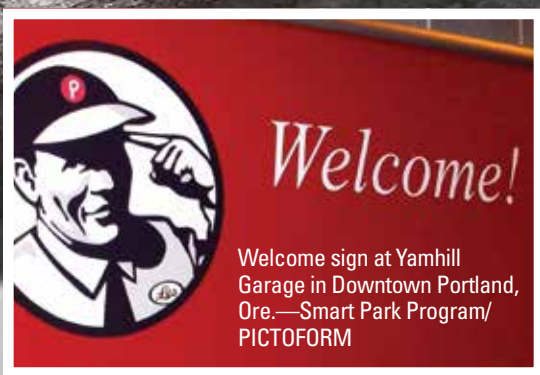


Changing perceptions by  
engaging customers and creating  
vibrant arrival experiences.



Fast-forward a few dozen years and parking emerged as a legitimate profession. We came to understand ourselves as a service industry with our own high standards for operational and service excellence. The parking brake had been released, but it was difficult to argue that parking was adding much forward momentum to the businesses we supported. Aside from the world of valet parking, it was hard to see that parking operations offered much in the way of competitive advantage.

It makes sense that no matter how much we did to improve the parking experience, it didn't yield much in the way of competitive advantage. After all, parking is always a means to an end. The customer is there for dinner or to shop. As an industry, we have embraced our role as custodian of the "first and last impression" for many years, but those impressions are generally disconnected from the primary motivation of our customers. As such, even good parking experiences are reduced to commodities that do little to build brand loyalty or contribute little to the overall experience.

### The Pre-Show Belongs to Parking

How then do we take the next step, engaging the customer and providing forward momentum for the businesses we support? You'll find the answer in Las Vegas this month, not just on the IPI Expo floor or in the breakout sessions but up the road at Treasure Island, where you can catch Cirque du Soliel's "Mystère."

As the audience filters in and goes about finding their seats (a parking experience of a different kind), the preshow begins with master clown Brian Dewhurst. His character, Brian le Petit, described as a bit of a bad uncle, serves as a foil for the house staff and generally runs amok in ways that description cannot do justice. The end result is that before the house lights are out and the show begins, the audience has been fully engaged and is ready for the experience to come.

Just as the seating of an audience can become the preshow, so can the parking experience. We don't just own the first and last impression; we own the first and last encounter. We own the preshow and the encore.

### Context Is King

I'm not a clown, you say? That's OK—not every show is Cirque du Soliel. The antics of Brian le Petit would hardly be an appropriate preshow for a tragic opera or a heady dramatic play. His preshow is tailored for an evening of cirque, of fantasy and whimsy, and it fits perfectly. In crafting your preshow, it is essential to uncover what experience the preshow of your parking operation is seating the audience for.



Example of incorporating signage that leverages well-known and local references to aid in a facility wayfinding—O'Hare Airport, Chicago



Example of incorporating wayfinding and transportation elements into excellent urban design—The Woodlands, Houston, Texas.

Those of us who oversee parking operations that serve a single entity, such as a hospital, a performance venue, or an airport, have it easy. The context in which we will stage our preshow is clear. Parking professionals who serve business districts have a slightly more difficult task. With downtowns and other business districts actively working to build coherent identities for themselves, however, aligning the preshow to the context of the main event is becoming increasingly easy.

### Know Your Audience

Understanding one's audience is absolutely fundamental to staging a successful preshow. Context joins culture and demographic factors to shape and understand their needs. The needs of families with

young children are different than those of a couple on date night, just as the needs of a patient arriving at the hospital are different than a business traveler arriving at the airport. The needs of one's audience determine the plot for our show and how we will engage the audience by meeting them where they are.

### Script the Show

Dewhurst's performance as Brian le Petit is highly improvisational. With more than 15 years of performing the character under his belt and nearly 70 years

of professional circus experience (yes, Dewhurst is still going strong at the age of 82), he can easily adapt his role without breaking character or disrupting the performance.

For the rest of us, great performances don't just happen. Few of us have Dewhurst's longevity playing Brian le Petit—in fact, many of the players our audience will interact most closely with will have just months or perhaps a few years of experience. For us, service scripts provide a basic outline for our performance, moving the show forward without constraining the performer who is prepared to make the role his own.

### Set the Stage

In *The Experience Economy*, authors B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore argue that the staging of an experience requires that plain space becomes a distinct place. Similarly with our parking facilities—the stage for our preshow—we have an opportunity to create distinct spaces consistent with the context of the main event. This is an area where our industry has excelled during the last decade, yet the strategies for placemaking within parking facilities have yet to be universally adopted. In seeking inspiration for how to set the stage for our preshow, we need look no further than the street outside our garage.

The notion of creating competitive advantage can be wide-ranging and multi-dimensional. Beyond the operational and customer service elements, we as an industry have made great strides in better integrating parking and mobility management into the urban form through enhanced facility architecture and design, enhanced walkability and pedestrian environments, and embracing creative placemaking and place management practices. We have expanded our stage to go beyond simply parking to include an array of multi-modal experiences designed to improve community access, including enhanced facility architecture and the provision of public art.

In *Making Business Districts Work*, David Feehan and a host of contributing authors lay out the essential building blocks of how to transform our town centers into unique, vibrant, and beautiful places that are truly exciting and energizing. As parking professionals, we cannot only turn to the same toolkit in setting the stage for our preshow but look to how it has been applied for the businesses we support. By creating consistency with the main stage, our preshow can become even more a part of a single seamless experience.

### Don't Forget the Encore

While the preshow offers the chance to shape the arrival experience and engage the customer in preparation for the main event, we have one more chance to create competitive advantage—the departure experience or encore.



Examples of incorporating creative signage and wayfinding related to a specific venue—Universal Studios Theme Park, Los Angeles, Calif.

Example of enhanced parking facility architecture and public art—Park Place Garage, Missoula, Mont.



Examples of creative and memorable pedestrian wayfinding.

You might be wondering, “How can my organization perform the encore? We weren’t the main event!” What is an encore, though, but a chance to extend the experience, sending the audience out on a high and feeling like they got just a little something extra? Extending the experience is somewhat more complex than staging a separate preshow that engages the customer but needn’t be fully integrated with the main event. If nothing else, we have a chance to, as Pine and Gilmore describe, “eliminate negative cues” or the things that distract from or contradict the experience. Ideally, we can also include positive cues that serve to extend or reinforce the experience.

### Not a One-Person-Show

Unlike Dewhurst’s performance before “Mystère,” the effectiveness of your preshow and encore needn’t ride on your shoulders alone. You’ll have the players from the main event cheering you on from behind the curtain as you warm up their audience. Just as importantly, you’ll be performing along with your colleagues and helping each other find new ways to bring just a little more theater into your operation as you stage increasingly vibrant arrival and departure experiences.

### Speaking of Encores...

Intrigued by this concept? Would you like to see a wide range of examples highlighting parking and transportation-specific customer engagement strategies that help create competitive advantage for the communities we serve? If so, we hope you will consider attending our presentation on this topic at the 2015 IPI Conference & Expo in Las Vegas.



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