

Show in Theme Parks: Its Definition, its Implementation, and its Value

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A family scans their ticket at the theme park turnstile as they are greeted warmly. Either a picture is taken or their finger is scanned. When the light on the device turns green, each family member enters the park for a fun day. Even in their first steps something is already at work on them. There's music playing, a train's horn sounds as it pulls into the station, and the path ahead is clean and open. The family smiles. It's going to be a good day.

This deliberate use of theming, employee actions, and attention to operational details is known as "Good Show". A Disney-coined term, this concept aligns these items together to produce something magical for the guests. This paper examines how the concept of Good Show is defined, implemented, and kept sacred in the theme park industry, and explores its relationship to how guests perceive the value of their visit.

Defining Good Show

The concept of "Good Show" encourages a theme park to present itself in the most realistic way possible in the theming, the employee conduct, and the operational details. Walt Disney himself originated this idea when his dream of Disneyland began to take shape. The story or theme in the various parts of the park defined good show. Marty Sklar, in his book *Dream it! Do it!* (2013) describes an instance where Walt got upset at a photographer with a large load of equipment parking his car in Frontierland (pp. 65–66). That car, Disney accused the photographer, didn't exist in 1860, the story timeframe of Frontierland. Sklar realized this action "... had violated a key story principle with our very visible contradiction." (Sklar, 2013, p. 66). Many years later, the Disney parks keep this concept in mind and expand upon it. Their leadership materials describe show as being a 'seamless' experience for the guests, from the beginning of their stay at a resort to the moment they leave (Kinni, 2011).

Recent research into why guests visit a theme park reveals guests' desire for a show. Milman (2009) surveyed 608 theme park visitors and asked them to identify what was important to them when they visit a theme park. Of the top five attributes guests identified, three of them related directly to show. The three are cleanliness ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 0.628$), friendly and courteous staff ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 0.669$), and employee knowledge ($M = 4.55$, $SD = 0.759$) (p. 381). Wong & Cheung (1999) also found that guests were interested in being part of the story.

The idea of show is intentional. Marty Sklar wrote a series of rules, titled "Mickey's Ten Commandments". Many of them speak to providing a good show. Sklar recommends telling one consistent story at a time with no contradictions (Sklar, 2013, p. 324), and he implores theme parks to maintain the park. He says, "Poor maintenance is poor show" (Sklar, 2013, p.324).

Guests wish to be immersed in a theme and environment where it makes sense. Walt Disney found theme parks he attended lacking and so he created one where this show is important. The Disney company has taken this idea and made it part of their operating principles called The Quality Service Compass (Kinni, 2011).

Implementing Good Show

Theme parks put this philosophy into practice in key areas of their park operations: employee onboarding and training, theming, and the general operational details. A recent job opportunity at Universal Parks and Resorts for a bathroom attendant describes the job as contributing to the experience of the guests by providing for "... the overall cleanliness and upkeep of restrooms and park facilities ..." (Universal Parks & Resorts, n.d.). Once hired, cast members at Disney World participate in an orientation titled Disney Traditions. This Walt-inspired orientation introduces cast members to the 5 Keys and provides inspiration for providing that great guest

service (Watson, 2022). Similarly, the Silverwood Theme Park handbook for its cast members instills the Good Show principles to its “cast members”—the same terminology Disney uses. Employees should have a friendly greeting to a guest, face them when speaking to them, and make eye contact (Silverwood Theme Park, 2023, p. 20). This handbook sums up their philosophy by stating cast members “...must go beyond good service, to outstanding service, to ensure that our guests have an experience they will never forget.” (Silverwood Theme Park, 2023, p. 21).

Beyond how employees represent the show, theme parks also put on a good show by setting up areas designed around specific themes. Wong & Cheung (1999) identified a nature theme as being the most preferred (66.7%) by 105 respondents to their survey, followed by fantasy (46.7%), adventure (44.8%) and future (44.7%). Kokai & Robson (2025) observe their collection of essays shows that guests at Disney, when immersed, have much more of an experience through their participation in the onstage show.

The themes guests prefer to immerse them in the show. Immersion has been defined in many ways. Anton Clavé et al. (2022) categorizes immersion as “a state of mind or form of reception” and have included many definitions from other sources (p. 114). Good show with a theme does immerse a guest into the land, helping the guest to experience an environment not related to their normal life. A theme invites the guest to be part of something by engaging many of the senses, being believable, and providing a lot of interaction (Anton Clavé et al., 2022, p. 115).

Good show also depends on maintaining the theme and performance in how the park is operated. When designing an area or attraction, Sklar (2013), in his “Mickey’s Ten Commandments” cautions against designing any part of the park that would contradict the theme of the area. When cast members talk with guests, they use language to enforce the show. Such phrases as “Guest”

instead of customer, “costume” instead of uniform, and ‘role’ instead of job lends are taught the first day of training (Kinni, 2011). The smallest details—words or a prop on a table—contribute to how the show is implemented.

Guarding Good Show

Once implemented, a theme park continues to keep the show going by reinforcing this philosophy each day with guests and cast alike. In his memoir, *Walt’s Apprentice: Keeping the Disney Dream Alive* (2022), Dick Nunes shares a story where he had to enforce show cast-member conduct to Walt Disney himself. Nunes explains that Walt, a smoker, would often smoke while walking through the park. Cast members were told never to smoke on stage, while participating in the show. Walt did it. When Nunes pointed this out, Disney at first scoffed at the correction but realized he was part of the show as well and never smoked again on stage. (Nunes, 2022, p. 51-52). Further, the show needs to be guarded from the guests as they attempt to break the show for themselves or others. Kokai & Robson, (2025) describe an incident where a YouTube vlogger was banned for life—at the time—for repeatedly sneaking backstage or exploring closed off parts of the resort. (p. 31). The vlogger’s ban was eventually lifted as Disney realized the power social media does have (Kokai & Robson, 2022, p. 31). Though Disney did not provide a reason for this ban, the event shows how strongly the parks protect guests from what happens backstage to preserve the show that is in progress.

Theme parks spend considerable effort to immerse their guests into the worlds they created by putting on a show (Anton Clavé et al., 2022, p.123). This show is something to be kept alive each moment of the day as best as possible.

Good Show & Guest Perceived Value

The value of a day at a theme park comes in the entire experience that park provides. Parks operate their show in three aspects: the employees, the theming, and the operations. A guest, however, perceives the entire show at once; everything the park does is combined into a seamless experience for the guest. They become a tourist as actor (Kokai & Robson, 2025, p 34) in the park and play their part in the experience. Picking up all the elements while playing their part, they are affected by the environment (Bitner, 1992). Theme Park show produces a bodily affect (Anton Clavé et al., 2022, p.123) that can put them in a certain mood to ready themselves for the park. Milman (2009) found that the attributes guests most valued, other than Safety, are ones around the Show concept. Therefore, it seems logical to conclude that if a theme park provides value in those attributes which put on the show, their guests will find more value in what they just experienced.

Conclusion

The magical experience guests feel at a theme park is captured in the concept of Show. While it started off at Disney, the concept has spread far to other theme parks. These hospitality establishments define show in their own unique ways and turn their descriptions into concrete practices carried out employees and theme designers and is reflected in how the park operates generally. Ultimately it is about providing a great show so the guests will leave with a strong perception of the value they receive.

The family who experiences the music and train horn sounds and sees a clear path ahead is in the process of becoming an actor in the show with a mood shaped by the environment that enables them to play the part. Their day begins with all the elements of the show combining into one experience. They are ready to have a magical day.

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