

MRS Awards 2020
International Research

Finalist
Flood + Partners
World Animal Protection

Love is blind:
Changing attitudes towards the
global dolphin entertainment industry

SUMMARY

Around the world thousands of dolphins are living in captivity, with more captured from the wild every year. The exploitation of these intelligent creatures for human ‘entertainment’ has become normalised. World Animal Protection needed to understand how they could open people’s eyes to the suffering that dolphins endure whilst in captivity. They commissioned Flood & Partners to understand more about visitors to dolphin venues – who they are, what motivates them, and how they really feel about animal welfare.

The first challenge was finding the right people to talk to. We needed to reach people who had holidayed near and visited dolphin venues, and these were scattered across the globe. Once a multi-stage process successfully identified our audience, we then had the arguably greater challenge of accurately capturing people’s true thoughts and feelings about dolphins in entertainment. People can hide their true feelings and post-rationalise when exploring sensitive behaviours like this. We used our ground-breaking survey platform to help us cut through and get to the truth.

World Animal Protection embedded the learnings into their campaign, with huge success, resulting in 12 travel companies (including Booking.com, Virgin Holidays and TripAdvisor) ending the promotion and sale of tickets to dolphin venues.

SYNOPSIS

Introduction and objectives

World Animal Protection is a global charity helping to find practical ways to prevent animal suffering worldwide. They work collaboratively with those able to effect change at scale: governments and institutions that can help improve the lives of animals.

In 2018 they turned their attention to tackling the longstanding problem of dolphins in captivity – especially those being used for entertainment. Their goal was to move the travel industry and the general public to wake up to the distress that captivity causes these intelligent animals, and challenge the acceptance of dolphin shows across the globe.

The global influence of World Animal Protection has been built on their evidence-based approach. This drove the need for research to “*understand visitor’s knowledge of and attitudes towards the issue of dolphins kept in captivity*”. The research findings needed to be able to, “*inform work with the travel industry and develop the campaign*.”

Finding the right people

World Animal Protection wanted to speak with both potential and past visitors to dolphin venues. Accordingly, we needed to reach tourists to those areas where dolphin venues are prevalent (coastal areas and major cities in the US, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Spain). The challenge? Most of these visitors live elsewhere in the world.

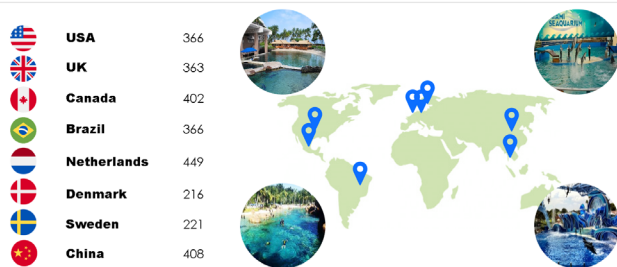
Face-to-face approaches were considered, but it was clear that they would use more time and budget than was available. An online approach was the most appropriate, with a multi-stage process adopted to ensure we focused in on the key audiences.

Since targeting every nationality wouldn’t be possible, our first step was to conduct desk research to identify the main sources of incoming tourists for each ‘dolphin’ area (this could include ‘local’ visitors too). From this we identified eight countries of special interest, where the largest numbers of tourists to areas with dolphin venues were coming from. These were the UK, USA, China, Brazil, Canada, Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden.

To validate the desk research, we conducted an initial online poll with over 10,000 people across the eight markets to confirm the prevalence of tourism from each of the target destinations. Finally, for the survey itself, we spoke to over 2,700 people who had recently visited a dolphin venue or were potential visitors in the near future (Fig1.).

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Global research with over 2,700 visitors and potential visitors to Dolphin venues



The revelatory challenge

The use of our special, proprietary survey platform (Fig2.) was fundamental to our approach. This enabled us to deliver a robust quantitative study, but at the same time had the power to provide a rich overlay of qualitative diagnostic understanding.

Capturing the deeper emotional motivators, as well as rational, was imperative. We needed to minimise post-rationalisation, and limit self-editing; we wanted to stop them simply telling us what they thought they ought to say.

Three principles underpinned our survey design. The survey had to:

- Engage participants
- Foster truthfulness
- Aid full revelation

The survey experience focused more on the visual than the verbal and was designed to be immersive. Our proprietary platform allowed for a more engaging interactive experience than the 'box-filling' exercise of traditional surveys. We used a mix of different question types to capture both visceral 'Type 1' responses, and questions that encouraged deeper thinking. For example, we used a Tinder-style 'swipe left or right' question to capture instinctive responses as to the kind of interactions with dolphins that are acceptable.

We know from unsolicited feedback (Fig2.) that people engaged positively with the survey, regardless of platform, with 1 in 4 surveys completed via mobile.

