

Attractions

MANAGEMENT

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“One of the strengths of our company is that we’re good at turning around ailing businesses,” says Håkon Lund, CEO of Lund Gruppen Holding (Lund Group), a family-owned, Norway-based attractions operator. “We’ve become good at taking over and improving destinations which have lost their strategic focus and are struggling with investment and visitor numbers.”

One of the first “turnarounds” the company took on was the Kongeparken theme park located on the west coast of Norway, close to the city of Stavanger. The park was first opened by a group of attractions entrepreneurs in May 1986 with an initial investment of around NOK250m.

It immediately faced issues and was declared bankrupt just months after launch. In the following years the attraction continued to struggle and changed hands regularly. By the time Lund Group became interested in acquiring the park – in 1997 – Kongeparken had gone through three

When Norwegian attractions operator Lund Group took over the troubled Skånes Djurpark wildlife park in Sweden in 2015, it needed a new flagship attraction to lead the rejuvenation. Enter Aardman Animations and its much loved Shaun the Sheep character



Håkon Lund is CEO of Lund Group, which operates Skånes Djurpark

different owner-operators and was under the control of a creditor, a Norwegian bank.

“The park had gone bankrupt three times,” Lund says. “While the market in which it operated was relatively small – around 300,000 inhabitants – there had been significant investments in the park’s infrastructure and we saw an opportunity to develop it into a world-class attraction.

“We realigned it and turned it into a family-focused theme park based on six values – learning, playing, sharing, exploring, magic and excitement. We invested in a number of unique attractions and gradually developed it into one of Norway’s top five most popular attractions.”



Skånes Djurpark in Skånes, Sweden, is a zoological attraction with animals native to the region; A new Shaun the Sheep zone has diversified the offer



A FAMILY AFFAIR

Kongeparken now attracts more than 260,000 visitors per year and employs around 450 staff. It has won a number of awards for its visitor experiences – including Themed Entertainment Association (TEA) awards for its Barnas Brannstajon (Children's Fire Station) and Gråtassland (branded tractor ride) attractions in 2012 and 2014.

Today, Kongeparken is one of the main elements in Lund Group's parks and resorts arm, one of the three divisions which make up the company. As well as the parks division, it has a highly successful festivals and events business, which operates everything from music festivals and cultural events to Christmas markets. The third strand, a travelling fairs businesses, dates back to the foundation of the business.

"Lund Group is a family business currently in its fourth generation," Lund says. "The company dates back to 1895 with my great-grandfather, also called Håkon, a showman who had travelling

shows, but also had parks in Oslo, Berlin and Ireland. He set the company's focus on providing excellent guest experiences, something we still take great pride in."

Lund adds that because of the nature of a family business, there are benefits when planning for the future.

"One of the strengths of a family business is that you can think very, very long term," he says. "We don't think ahead in terms of quarters or 12-month or even 10-year periods. We work to horizons of 30 to 50 years for each of the projects that we take on."

ANIMAL ADVENTURES

One of the projects that recently appeared on the Lund Group's horizon was Skånes Djurpark wildlife park in Sweden – another destination in need of a turnaround.

First launched in 1952 and located in a picturesque setting in Sweden's Skåne region, the vast attraction, covering nearly 100 hectares (247 acres), housed an eclectic selection of wildlife, nature trails,

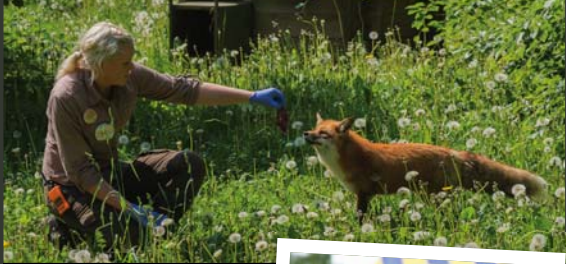
play zones and a small waterpark. "It's a wonderful setting, you are quite literally surrounded by wild nature," Lund says.

