant gas cylinder in Oberhausen that has been turned into an exhibition space with a undeniable wow factor while Duisburg has the brilliant Landschaft Park, where you can climb to the top of a blast furnace, go diving in huge gas tanks, and admire gardens in ore storage bunkers. Something big, ambitious and striking like this could be Sheffield's much-needed must-see.

THREE: Football

Sheffield has a strong claim to being the birthplace of football. Sheffield FC is the oldest football club in the world, while Hallam FC's Sandygate Road ground is recognized as the world's oldest football ground. I'd say there's certainly some corporate beano potential in organising a kickabout at the world's oldest football ground, wouldn't you?

Sheffield doesn't exploit its football heritage enough. A good, permanent History of Football exhibition at one of Sheffield's museums could transform it from being OK to being genuinely worth coming all the way to see.

More importantly, however, Sheffield is the only city in England outside of London that has three league football clubs playing within its boundaries. Along with Sheffield United and Sheffield Wednesday, Rotherham United's semi-permanent decamp to the Don Valley Stadium means the city sees 69 home games every season (before you start including cup matches). Those visiting fans should be important tourism targets. But Sheffield's centralised location acts as both blessing and curse here. It's easy to get to from just about everywhere in the country, but it's also easy to get back from later in the day after the match has finished. A team effort with the football clubs, train companies and Sheffield's hotels (which are generally very cheap) for a Make A Weekend Of It campaign could bring a simple, effective boost to tourism numbers.



FOUR: Sheffield Round Walk

Chances are, you've never heard of the Sheffield Round Walk. That's OK, most people in Sheffield haven't either. It's an absolute treasure that's scandalously underpromoted, poorly signposted and generally left to rot on the odd tatty leaflet in the back of the Tourist Information Centre's cabinet. Yet this 14 mile route through the parks, woodlands and Peak District-cusp countryside of South West Sheffield is something that should highlight the city's distinctive greenness. It offers the chance of the perfect country-city combo day. Take on the walk in the daytime, stop at a good pub on the way for lunch, then head out for a cracking night out after you've showered and rested your feet. In terms of simple pleasures, it doesn't get much better than that. Please, powers that be, cotton on to this.

FIVE: Events

Sheffield's events calendar is growing. The World Snooker Championships is the one that everyone knows about, but there are also other niche events and festivals that are doing a good job of pulling

in targeted crowds. The Sheffield Comedy Festival seems to be getting exponentially bigger every year, the Tramlines free music festival has become a gloriously enjoyable weekender and the Sheffield International Documentary Festival is successfully plugging a global gap. More along the same lines would be nice.

Solving the Local Problem

But as Wendy Ulyett says, part of the problem is that Sheffield residents don't sell the city all that well to outsiders. This is partly natural South Yorkshire understatement and cynicism – but I'd argue it's mainly because most people in the city don't know what it has to offer. Sheffielders, as a rule, can't think of distinct reasons why anyone would come up to Sheffield other than for business or visiting friends and family.

The business and visiting friends and family markets are vital – get people up once, and chances are they'll come again. But how do you get the locals to encourage them to come up in the first place? Well, as a general rule, the city does a poor job of selling its highlights and possibilities to its residents.

So here's an idea; an idea that will take a lot of work and logistical troubleshooting to pull off, but one that will be so worthwhile if it happens.

Every year, Sheffield should hold an Explore Your Own City Weekend. It should be co-ordinated so that public transport is free and attractions open for free – and, importantly, open late until 9pm or 10pm at night. Companies offering experiences – such as the 1877 Spa or the Sheffield Ski Village – should do what they usually do at half price. Restaurants should offer two for one deals. Live music venues should all host a local band on the Saturday night. Volunteers should be roped in to run walking tours around Sheffield's public art and industrial heritage sites. A mass hike around the Sheffield Round Walk route should be organised. Get the support of the city council and the local media, make a big thing of it, and challenge Sheffield's residents to cram in as much into one weekend as possible.

It'll cost money in the short term, sure, but the long-term value could be hugely significant. It'll give Sheffield a feel-good, positive, festival spirit for that weekend, but that's not the important thing. The key is that when those friends and family are coming to visit, the people they're staying with will know where to go and what to do for an action-packed weekend. There'll be none of the usual "well, I'm not sure what there is to do, if I'm honest".

Then those visitors will go off happy and slightly exhausted after having a brilliant time, raving about Sheffield to people where they live. That word of mouth is the best marketing of all. But the city needs to show its residents how to show people a good time. For tourism in Sheffield, the investment of one weekend in creating an army of 500,000 ambassadors/ tour guides is unquestionably worth it.

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