

# European Parks Learn to Utilize Branding

*TEA Interviews Nick Farmer*

**N**ick Farmer is Managing Director of Farmer Attraction Development Limited, based in Leicester UK. In November 2007 he became the first European president of TEA. As an attraction owner as well as consultant and supplier he has a broad perspective. Having been active within TEA since its inception and part of the association's leadership for several years he has seen the business from both sides of the Atlantic. In this interview, he shares insights on how branding can be employed to boost European attractions.

**European parks and attractions are more regionally oriented than their US counterparts. They often create their own unique stories and brands. In other words, they are already well differentiated. What benefits can they reap from adopting and integrating an outside brand?**

It's about marketing power. Every park needs a strong story that people get immediately. You don't need to do much explaining when your ride carries the imprimatur of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory or Bart Simpson.

Branding an attraction after a popular story from literature or the media supplies an instant connection for the children and families who love the stories and characters. Suddenly there is somewhere to go, a special day out in the physical world of the character. Branding gets people through the door: it makes marketing much easier and, one would expect, much more successful.

As European parks are also smaller than US parks, branding can make a critical difference in attendance numbers and revenue. The attraction still has to deliver a great experience to work long term, but a brand helps get people through the door. There's no point in having an attraction that delivers if you aren't bringing people in.

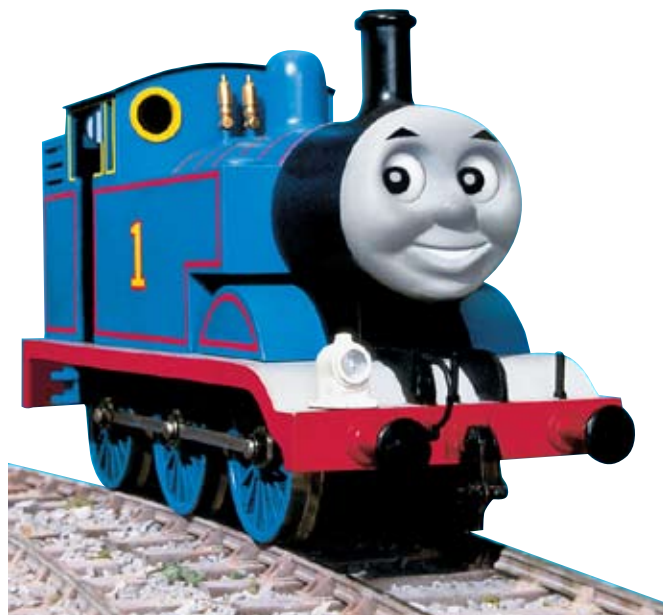
**What kinds of brands are best suited to European properties?**

An outstanding example in play is Thomas the Tank Engine, a character created in the 1940s by a Church of England vicar, the Rev. W. Audry. This very gentle set of children's stories about a little train line with two or three locomotives in the English countryside struck a chord and is still going – now as the powerful Thomas & Friends brand.

Thomas is greatly loved and has been animated on TV. He has also started to move into events by way of live stage shows and now, into his first European park, in the form of a complete Thomas the Tank Engine zone on 6,000 square meters at Drayton Manor Theme Park in Staffordshire, opening in March 2008. The deal was brokered by HIT Entertainment Ltd., and RMA Ltd. is designing the attractions. ThomasLand is designed for young children and will feature about 11 rides and a souvenir shop. I think they'll do very well with it.

**Fifty years is a long interval between the first appearance of the stories and Thomas's adoption into European parks.**

I think its slow development shows that it is not a Ninja Turtle kind of in-and-out phenomenon. It's a safe bet, an established classic, like Dr Seuss, which also took many years before it appeared in a theme park. A classic brand carries minimal risk for the licensee – on the other hand, the copyright holder likely will drive a hard bargain. The stronger the brand, the more you have to pay to license it of course.



Thomas & Friends image courtesy of HIT Entertainment

**Did you read Thomas the Tank Engine as a boy?**

Yes, I started reading Thomas stories when I was five years old – Thomas and I are about the same age.

