



Scottish *Thistle Awards*

Case Study

Glasgow School of Art Enterprises Ltd

Winner 2010 'Heritage Experience' & 'Retail Tourism'



*celebrating
excellence*

INTRODUCTION

A rare piece of holistic design and the masterwork of its designer, The Glasgow School of Art (GSA) was recently voted 'Britain's Favourite Building of the Past 175 Years' (Royal Institute of British Architects public vote 2009). The key difference between the GSA and most heritage attractions is that it the GSA is not a museum. The building still functions with its original purpose and 100 years since its completion it is still a hard working art school attracting thousands of talented students. Glasgow School of Art Enterprises Ltd (GSAE) opens the School up to visitors, its two main activities are guided tours and retail. These business strands have been in operation for many years, but in 2010 the efforts of a new, energetic and entrepreneurially spirited team came to fruition. With a new strategy, new products and new services in place, the decision was taken to engage more closely with VisitScotland, to benchmark the business further afield and with higher ambitions.

OBJECTIVES

Whilst aiming to strike the delicate balance between visitors' and staff and students' needs, authenticity has been key to both building trust and respect from the School and providing a quality visitor experience to generate higher footfall and spend per visitor, both essential in ensuring the long term viability and commercial success of this essential project, which annually donates its profits in full to the School, a registered charity. The main visitor draw had always been Mackintosh's work, but to achieve true authenticity and engage with a wider audience, the heritage side presented to the visitor needed to be tempered with contemporary aspects of the GSA to give visitors an accurate sense of place. GSAE needed to represent to GSA to new and existing audiences as a vibrant young community housed in a heritage building, where you can smell the paint and see the dirt from 100 years of creative education. Strategic and operational aspects of the visitor experience needed to be transformed to secure the enthusiasm of staff and students to attract and allow higher footfall through the School's working environment.

CHALLENGES

Over the years since GSAE's inception, visitor numbers had crept steadily upwards and by 2007 the quality of tours had dwindled, the shop had started to 'pile it high & sell it cheap' and a negative effect on the inner workings and brand of the School had become a concern. A chasm was forming and there was a sense that the private and public sides of GSA had become uncomfortable bedfellows. At this point GSAE kick started a period of significant growth with the start of the three year long, HLF funded 'Mackintosh Conservation and Access Project'. The public were to be held in new spaces managed by GSAE, positioned away from GSA's main thoroughfares, in an effort to widen the divide between visitors and the School. GSAE saw and seized an opportunity to do the opposite!

To build a new, sustainable business model, GSAE realised that the two historically opposing 'sides' actually needed to be brought closer together. The company needed to start thinking creatively and a new injection of entrepreneurial spirit was needed to reinvigorate the potential of the project.

ENGAGEMENT

GSAE engages with peers and industry bodies predominantly through membership of local and regional groups such as Glasgow's Leading Attractions and the Mackintosh Heritage Group; Scotland and UK-wide organisations such as the CRM Society, the Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions

and the Association for Cultural Enterprise. Links with VisitScotland and Glasgow City Marketing Bureau are sustained through familiarisation, press and promotional activity and participation in schemes such as Glasgow's Tourism Service Initiative. The company's board of Directors provides direct links with large scale retailers, visitor attractions, destination marketing agencies, law firms, arts organisations and individuals.

GSAE works with and recruits from GSA's student and graduate body; employs students and new graduates as tour guides; commissions GSA staff, students and alumni to design for and supply the shop; and employs students and new graduates work back of house for the company (e.g. all marketing and promotional materials are designed by a visual communications graduate, the shop floor managed by an interior design graduate and private tour bookings handled by fine art and design graduate guides).

The team were inspired to enter the Scottish Thistle awards after a long period of having all 'noses to the grindstone' to transform and refresh the company's offer. After focussing inwardly for a long spell, there was a strong desire to gain insight from VisitScotland and to see how the offer would compare to some of the bigger players in the industry. The process of entering the awards has benefitted the company in terms of team building and morale boosting, it has created links with other entrants and winners and provided GSAE's small team with an invaluable opportunity to network with, and learn from the best in the industry, ultimately resulting in higher visitor numbers enjoying an enhanced visitor experience.

RECOGNITION

After winning two Scottish Thistle Awards categories in 2010, GSAE's team have been approached by several industry peers to meet, shadow and sneak a look at the company's entry! As a relatively small attraction operating within an academic institution, winning a VisitScotland Scottish Thistle Award has alerted GSAE's peers to the fact that GSA has a comprehensive visitor offer, and to the quality of its products and services. It has encouraged other businesses to get in touch, enhanced the team's opportunities to share information and expanded the company's frame of reference for continuous learning from other leaders in the industry. A direct result has been a higher level of engagement with the tourism industry in general, and essentially with businesses outside of GSAE's usual niche.

SUCCESS STORY

Winning two awards in 2010 provided GSAE with an invaluable opportunity to promote their "award winning" business to customers – online, through social media, in print and in the press. The 'Scottish Thistle Award' label has been an accessible and understandable hook on which the company has hung extended coverage to potential new markets and had elevated the perceived value of the company's offer to stakeholders and its current customer base.

The business has continued to grow solidly with a 12% increase in profits from 2009/2010 to 2010/2011, with the team going on to win the 'Winstan Bond Trophy for Entrepreneurial Museum / Attraction of the Year' at the prestigious Museum & Heritage Awards in London in May 2011.

INVESTMENT IN THE FUTURE

With a confidence boost fresh from the award wins, GSAE aims to achieve a five star VisitScotland grade in spring 2012. The aim is to polish the company's existing offer to give the team a solid foundation to develop a number of new initiatives from 2012 - 2014; including a diversified tour

programme to engage with visitors with different levels of interest; an online shop and new retail selling streams to increase offsite income; a brand new visitor centre incorporating a permanent exhibition, shop, café and tour departure point in the Stephen Holl designed building currently under construction.

TOP TIPS

- GSAE would avidly encourage any business to enter the Scottish Thistle Awards, and would urge that small and independent operators in particular have a go!
- The process of entering forces the team to take an objective and detailed look at the quality of the offer as well as at internal operations, which as we all know is normally very, very hard to find the time to do!
- It has been very interesting learning that a small business like GSAE can in fact compete with larger organisations at the top of their game and this has given the company's team the confidence to pursue opportunities they wouldn't otherwise have chased!
- Having an expert panel of judges analyse your business in this manner is too good an opportunity to pass up for any business looking to develop and grow in Scotland's competitive tourism industry.

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