

## **Marketing to families – how East Midlands Tourism has gone about it**

### **1. Introduction**

Families are a core market for many UK destinations and tourism businesses but many destinations and operators market themselves as 'family-friendly' without understanding the needs of this market or having the right product in place.

East Midlands Tourism – the tourism arm of the East Midlands Development Agency - has taken a longer-term approach to growing its penetration of the family market. Following consumer and industry research in 2006 and 2007, East Midlands Tourism developed a programme of business initiatives to help operators better understand the changing family market and deliver a quality family product.

The Think Family programme, devised by East Midlands Tourism, is a best practice case study of how a tourism organisation is supporting businesses to attract the family market.

### **2. Gathering information**

#### **2.1 *First steps***

East Midlands Tourism recognised at an early stage the potential value of the family market to the long-term success of tourism in the region. Initial desk research was commissioned in 2006 drawing on a range of sources including Mintel research and current best business practice.

The research confirmed that families were a significant market. At that point spend on UK family breaks was forecast to increase. However numbers of family visitors were set to reduce due to demographic changes and increasing competition from overseas destinations. To maintain market share and secure future growth it would be essential to understand the needs and aspirations of families. What will bring them into the region, stay longer and enjoy a consistently high-quality experience that exceeds their expectations?

#### **2.2 *New insight***

Following the findings of the desk research, East Midlands Tourism quickly established 'Think Family' as one of three signature projects in its Quality Improvement Programme. The aim of Think Family is: "To work with the region's tourism industry to establish the East Midlands as one of the most welcoming destinations in the country for a family short break or holiday where the needs of all members of the family are well catered for."

Early in 2007 East Midlands Tourism commissioned new research to better understand the family market and identify current best practice. This included:

- in-depth video interviews with families, including children and grandparents in their own home environment
- mini video interviews with families at visitor locations in the East Midlands
- classroom research with schoolchildren to help establish kids' segments

- telephone interviews with successful tourism operators inside and outside the East Midlands to identify business ideas, best practice and develop case studies.

All research was based on Live Tourism's Visitor Journey model. The Visitor Journey is a simple tool that takes a visitor's view of what they feel and what they want at every stage of a short break or holiday. There are six stages starting from the moment a visitor first decides to take a trip and finishing when they return home and reminisce about their trip.

## **2.3 Findings**

### **2.3.1 Introducing the family**

The existing and new research identified a number of key market insights and trends.

Families no longer conform to the stereotype of two plus two. A quarter of all families are lone parent families.

More grandparents are taking the role of primary carers with 69 per cent taking the role of chauffeur on holiday.

While family holidays account for a third of all UK trips, perceptions are not all positive. Six out of ten parents say that Britain is not family-friendly and more than half think Britain is anti-children.

Children play a key role in the decision-making process. They are not a standard group and requirements change with age.

Many families are sceptical of the term 'family-friendly'. "It just says you can bring your kids. I don't think it necessarily means that children are catered for."

Key motivations for a family break are spending time together, discovering new places and experiences, revisiting childhood memories, escaping the daily routine.

Key priorities when choosing a family holiday are cost, but more specifically value for money, distance and things to entertain all members of the family.

### **2.3.2 The family journey**

In-depth interviews were conducted with a number of family groups in their own home environment. Interviewing family groups, including children and grandparents, helped East Midlands Tourism understand the role of each family member and their individual feelings, motivations and priorities. Key findings included the following:

#### **Easy-to-access information**

Planning a family break can be exciting. Families place a great deal of importance on pre-holiday planning and research to make sure they choose the 'right' holiday. They need more information than most and like it in an easy to access and well-organised format.

However, pick the 'wrong' location with little to see and do or poor quality accommodation that doesn't welcome families and the whole holiday can fall apart. Respondent families felt anxious about planning a break, wondering if it would meet everyone's needs and live up to expectations. Many families are also confused, daunted and overloaded with irrelevant information.

"I feel anxious as there are so many places to look at. In fact I find it quite boring ploughing through all the information. I need something more discerning such as recommendations and critiques."

### **Flexible booking arrangements**

Speed plays an important part in booking. If families can't book quickly and easily they will look to the next business. They often feel anxious and impatient until the booking is made.

Families, like all other visitors, need booking systems that are simple, quick to use and have clear and transparent pricing information. Families also look for flexibility to recognise the different types of family group.

"Family tickets tend to be two adults and up to two or three children, which I think is a bit restrictive. Could you have a group ticket that gives a discount for different types of family groups including grandparents, single parents and different numbers of children?"

### **Stress-free travel**

The journey marks the start of the holiday. Emotions include excitement but also dread and apprehension. Travelling with children can be stressful. Families look for convenient transport without complicated interchanges and with things to keep the children occupied. Most choose to travel by car but trains are seen as a chance to spend time together as a family, providing a key opportunity for train operators to further adapt their product to family needs.

Accommodation and attraction businesses have an important role to play by providing information to help make the journey easier and more enjoyable.

### **Friendly staff**

On arrival at a destination, families feel apprehensive. Will the destination/accommodation/attraction live up to the claims and pictures on its website and in its brochure? Will staff really welcome children?

Friendly staff is one of the most important priorities for families. A warm welcome sets the tone for the holiday and can help make all members of the family feel special. Adults relax if the environment is relaxed. Otherwise they worry about what others will think if children run around or are noisy.

## **Family-friendly attractions**

Finding activities to keep all members of the family happy is a key challenge of planning most family holidays. Trips to attractions are met with excitement, curiosity and interest but adults also feel uncertainty about whether children will be welcomed, whether there will be enough to do and what happens if it rains.

