



People Skills

by Jan van Harsseel, Ed.D

Developing and conducting training programs for customer service employees

*Another great article from The Rooms Chronicle, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! ***Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.*** College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com*

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Editor's note: This is the second in a series of four articles on the successful management of the customer service function. Managing the customer service challenge involves a four-step process; it includes the management tasks of hiring, training, motivating and rewarding guest service employees. In the July/August issue of The Rooms Chronicle, the author introduced principles guiding the hiring process. This issue's article will discuss step two-training.

Who needs customer service training? Everyone! Creating frequent opportunities within an organization to talk, think, and share ideas about customer service challenges is an important professional development activity that all employees in the organization should engage in. Customers evolve; their needs and expectations change, and they continuously redefine what they want and expect.

Customer service is the activity of anticipating guests' needs and consistently exceeding those expectations with urgency and intent. It is basic, but not easy. It is through quality customer service that lodging organizations help define the experience a guest will have at their property. The property's product can be defined in terms of the story guests will tell about their experience after they leave! Therefore, it is essential that each hotelier ask himself this question, every day: "What story is my staff giving our guests to tell?"

Settings

Initial attempts at customer service training could take the form of a workshop or seminar. These types of service training programs must be provided for all people who meet and serve guests. Management should take an active part. To only encourage participation for front-line employees sends the message that there is an isolated problem.

The training programs must be continuous. Employees change jobs. Also, employees sometimes become careless or forgetful in the performance of their duties and need opportunities to refresh their focus and commitment. Schedule at least two sessions at different times of the day so every employee, regardless of work schedule, has the opportunity to attend.

Consider talking with the local CVB or Hospitality Association to help facilitate a workshop for the entire community. Keep in mind that a hotel's



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employees are part of a “destination team.” A community-wide effort instills pride in community and creates an understanding that all employees employed in local hotels, restaurants, and attractions are part of the experience visitors have in that community. Consider an initiative during National Tourism Week and combine a seminar with an industry breakfast, brochure exchange, community open house, or career fair.

In addition to a formal workshop or seminar setting, it is important to create opportunities for employees and supervisors to regularly share with one another their service experiences. Similar to a hospital’s monthly morbidity and mortality meeting, collectively, customer service employees and supervisors can assess whether they handled a particular situation right, or if they could have done things differently. How can they improve future service encounters by learning from previous ones? Do they feel empowered to “comp” services in case things don’t go quite right? Integrate the opportunity to talk about customer service issues in every staff meeting. Consider starting each meeting with a “one idea” minute. Ask everyone present to share a service idea that they witnessed or personally experienced outside the immediate employment setting. Then ask, “Can it be adopted into our service culture?”

Workshop objectives

The goals of a training seminar should be clearly articulated at the onset. Examples of workshop goals may include: a) To better understand the service product, b) To recognize and master hospitality skills, c) To see ourselves from a visitor’s point of view, d) To use effective techniques to handle customer complaints, and e) To become familiar with area attractions and events. Hospitality skills include hosting skills, communication skills, and problem-solving skills.

Hosting, or the method of being a good host when serving strangers, is the primary focus of the visitor services training program. It includes hospitality, knowledge, and caring on the part of all members of one’s staff. Hosting as an attitude translates into service. It makes the visitor feel comfortable as a guest of one’s property. Good hosting brings visitors back to the community and promotes a general increase in visitation because satisfied guests return. Such guests speak positively of their experience and encourage friends and neighbors to visit the destination community and the property.

Communications plays a major role in the service encounter. Participants in a workshop need to be reminded of the importance of vocal and non-verbal elements of communication. Good communication develops a relationship between the employee and the guest, which makes the guest feel more comfortable in an unfamiliar environment. Workshop activities can focus on important elements of communication, namely listening, remembering names, making conversation, and demonstrating empathy.

A hospitality-oriented training program should also include presentations on the impact of tourism on employees’ jobs and the economic well-being of the local community. Moreover, it should include an overview of the community’s transportation options, attractions, and events. Much of the workshop should focus on helping employees seek out everyday opportunities to exceed guests’ expectations. It is important that employees understand how guests’ expectations are formed and how the overall quality of customer satisfaction depends on whether or not expectations are met or exceeded. ‘Reaching out’ is a concept that suggests that employees seize each service encounter as a moment of truth to delight a guest. That way, service providers begin to see themselves as “extensions” of the visitor experience rather than as company employees.

Another important element of an employee training program is how to handle guest complaints. A dept. customer service employees will quickly learn how to recognize the difference between passive complainers, aggressive complainers, and constructive complainers. Businesses should welcome complaints! Handle a complaint promptly, and the guest is most likely to remain loyal.

When it comes to guests complaining, seventy percent will do business with a hotel again if their concern is resolved satisfactorily. Service recovery happens when employees can help turn a frown upside down. Customers are generally very forgiving and businesses should be grateful for customer complaints. Remind employees to always thank a guest for bringing a concern to their attention, as a complaint is really an opportunity to win back the guest by wowing them with excellent service recovery.

Finally, special populations present unique service opportunities. International visitors, guests with disabilities, and the increasing number of older travelers may require special attention from staff members. And, of course, there are specific dos and don’ts that correspond to each of these situations. A hotel’s employee training program should identify how to appropriately interact with and respond to guests in these situations.

Conclusion

Customer service training should be an important and ongoing activity for every service oriented organization. Why? Your biggest threat is your unexpected competition. Loyal guests are less likely to stray and try the services of other providers. Consumer confidence leads to company loyalty. Proper training gives employees the tools to take care of guests.

In the next issue of TRC

- Jan van Harssel will continue with Part III: Motivating the service employee. ✧

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