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Experts: Narrow focus, poor plan hurt park

BY BILL WILSON
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Mother Nature took the rap Monday when a bankrupt Wild West World closed its doors. But the park may have been doomed before it opened, experts say, the victim of a flawed business plan.

It was a poorly marketed park too limited in its scope with a Western theme that has been outdated in the amusement industry for decades, they say.

The park can come back, said Judith Adams-Volpe, an amusement park researcher and historian at State University of New York-Buffalo.

But its theme will need rethinking, she said.

"The Wild West, you know, used to be a very popular theme on TV, and it's just not any more," she said. "The park probably can be turned into another kind of park relatively easy, but I doubt it has a future as a Wild West venue."

A limited focus

There's a clear rule of thumb in the theme park business: The broader the focus, the greater its chance for success.

So a Western-theme park heavily tailored toward children and without a major roller coaster faced challenges from the beginning, Adams-Volpe said.

"That's quite problematic," she said. "The most successful parks appeal to all age groups, multiple demographics."

That's the way Adventureland in Altoona, Iowa, sells itself, spokeswoman Molly Vincent said.

"To succeed, you've got to have a nice mix of rides," she said. "The extreme thrill rides, the flat rides for everybody and the kiddie rides. We think it's critical to have something for everybody."

A successful park also needs a theme that literally pulls in customers. Western isn't it.

Wild West World founder Thomas Etheredge, who didn't return calls Tuesday for this story, saw the park as a complement to the successful Western-themed Prairie Rose Chuckwagon Supper in Butler County.

But Adams-Volpe said: "Any number of Wild West parks were tried in the late 1960s and the early 1970s.

"None of them lasted very long at all, and it's for all the reasons we've said -- not a broad enough demographic appeal. The re-enactments, if they try them, tend to be hokey, and when you compare that to today's virtual reality experience, it pales by comparison."

Marketing

There's little hope for any business that opens its doors and waits for paying customers to foot the bills.

An aggressive -- and admittedly expensive -- marketing plan centered around television was a must to get Wild West World off the ground, several experts said.

TV is the broadest medium and the biggest net cast, said Nicole Howerton, principal and co-creative director of Howerton and White.

"For all businesses, but especially entertainment, you have to be constantly in front of the audience and sell the excitement," she said.

Instead, Etheredge scaled back to billboards and some radio as the park opened, former marketing director Ryan Cole said last month.

Adventureland spends "a significant amount of our budget" on marketing, Vincent said, emphasizing television. The park targets all of Iowa, eastern Nebraska, western Illinois and southern Minnesota.

Its ads have the same scope as its 42 rides -- a little something for everyone.

"We target the younger audience with one ad about our kiddie rides, and we have another that emphasizes our roller coasters and extreme thrill rides," Vincent said.

While some have complained that Wild West World lacked a spectacular view from the interstate, that's not an issue, Adams-Volpe said.

"Since theme parks started, they're behind bunkers almost," she said.

"Parks are always built so you cannot see much from the road. By design, they seek to create a little sort of island of pleasure that's not part of the regular environment."

The business plan

On Monday, Etheredge said poor weather and construction cost overruns doomed the park.

Circumstances like those, though, must be part of a start-up plan for a successful business, said Fran Jabara, a Wichita businessman and professor who founded Wichita State's Center for Entrepreneurship.

Wild West World opened the day after a May 4 tornado destroyed Greensburg. About 50 of the park's first 60 days were marked by bad weather.

Adventureland built covered rides and indoor arcades as its hedge against the weather.

"We're all in the same boat," she said. "This is Iowa, where in 1993 it rained all the time. You have to be in a position where the rain doesn't shut you down."

Then there's the money side. Etheredge's original \$15 million budget doubled before the park opened.

"In our business, we always plan for the worst-case scenario," Jabara said. "If you go and ask Dan Carney about the Pizza Hut start-up, I would guess his answer is going to be the same."

With cost overruns to build a project that contractors said was constantly in flux, and then with rain, the worst-case scenario arrived quickly for Etheredge.

But why is harder to pinpoint, Jabara said. There are no firm guidelines for start-up capital, he said.

There are two types of start-up capital -- personal equity and leverage, Jabara said. It's how those two balance that determines the fate of a business.

"So many times people underestimate the need for adequate equity and find themselves borrowing more than they should have," Jabara said.

"But there aren't any rules. It varies by the people and the business. The general rule is that if you have one dollar, you can borrow one. If you're lucky, two or three."

So Mother Nature deserves some of the blame, Jabara said. But not all of it.

"I think he probably tried to look like Disneyland... and priced himself out of the market," he said.

"There are two ways to invest your money -- with your head or with your heart."

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