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## Learn the hierarchy of your visitors' needs and build empathy through research

OCTOBER 19, 2016 BY [THOMAS SPRANGERS](#)

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The [design thinking process](#) helps destinations better understand its visitors and their travel needs. It's about finding empathy and adding value to their journey while increasing positive word of mouth. We've seen how [mapping out the customer journey](#) based on one or more visitor personas is a great way to gain insight into how visitors interact with your destination. Research uncovers your visitors' behaviours and their deepest needs and is the cornerstone of this visitor-centric approach.

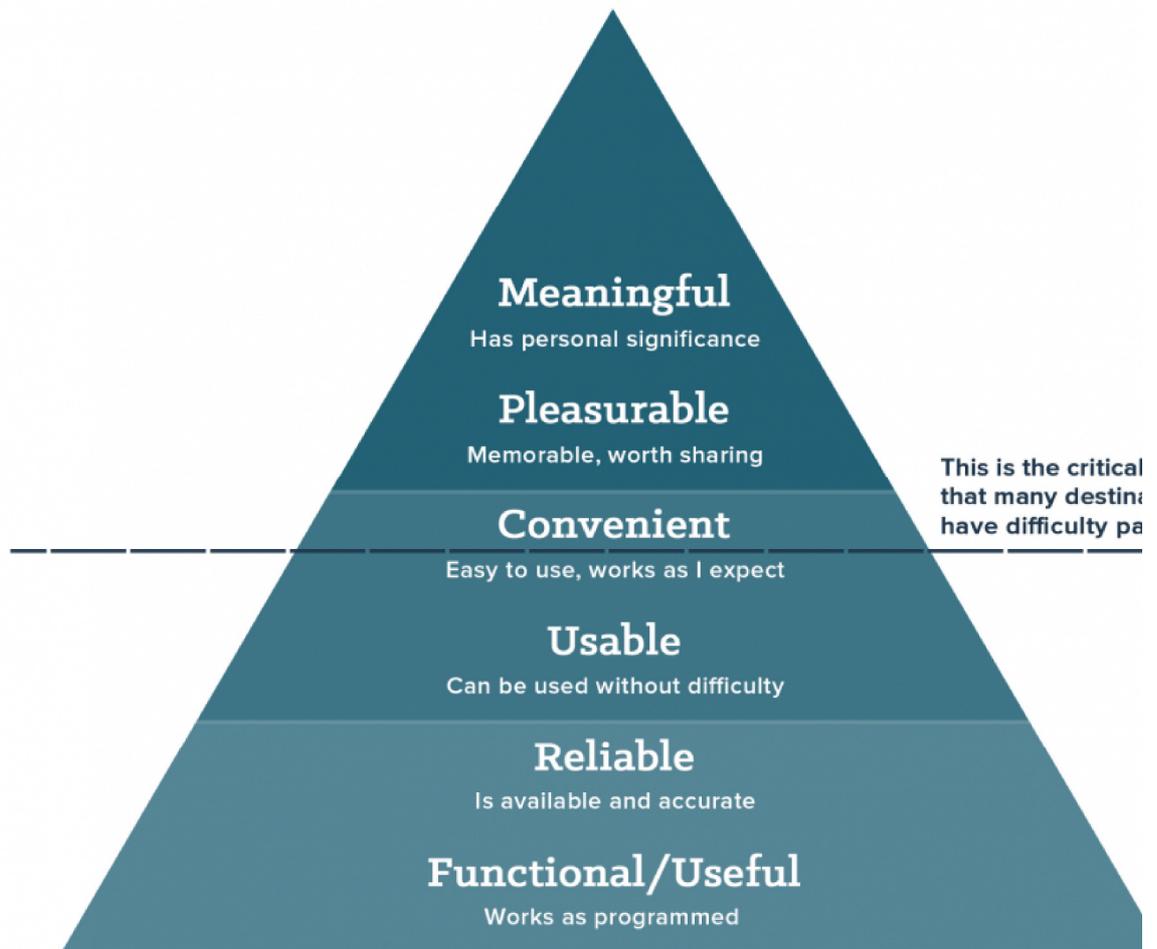


*Image credit: Ben & Gab, Flickr*

## Hierarchy of a visitor's needs

Many non-tourism brands take this customer-centric approach and work continuously to understand customers' needs. For example, when you wake up in the morning and take a shower, there's a chance shampoo might promise to **alleviate stress**. And on any given Saturday, some people are likely getting their day with a deodorant that promises to **cure their hangover**. These examples show how brands try to connect with their customers on a deeper level: they're not selling something to clean your hair with; they're selling deeper, more meaningful promises of less stress and no hangovers.

You might be familiar with **Maslow's hierarchy of needs**, a theory used in psychology that describes human behavior and motivation. We can apply this theory to products and services and more specifically, to the destination experience:



*A hierarchy of visitor needs.*

In order to really add to the experience of your visitors, destinations need to answer to their visitor's d  
People don't go on holiday to eat and sleep in a different environment. They go away for a million diffi  
with the aim of satisfying a personal need: escape the hectic city for a week, reflect on life after a lost i  
visiting a family member that they haven't seen for five years, and many, many more reasons (for a te  
illustration, [watch this short clip](#)).