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Engaging interactive online survey

- Fresh, interactive questions
- Some capture instinctive 'Type 1' responses
- Others encourage deeper thinking



Hugely positive respondent feedback

"One of the best, if not the best, online survey I have ever done."

"Very interesting survey, gave me something to think about."

"Interesting survey and food for thought!"

"I absolutely loved the survey! Loved the format too!"

"Good experience, made me think."



A story of love

The research uncovered many issues, with notable surprises along the way. To start with, the research exposed just how much work World Animal Protection had ahead of them, with 9 in 10 believing at least one form of dolphin entertainment is acceptable.

As Elodie Guillon, Global Behaviour Insight Advisor at World Animal Protection said, **"We expected low awareness on the issue, but not to that scale."**

Prior to the research, one hypothesis had been that large swathes of the public, especially visitors, simply didn't care enough about the welfare of dolphins. The research highlighted this was very far from the truth. Instead, visiting was interpreted – especially in a family context – as an act of love. It was people's huge love and respect for dolphins that drove the desire to come and see them. Not to visit would be like not looking up an old friend when you are miles from home and in their town.

But love is blind. In this case, love helped hide the fact that dolphins suffer hugely in captivity. This dark truth was – as the research clearly showed – largely unknown. And the reason was right in front of all our faces. To us, dolphins can look like they are smiling all the time. Even in captivity, dolphins look 'happy'. And why are they happy? For some it was read as a sign of their reciprocal love – for them it was fun being in the company of humans.

This fresh appreciation provided the campaign leaders with a clear understanding of the issue, the scale of the challenge and how it needed to be tackled. **"Sadly, the dolphin's smile, which is simply the shape of their jaw, gives people the impression that these beautiful animals are happy in captivity – nothing could be further from the truth."** said Nick Stewart, Global head of campaigns.

As a global study, it was critical to highlight the differences by region. Tourists from the US, China and Brazil found the use of dolphins in entertainment culturally more acceptable, representing a bigger challenge to change perceptions there. With a team spread globally, it was important to share the story in a digestible and tailored manner. We conducted multiple presentations, highlighting country-specific issues. This enabled the development of individual market 'personas' to bring alive visitor profiles and to help tune market-specific campaign messaging.

“Flood’s team has been extremely responsive and willing to provide further analysis when requested.”

Elodie Guillon, Global Behaviour Insight Advisor – World Animal Protection.

Research impact: a new strategic direction

To quote Nick Stewart again, *“Our research shows that most people visit dolphin venues because they love dolphins, but they don’t yet understand what dolphins need for a happy life and how captivity stops that happening.”*

Our work has helped to provide a strong foundation for World Animal Protection to develop and push forward their campaign. It also modified how they planned to implement the campaign. Originally, they favoured targeting cruise operators – hypothesised to play a significant role in selling tickets and bringing visitors to dolphin venues. However, our research uncovered the importance of independent booking, often because of advertising on travel sites, such as TripAdvisor and Booking.com. By hosting ads, and directly selling tickets to dolphin venues, the big travel companies were fuelling the acceptability of attending venues and endorsing animal cruelty in the process. Through a better understanding garnered from the research, World Animal Protection decided that these companies should be a key campaign target.

Opening eyes

In October 2019, World Animal Protection released their report ‘Behind the smile, the multi-billion dollar dolphin entertainment industry’ which incorporated our research findings. The report is part of a wider campaign, guided by the research, to educate and expose the suffering caused to dolphins in entertainment. This campaign, ‘Fooled by a smile’ has been shortlisted for the Third Sector Digital Awards, with news coverage (Fig3.) so far generating a reach of 43 million.

Targeting the travel industry has also had great success, with twelve major companies, including Booking.com, Virgin Holidays, TripAdvisor & AirBnB having stopped promoting and selling tickets to dolphin venues. TripAdvisor represented a particularly important win, since our research had shown how visitors often planned their trips independently.

By putting an end to the promotion of dolphin venues on these websites, World Animal Protection have been able to take the first step in changing society’s attitudes towards dolphins in entertainment. Although getting hold of visitors was a major challenge, the work put in to find them and uncover their deeper thoughts has paid off.

The campaign after COVID

World Animal Protection continues to campaign in this area, with some travel companies still promoting dolphin venues. However, following the halt of tourism due to the COVID-19 crisis, the campaign has been temporarily re-aligned to target the World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO). The UNWTO is currently developing a plan to help the global tourism sector not only recover from the unprecedented challenge of COVID-19, but to ‘grow back better’. Using this research World Animal Protection are now in talks with UNWTO to include better protections for dolphins in captivity, in their plans for the future of tourism.

As the global situation continues to evolve, the team at World Animal Protection have needed to adapt and refine their campaign strategy, with our research continuing to play a central role. A follow-up survey is planned, to measure the extent that people are starting to see captive dolphins through fresh eyes.

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Media coverage of the resulting campaign