Owned and operated by the non-profit Skånes Djurpark Foundation, the attraction was in trouble and relied on taxpayers' money to keep it ticking over – mainly due to visitor numbers lagging behind targets. According to Lund, the low numbers were a symptom of a bigger problem.

"The foundation's main challenge was that it hadn't really decided what type of visitor attraction it wanted to run – a traditional zoo or a wilderness park," Lund says. "It was also unsure whether the park should just have Scandinavian animals or have exotic ones too."

After a particularly bad two years between 2011 and 2013 – when the park lost 150,000 visitors – Lund Group was contacted by the Skåne region's governor to see if it could help. A feasibility study was conducted and in June 2014 the company signed a deal to take over. Lund Group began operating the park in January 2015. ▶

VISITOR ATTRACTIONS



Lund Group chose the Shaun the Sheep IP as it fitted with Skånes Djurpark's family appeal and the natural setting of the park



Having a strong story and a strong brand on board as a partner has proven to be key to the success of this park

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTIES

The first thing Lund Group installed at the park was a clear vision. A decision was made to turn Skånes Djurpark into the world's largest showcase of purely Scandinavian animals – a conscious choice made with the target audience in mind.

"The location of the park means that if you travel up from Germany or Denmark, it will be the first place you will come across authentic Nordic nature and its wildlife," Lund says. "The idea is that you can come to Skåne, in the south of Sweden, and you can meet all the animals you would see later on if you would continue to travel to northern Sweden, Finland or Norway."

As part of the plans to breath new life into the offering, Lund Group looked at adding an intellectual property (IP)-led themed attraction. It was a method Lund Group had deployed successfully in the revival of Kongeparken, where it had installed the €2m (£1.7m, \$2.1m) Gråtass (Little Grey Fergie) attraction based on a popular Norwegian TV character.

The concept for Skånes Djurpark needed to be carefully considered, however. "We realised early on that any themed attraction at Skåne – especially a branded one – needed to feel natural in the surroundings of the park," Lund

says. "Not a plastic-fantastic universe, but something that would fit in the picturesque setting. We were very conscious of making sure that any addition wouldn't create a huge contrast with the rest of the park.

"Our focus was to find an IP that was 'real' and to do with animals. We created a list of things we wanted – the animal aspect being a key one – and visited a number of different IP owners and developers. We shortlisted five, cut it down to two and in the end chose UK-based Aardman Animations as our clear winner."

SHEEPING AROUND

Famous for its old-school, stop-motion clay animations, Aardman has a burgeoning IP portfolio of animal characters and a decision was made to utilise one of them, Shaun the Sheep, at Skåne. Following an investment of £5m (\$6.2m, €5.9m), the family-oriented Shaun the Sheep Land officially launched in June 2016.

Visitors to the attraction are welcomed into a traditional Swedish country fair, where there's a meet-and-greet with Shaun and a chance to explore his home at Mossy Bottom Farm. Guests take a tractor ride, helping Shaun to find his misbehaving, lost flock before the farmer wakes up and finds out his sheep are missing.

According to Lund, the addition has been a hit with guests. "The feedback has been 100 per cent positive," he says and adds that Shaun has played a big part in the recovery of the park.

"In the first year since we took over we had a 15 per cent increase in attendance. In 2016, when Shaun was introduced, we achieved a 30 per cent increase. Having a strong story and a strong brand on board as a partner has, I think, proven to be key to the success of this park."

NEW EXPERIENCES

The turnaround of Skånes Djurpark has got off to a good start, but Lund says there is no room for complacency. "Continuous investment in a destination is key for developing it and that is true at Skåne, too," he says, adding that there will be new features for guests to enjoy in 2017.

"We are continuing our investment programme and this year we will be looking at the way we introduce people to the wilderness aspect of the park."

He remains tight-lipped about the exact details, however. "Let's just say that we're looking at different types of technologies and transport solutions in order to come up with a different way to giving people a nature experience with animals." ▶

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NGAIO HARDING-HILL

senior manager, attractions and live experiences, Aardman Animations

What was the process that led to Shaun the Sheep Land at Skåne?