**What about movie-based brands?**

Movie Park in Bottrop-Kirchhellen, Germany, is a good European example. This is an interesting re-branding story – the park was formerly Warner Bros. Movie World and all its attractions were tied to WB intellectual properties. When StarParks acquired the park and decided not to renew the WB license, suddenly it was a movie-themed park with no movies. My company was part of the team working with Thinkwell Europa to re-theme the Loony Tunes dark ride as Ice Age Adventure, with the Ice Age story and characters, in time for the 2005 season. Craig Hanna, CEO of Thinkwell's US headquarters in Burbank, had good connections with the producers of the film and with its distributor, Fox and was quickly able to open the necessary doors to licensing, fortunate, as we were working in a very short timeframe. Ice Age was also a good choice, research showed that this popular animated feature had a good following in Germany. It was the first time that Fox had licensed Ice Age to a park in Europe. It was a new type of operation both for the park and for Fox, and probably a fairly attractive deal because it enabled Fox to get a foot in the door.

**What if you don't have someone on the team with feature film connections?**

Pick up the phone or conduct an Internet search. If it is a book you start with the publisher, if it is on TV you call the network to find out who handles the license. Then it is a question of negotiating and making sure you are not paying too much.

An IP will have an agent to rep it and the agent won't be too difficult to find. In the toy industry, which is my own background, you know who the agents are. They're all the time calling the manufacturers. They haven't addressed European parks and attractions very much as a market, although that is starting to change. Hit Entertainment is one of the first to become active in this area.

The business of branding is prevalent in most of our consumer industries, whether you're buying a Superman ice lolly or Shrek pajamas. Smaller parks need to look for smaller brands, but there are valuable brands within their reach.

**How do you establish what the price should be?**

Certainly when it comes to a park, you have a slightly different situation than if you're selling Thomas-branded wagons. The park has a bigger upfront expense that must be finely balanced with the advantages. How do you calculate the value of branding your free train ride and turn that into a monetary figure? You have to



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do some analysis and be confident about the visitor numbers you can expect to generate.

It is critical to assess the probable longevity of the brand and factor that in as part of its value. Hot properties that are doing well right now but come from nowhere could go as quickly as they came.

From the viewpoint of an IP agency, it is critical to the deal that the business plan be sound. The operator must set achievable goals in terms of increased business thanks to the additional marketing opportunity offered by the property, and the deal must recognise that the operator must pay a percentage for that increase in business that the IP brings.

For the IP owner, a deal with a park offers an extension to the brand owner that can't be achieved any other way. For a park, IP offers marketing potential that also can't be had any other way. It can be expensive for a park, but it can be tremendously successful for both parties.

**How can parks, especially smaller parks, get the most value out of a branding investment?**

Parks and attractions do have to consider the longevity of a brand, because they are building something, not just rolling out a product line. If you build a Thomas land or a Willy Wonka world

you've dropped some money and it's got to last a good number of years, because otherwise it won't pay for itself. Parks are extremely cautious about that, and the perception has been that intellectual property licensing is more expensive than is commercially sensible. People are beginning to realize that isn't so.

As an example of a smaller property that has acquired a brand, there's Drusillas Zoo Park, a small family zoo in the south of England. What they have done is taken an existing train ride round their park and branded it as Thomas the Tank Engine – a not-too-expensive approach in terms of doing the theme work and the scenic work and so on. And yet it has a very strong marketing pull – it gives a special flavor to the experience of riding the train, and to the zoo. This is quite a small zoo and doesn't release its visitor numbers but my guess is it draws about 400,000 people a year. It's very commercially astute and well run but not a big operation.

The attendant retail opportunities that a brand offers are very important. There will already be existing souvenirs produced by toy manufacturers, and the park will have a real platform for selling it. And if there is something unique about the way you present the license or the character in your park, you may arrange to create your own souvenirs as well. Beyond souvenirs, there are other applications - food and beverage, for instance. Extend the brand



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### Can you have too much Thomas?

You could have too much of just about anything. I suppose the license agent has to be a bit careful about how not to oversell a brand. But keep in mind that children don't easily tire of their favorites, and that there are new generations coming along all the time.

There are also various ways to present a brand. The licensing of Charlie and the Chocolate Factory for a ride experience at Alton Towers is quite interesting.

Alton Towers chose to go with the look of the book illustrations, rather than the visual identity from any of the movies. It's part of the complexity and the questions you have to ask when taking on a license.

Once the big media buzz around a brand is gone, if the story and the concept haven't much worth it will really slip away very quickly. That's why it is so important to understand the value and the longevity of a brand, and to assess a brand's probable longevity when conceiving the attraction and considering how much to invest. If a brand looks to have good short term value only, you might create something that will be easy to re-theme in a few years' time – or plan to re-negotiate the licensing fees. Regardless of the brand association, it's got to be a great experience that works on its own terms. **11-7-11**



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