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Are "THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT" GOOD FOR BUSINESS?

By Sabra Brown Steinsiek

We've all heard the stories. Hotel rooms where objects mysteriously move from where they were left. The restaurant where unseen hands rearrange the table settings. Turn on your television today and you can find numerous ghost related tales – *Ghost Whisperer*, *Medium*, *Haunted History*, *Most Haunted*, *Dead Famous*, and *Ghost Hunters*, just to name a few. Movie makers make full use of ghostly tales. Who could forget *The Sixth Sense* with its "I see dead people" tagline? Even today, stories told around a campfire must always include at least one ghost story.



But what if you're a business owner and you happen to "own" a ghost? Is a resident haunt good for business, or does it drive customers away?

Julia Brown owns Albuquerque's Tours of Old Town (<http://www.toursofoldtown.com/>, (505) 246-TOUR). When the tours first began in 2001, she says that her business faced a lot of resistance from Old Town business owners. "They were afraid having a ghost would hurt their business reputation. Some were afraid that they would be ridiculed for the stories they told."

But her timing proved to be perfect. Ghosts were becoming acceptable, maybe even trendy. The ghost tour was a success, and business owners who were included on the tour found that customers would come back the morning after their tour to check out the merchandise they'd seen through the window.

Today, Tours of Old Town is an established business with an office in what Julia calls the "smallest space in Old Town" at the rear of Plaza Don Luis. Along with the nightly Ghost Tour of Old Town, she offers daytime History, Legends, and Lore tours as well. She and her eleven contract employees guide an average of 500 people a month through Old Town. "We've seen a steady increase," she says. "Business was up 101% in 2006 and is already [in August 2007] up 72% this year." Long-term plans include adding transportation to the now walking only tours and offering more themed dinners "with a ghost," held in Old Town restaurants, where customers will enjoy a fine meal while participating in a real séance or learning basic ghost hunting techniques.

Brown prides herself on the history included on the ghost tours. "We're not about scary things jumping out at someone. We tell the stories in a historical context. Sometimes something happens but a ghostly happening can't be guaranteed.

So, are ghosts good business? A survey of owners and managers of some of New Mexico's haunted places overwhelmingly says "yes."

Marie Coleman of Old Town's Church Street Café shares her space with the ghost of Sarah Ruiz, one of the last owners of the historic home – turned restaurant. "People find Sara fascinating. They come in and want to know where she is, what her story is. They're intrigued, and we're happy to talk about her." While Marie has never seen Sarah, she has heard her voice and been the victim of her harmless pranks. And everyone who works there never fails to say "good-night" to Sarah when they leave at the end of the day.

Lillian Gallegos of Casa de Fiesta, also in Old Town, agrees. "Sometimes we have people come in who don't know about our happenings. They get a bad vibe and ask if we have ghosts, so we share our story. No one's ever left because of those feelings." She admits to feeling a little spooked at night when she's closing up and won't close up alone. But she goes on to say that she never feels that whatever shares her space is out to do harm.

Lisa Thomassie, general manager of The Lodge Resort in Cloudcroft (<http://www.thelodgeresort.com/>) says that ghosts are "absolutely" good for business. "Many of the people who come to The Lodge are here because of its unique history and some come just to check out our ghost." Redhaired Rebecca was a chambermaid who went missing and was presumed murdered by her lumberjack boyfriend after he discovered she was "entertaining" in his absence. Today, Rebecca does a little flirting and plays tricks on guests and staff alike. As much as she likes people, she might well make an appearance at The Lodge's upcoming Murder Mystery Weekends, Nov.2, Nov.9, and January 25. "She's part of the charm of The Lodge," says Thomassie. "We have people who come again and again and bring new generations to meet her."

The Plaza Hotel in Las Vegas, New Mexico is home to the ghost of its former owner, Byron T. Mills. When guests ask if the hotel "has a ghost," General Manager Janine Duncan will sometimes respond with "Do you want a ghost?" She says that the hotel doesn't go out of its way to attract ghost hunters (their website, <http://www.plazahotel-nm.com/>, doesn't even mention poor Byron), but they don't deny his existence to those who ask. "Our ghost experience has been mostly positive," she says, "but we have on occasion lost business because of someone's ghostly experience."

Known for its unique pueblo deco architecture, The Shaffer Hotel in Mountainair was built in 1923 by Clem "Pop" Shaffer and his wife, Lena. Manager Victoria Lambert says that Pop's ghost has been seen for years, and people are intrigued by it. "They want to see him, know all about him, and experience a haunting. For us, it's been a neat thing. Our ghosts aren't into running people out," although it's recently come to light that Lena is still around and is not happy that Pop has gotten all the credit. A memorial to her is being added and things are expected to calm down a little once she gets the recognition she deserves.

There are at least two businesses in New Mexico that feel that having a ghost is a real detriment. One, a hotel, has lost business to unexplained events when multi-night reservations are cancelled after the guest is spooked on the first night. They no longer discuss their ghost. The second, a restaurant, is disavowing any knowledge of the ghost, claiming all previous reports were made up, and state they're not trying to attract a ghost-hunting clientele.

These days, instead of a business owner shying away from talking about their resident ghost, property owners approach Old Town tour operator, Julia Brown, to ask, only partially in jest, just how they might go about acquiring a ghost.

So, if you have a ghost, how do you let people know? There's always word of mouth, but authentication is available.

New Mexico Paranormal Investigations (<http://www.nmparanormal.com/>) is run by brother and sister, Ron and Sherry Andree. Their approach to ghost hunting is "one foot on the ground," according to Ron. "We use a combination of scientific and metaphysical approaches when we're investigating a site." They begin by exploring the history of the building and try to put the reported happenings in a historic context, tying those happenings to an event or individual. They listen to the people reporting the incidents to see if they come off as "genuine." Above all, they strive to keep an open-minded approach.

The Southwest Ghost Hunters Association's, (<http://www.sgha.net/>) mission, according to their website, "is not necessarily to prove that ghosts exist, but to investigate all possible explanations of areas that are associated with being haunted" using the "scientific method." In addition to their investigations, they maintain a comprehensive website that offers access to articles such as "Ghost Types Defined," "The Ten Biggest Mistakes Made By Ghost Hunters," and "Rules To Follow In An Investigation." Under the guidance of President Cody Polston, SGHA has recently launched their own tour and event business at <http://www.haunted-adventures.com/>.

Are ghosts good for business? It depends on whom you ask. Just be careful what

you're wishing for when you admit to your spectral roommate – you just might get it!

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