We were invited by the Lund Group to visit them at Kongenparken in 2014. They presented their plans for Skånes Djurpark, which they had just acquired, and expressed an interest in partnering with an IP that shared similar values to theirs. We pitched a range of concepts that integrated the brand into the attraction and they liked them. For Aardman, Skånes Djurpark was an ideal location for Shaun's first international attraction – beautiful parkland filled with wild animals.

How closely did you work with Lund Group on the attraction?

We worked very closely with them all the way through the project. We recognised our shared commitment to telling a great story and that we both had our own areas of expertise.

One area that really benefitted from the creative partnership was optimising the pre-opening visitor experience. Working together we created a narrative that told the story of the flock's journey to the park from Mossy Bottom Farm. Using bespoke animation and a PR campaign that captured the flock's journey in online postcards at iconic landmarks, visitors were able to share the flock's journey in real-time. It really built up anticipation for the opening.

Aardman has a portfolio of well-loved characters, including Wallace and Gromit

What's your strategy concerning partnerships with attractions?

We have great ambitions for this area of our business and from a brand perspective, our strategy is to work with partners which share and understand the values of our company and brands. Our mission is to create highly engaging entertainment using strong, funny characters in compelling stories for worldwide family audiences.

In comparison to some of our competitors in the world of animation, we have the ability to be creatively nimble and highly responsive and so we seek out partners that have the highest creative ambitions for their visitor experiences. Quality is also integral to everything we do and is a priority focus in our partnerships with attractions.

How many attractions has Aardman worked on?

Our first attraction was Wallace and Gromit's Thrill-o-Matic ride at Blackpool Pleasure Beach, which opened in 2013. The first Shaun-branded attraction – Shaun the Sheep Experience – opened at Land's End in 2015



and was created in partnership with Heritage GB. Shaun the Sheep Land at Skånes Djurpark is Shaun's first international attraction.

Adding to these, we have a large portfolio of international touring exhibitions, live experiences and touring stage shows featuring Aardman brands – such as Wallace and Gromit's Musical Marvels, Shaun the Sheep Stage Show and Shaun the Sheep's Championsheeps.

Are there any plans to expand the attractions operations?

Yes, we have ambitions to develop Aardman's presence within the sector. We have exciting

concepts for a Shaun the Sheep family entertainment centre and an Aardman Experience – and we'd love to create an Aardman Land with the right partner.

Nick Park's new film, *Early Man*, releases early next year. It provides a whole new cast of characters and adventures to launch into the world of visitor attractions so there are loads of really exciting projects on the horizon for this area of the company.

What are the benefits and opportunities you see in the sector?

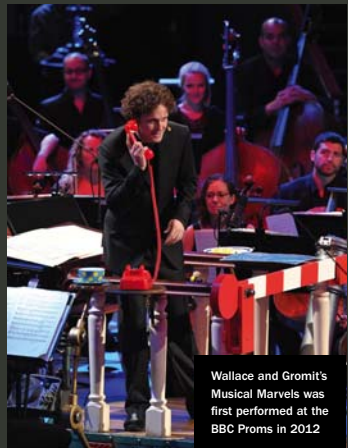
Attractions provide a new gateway for audiences to be introduced to our characters and brands. As our attractions portfolio expands, it's exciting to anticipate that attractions may be the first interaction people have with our brands, rather than through the more traditional screen-based experience. Fantastic new developments in attractions technology, like VR and AR, also offer great opportunities for us to continue to combine our core talents as filmmakers and storytellers with the world of visitor experiences.



Guests ride in cars themed like Wallace's slippers on the four-minute Thrill-O-Matic at Blackpool Pleasure Beach, UK



We have exciting concepts for a Shaun the Sheep FEC and an Aardman Experience - and we'd love to create an Aardman Land



At Land's End (or Lamb's End), UK, visitors must try to cure Shirley the Sheep's hiccups. Shaun the Sheep Experience is a joint venture between Aardman Animations and Heritage GB

Wallace and Gromit's Musical Marvels was first performed at the BBC Proms in 2012