There's only one way to find out what your visitors really need and what motivates them, and that is b  
100% empathy through research. Truly understanding your visitor allows a destination to create near  
pleasurable experiences in all stages of travel, encouraging word of mouth, making their visitors their  
(Note that this mechanism also works the other way around, as our Chief Strategist William Bakker ex  
2011 blog post, "[Meh](#)".) In reality, there are not many destinations who get past the "Convenient" level  
pyramid. Being a truly visitor-centric destination requires a different organizational structure and a dif  
doing things than destination marketing organizations (DMOs) are usually used to.

## Study your visitors through research

When we say “research” at Think!, we don’t mean questionnaires, focus groups or other types of more research. If you really want to find out your visitor’s barriers and needs, you need to immerse yourself in their worlds and study them in their own environment, constantly asking “Why? Why? Why?...But, why?” This is achieved by conducting qualitative research, such as **ethnographic research**, observational research (both online and offline), as well as structured, open interviews. You’ll find that what people say they do is often different from what they actually do, is done with a different set of motives that you were assuming, or that there are experiences that haven’t occurred to you yet.

The screenshot shows a Reddit thread with the following content:

- Post by Squareeyed1984 (2 points, 3 months ago):** "Check out the penguin parade in Phillip Island. The great ocean road and the 12 apostles. The Yarra Valley . Drive upto the snow at Mt Buller. Heaps of café's in Brunswick and Fitzroy(I recommend the auction rooms). Healesville Sanctuary. Any of th beaches(cold at this time of year). Eureka Tower. Ballarat and sovereign hill. Catch the city circle tram(see Melbourne and it's free). Hope that helps." [permalink](#) [embed](#) [buffer](#)
- Reply by AllieUK (1 point, 3 months ago):** "Edinburgh has a penguin parade at our zoo, and it is one of the best things ever. I have to admit I do really want to see tl penguins in Australia, just because I love penguins and also, it seems like such an oxymoron! Thank you very much for all your suggestions! Mal is actually from Ballarat so I am trying to persuade her to show me arc there too. Thanks! :)" [permalink](#) [embed](#) [parent](#) [buffer](#)
- Post by BuckEyeAussie (3 points, 3 months ago):** "Sovereign Hill and Kryal Castle both are worth a visit.And Both at Ballarat." [permalink](#) [embed](#) [parent](#) [buffer](#)
- Reply by AllieUK (1 point, 3 months ago):** "Thank you! I really love seeing castles and ruins actually, especially in new countries, so I need to ask Mal to take" [permalink](#) [embed](#) [parent](#) [buffer](#)
- Post by Squareeyed1984 (2 points, 3 months ago):** "In all honesty, I love the penguin parade. It's actually wild penguins that come onto a beach and walk up to there nes they are fairy penguins but don't quote me." [permalink](#) [embed](#) [parent](#) [buffer](#)
- Reply by AllieUK (1 point, 3 months ago):** "That sounds incredible! Another friend told me that they sometimes do Penguin weddings which might be the best thing in the world, at S" [permalink](#) [embed](#) [parent](#) [buffer](#)

*In this example from Reddit, “AllieUK” reveals more and more travel motivations through convers*

## Overcome research obstacles

In design thinking workshops, we often find a few obstacles to conducting qualitative research. In rese workshops, it’s not uncommon (and very plausible) for participants to stick with their assumptions and (think) they know about their visitors, which will lead you exactly where you already were. Uncovering requires an open mind and the willingness to challenge what you think you know about your visitors. . solution to overcome bias is to make sure that your workshop includes participants that have nothing your destination’s management and marketing.

Conducting ethnographic and observational research is the cornerstone of becoming a truly visitor-ce Through this research, a DMO can uncover their visitor’s deepest wants and needs and go from being place with a beach,” to having genuine, personal significance to their visitors in all stages of travel.

*Could your destination benefit from a deeper understanding of your visitors' needs? Destination Think DMOs with research into their visitors through design thinking to improve visitor experiences, marketing activities and organizational effectiveness. **Contact us today** to find out how we can help you.*

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## About Thomas Sprangers

### **Client Strategist at Destination Think!**

In the summer of 2012, Thomas quit his agency job in The Netherlands and followed his heart to Vancouver. There, he met William, and soon after joined the ranks of Thomas as a Project Manager.

Today, Thomas is back in Amsterdam as a Client Strategist (with his heart intact), where he puts his expertise, energetic enthusiasm and big smile to work in helping Think!'s clients innovate through strategic consulting and design thinking, his specialty.

Thomas loves his early mornings (late nights to some) and takes good care of body and mind. On any work day you will find him in the gym, on a meditation pillow or in the kitchen.

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