

# Crest of a wave

## How Brighton Pier Group bounced back post-Covid-19

If you're looking for an example of a business that has bounced back from the pandemic restrictions almost perfectly in line with the findings of our report, then look no further than Brighton Pier. The iconic landmark is an experiential leisure attraction that has fully returned to pre-pandemic visitor and profit levels; although the management remains acutely aware that new challenges stand in the path of future growth.

"As soon as the restrictions were over, we saw a huge increase in volume of customers," explains Anne Ackord, CEO of Brighton Pier Group, which owns the attraction. "I think initially – certainly in the first half of this year – that was partly driven by the pent-up customer demand we saw across the industry. Families that had been stuck at home for long periods were desperate to get back out there, and that certainly played a part. But, as the year continues, it's clear that we have now fully returned to 2019 numbers, which appears to be the generally accepted 'pre-pandemic' benchmark."



## Case studies



### **Sustaining success**

That consistent increase to bring figures in line with pre-pandemic numbers is partly down to strategic decisions the management took during lockdown to pivot the way it garners insights on potential visitors and engages them, Anne explains.

In our previous report on trends in the hospitality and leisure sector, *Bouncing Back*, published in May 2021, Anne explained how the business planned to maximise customer engagement by being more targeted in its marketing messages and encouraging repeat visits.

Now, just over a year on, the Group is reaping the benefits of those strategic changes, she adds.

“We have worked really hard to improve our data collection, finding out about our customers so we can better understand who they are, where they come from, what they like, and what they want from us,” Anne continues. “We then leverage that data to send tailored offers and information on events we know customers will be interested in, and we send them through various platforms. Facebook isn’t as popular as it was, but Instagram and Snapchat are far more effective now, and we have plenty of direct communication with the customers through SMS and email.

## Case studies

"And what's interesting for me is that customers are actually much more willing to share that information – because this newer generation of consumers wants tailored and bespoke offers, and it is willing to give up personal information to achieve that."

### Destination UK

Anne adds that an additional factor relating to the speed at which many leisure firms saw a return to pre-pandemic numbers was that continued travel restrictions prompted many to "rediscover the UK".

"I do believe people found that they can amuse themselves in their locality," she says. "They were forced to look locally for activities to do and they have realised that, actually, you don't have to travel to find great experiences. That certainly also helped."

Such as been the success of Brighton Pier Group's post-pandemic response, the business has recently expanded by acquiring Yorkshire-based Lightwater Valley Family Adventure Park.

Despite that growth, however, and the continued return of visitor numbers across the business, Anne acknowledges that challenges remain ahead for the leisure sector – and that there are new issues to counter.

"Lots of businesses in the sector are telling us they're really struggling with recruitment," she explains. "That's the result of a number of factors, in my view."

"I think furlough and lockdown led many to re-evaluate their lifestyle and their approach to work. Many chose a career change when they couldn't work and we are also getting many applications from people who now want to work only one-to-two days a week, so they can have a better work-life balance. That's been hard on the operating managers because they have to create rotas and schedules."

"But there's also an issue, which is common across the industry, whereby the type of work we need to recruit for – let's call it customer service and customer-facing roles – is not inherently desirable with the British population in general," she adds. "In parts of Europe, being a waiter or kitchen staff is seen as a skilled job and these positions are viewed as being a career. But that's not so much the case here. Prior to Brexit, around 60% of our employees in the Group were from Europe. Now we have to recruit for those roles from within the UK – and people do not value that role as highly."

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Anne adds that other challenges are also on the radar – not least rising interest rates, the increasing rising cost of living and continued talk of a recession – all of which, she admits, could hamper consumer confidence going forward.

However, she remains upbeat about the positive shift the business has seen as it emerges from the pandemic. "Yes, these are challenges," she admits. "But life is a challenge and business is a challenge – and you just have to rise to it. And I'm confident that the Group will do so."