When discussing the perfect attraction, children and adults have different priorities. Children love attractions that are fun, exciting and enable them to do all the things they are not normally allowed to do at home. Adults have a longer list of requirements. They want to see their kids having fun but in a safe environment. They also look for areas for parents and grandparents to relax while supervising children, a relaxing environment and welcoming staff.

## **Healthy eating options**

Many families said that they were disappointed by the range and quality of food on offer for children in British restaurants and cafes. They were fed up with low quality, mass produced meals and wanted to see more outlets serving child-sized portions of adult food and healthy options.

“So many attractions say they are family-friendly but actually when you get there they are not. All they have are children’s menus with the usual chips and chicken nuggets and they barely tolerate children.”

But treats are also important on a family holiday. Chicken nuggets and chips can be a good treat if made using quality products.

## **Help with the journey home**

When it is time to go home families tend to feel sad that the holiday is over, but content after a great holiday. Families told us that they were not used to having anyone manage their departure. But the journey home is not the same as the arrival. Families are in an unfamiliar environment and there is an opportunity for businesses to help with the journey and create a great last impression.

## **Happy memories**

Once at home, life returns back to normal. But the holiday memories live on. Families love to reminisce about their holiday, relive the fun times and look through photos together. Remembering the holiday makes families feel happy, joyful and nostalgic.

“We buy children scrapbooks and they fill them with leaflets and photos. They take them to school and say ‘I’ve had a week off but I’ve done all of this’.”

## **3. The East Midlands Tourism's solution: the Think Family programme**

Armed with market research and best practice business ideas, East Midlands Tourism developed a programme of initiatives to help businesses in the region better understand the family market and respond to its needs.

### **3.1 Advising businesses**

East Midlands Tourism launched its Think Family programme with an online toolkit in March 2007. The 'think family Q-book' was the first in a series of 'Q-books' or 'Quality-books' aimed at helping small tourism businesses improve the quality of the visitor experience. The Q-books are available online and free of charge at [www.eastmidlandstourism.co.uk/q-book](http://www.eastmidlandstourism.co.uk/q-book).

The think family Q-book is packed with market insights, tips and practical ideas of how businesses can make sure families are properly catered for. It also includes videos of families so operators can hear directly from their potential visitors and case studies of businesses already successfully welcoming the family market.

The content was developed with the help of more than 35 tourism businesses ranging from Butlins and Virgin Trains through to small B&Bs and attractions. It was also reviewed by families to make sure the advice and ideas accurately reflected what they needed from a holiday or short break. Close attention was also paid to the design of the Q-book to develop a look and feel that would engage with businesses and also communicate the family message.

A summary printed version was produced to act as a teaser for the online guide.

### **3.2 Getting the message out**

Following the launch of the Q-book, East Midlands Tourism developed a one-day workshop for tourism businesses.

The Think Family roadshows bring to life the market research and give the opportunity for businesses to come together and share ideas. The format is dynamic, creative and fun. It includes 'think family fortunes' to test knowledge and reinforce learning points, videos of families telling businesses what they look for at each stage of a holiday or short break and best practice from other businesses. Businesses attending the roadshows are encouraged to give feedback, monitor the impact of any improvements they make and keep in touch with East Midlands Tourism.

The roadshows have been hugely successful in enthusing businesses about the family market and bringing operators together to network. They have now been rolled out across the region working with the Destination Management Partnerships.

### **3.3 Championing Think Family**

Dea Birkett, travel writer, broadcaster and founder of the 'Kids in Museums' initiative was recruited by East Midlands Tourism to champion the Think Family message among tourism businesses. She wrote the foreword to the Q-book and is also featured in a video that opens the think family roadshows.

Dea's involvement has helped to raise the profile of the programme as well as providing valuable insights to the family market.

### **3.4 Recognising achievement**

In 2007, East Midlands Tourism launched a special regional 'Enjoy England Excellence Award' to recognise and reward businesses that provide an exceptional experience for families. Following improvements including an impressive website redevelopment, they went on to win gold in 2008.

### **3.5 Involving visitors**

As children play a significant role in deciding where families holiday and which attractions they visit, it has been essential for East Midlands Tourism and the industry to gain their feedback and ideas. In August 2007, the 'think family scrapbook' initiative was launched.

Working with schools across the region, East Midlands Tourism asked children to tell them about their local attractions – the good bits, the not-so-good bits and what they would do differently if they were in charge.

Each participating child completed a scrapbook specially designed for their age group. Young children aged 5-7 were asked to draw pictures of something they liked and something they would like to change. Older children were asked to scrutinise every part of the attraction from the design of websites and brochures through to the friendliness of staff, the quality of food and the range of merchandise in the shop. The results were fed back to attractions to give them ideas about how to adapt their offer to keep it in tune with family needs.

Working in partnership with the Leicestershire Education Business Partnership, East Midlands Tourism also developed a GCSE/BTEC version of the Scrapbook, which has been piloted using the National Space Centre. It is now being rolled out and integrated into the new 14 – 19 diplomas.

## **4. Conclusions**

East Midlands Tourism has developed Think Family as a long-term project. A number of substantial building blocks and business resources are in place. The region's Destination Management Partnerships are now taking a greater role in the delivery of think family and tailoring resources to the needs of businesses in their areas. For example, Visit Peak District and Derbyshire is currently developing plans to create a localised version of the think family scrapbook and also launch a consumer-facing family microsite using 'Trail Tribe' characters to help families plan a holiday or short break.

In summary, the family market is a significant market but it has changed over time. While many destinations market themselves as 'family-friendly', East Midlands Tourism has gone back to basics to make sure the product is in place. Their research and business tools are helping local tourism businesses better understand and respond to the changing market and deliver a truly family-friendly experience.