

Hospitality: The Guest Pays the Bills

The landowner who offers his property for use by those who pay a fee is in the “hospitality” business. It is important that the customer receive the attention and service that will keep him or her coming back as well as telling others about the business. Customer service problems can be generally prevented or solved by attention to 4 areas:

1. Providing a strong sense of vision and direction to guide one’s employees,
2. Providing good leadership through example,
3. Reducing employee turnover so as to retain experienced, quality help and
4. Turning problems into opportunities.

The majority of services you provide in heritage/Agritourism will put you in the hospitality business. The hospitality business today suffers from a lack of “Pleasing The Customer”. There is precious little sincere attention paid to the customer and herein lies the opportunity.

Good customer service is the cheapest and the most effective type of marketing you can do. People today are conditioned to expect poor service and the operator who exceeds those expectations is the one who will build his guest base. Conversely, mediocre service will cripple even the best of ideas. In this fact sheet let’s explore some of the reasons why service is so poor and offer some suggestions on how to institutionalize the philosophy of Pleasing the Customer.

The Service Problem

Visualize the last time you were at the grocery store, a restaurant, a gas station, a motel or an airline desk. Chances are that your experiences were about the same: impersonal, lacking a sense of urgency, no genuine desire to make this a pleasant experience.

Did you feel special?

Did you make a mental note to come back?

Would you recommend this establishment to others?

Worse yet, would you ‘warn’ others?

Poor service is a problem that plagues the hospitality industry, and if you are considering uses for your property that require guest interaction (and practically all of them would) you should take note. All of the good ideas in the world aren’t worth a dime if they aren’t executed properly. You have to make this a priority to be a success.

At the risk of oversimplification, the key to success in the hospitality business is people.

- People visit (and buy from) people they like.
- You personally can't be everywhere all the time, so you have to depend on others to help.
- Your employees are people too, and they need to feel good to treat people well.

Take a look at this problem and see if you can quantify it. In a recent Nation's Restaurant News Gallup Poll, consumers indicated that they would be more likely to return to a restaurant because of friendly service than for discounts, coupons, lower menu prices, quality food or fast service. When do you leave a larger than 10% tip?

The rule of thumb in business is that for a good experience, a guest will tell 7 people; and for a very poor experience, they will tell 19 people. The math and the logic are very obvious. This word of mouth is the cheapest and the most powerful marketing tool that we have.

When this is so painfully clear, why does this problem exist today? There are 3 independent reasons:

- A lack of direction.
- There is a dearth of "leading by example".
- There is a shortage of quality people.

Solving the Service Problem

Let's explore each of these in some detail.

First, let's look at this lack of direction. No matter how much employees complain, they really crave direction and discipline. As you look at the service industry today, leaders have to communicate a philosophy of extraordinary customer service throughout the organization and reinforce the type of behavior they want.

Secondly, there is a notable absence of leading by example. There are far too many service managers who are chained to their desks in the ivory tower. They are not in touch with the customers, the employees, the issues or the opportunities. You have to show employees what you want and that the rules apply to you.

You have to prove that you're not too good to do what you ask your people to do, and you have to show them that you can think like a customer. You also have to be willing and technically able to do every job in your operation – take reservations, entertain, wash dishes, clean toilets and stalls, write personal letters to previous guests at Christmas. This builds credibility with your people.

They also feel that you are not out of touch.

Finally, let's look at this shortage of quality people. Demographically, you can prove that the group of people that the hospitality industry traditionally draws on to fill its ranks is shrinking. You can also make the case that the work ethic is not the same as it used to be. You claim kids don't have to work, kids don't want to work, and kids

don't care if they do a good job or not. That's a cop-out. The manager's responsibility is to mold the attitude of his people.

Nonetheless, the shortage is real. However, the real problem is not recruiting, but retaining people. Turnover in the service industry averages 200% for permanent employees. This means filling every position every 6 months. Even if you give direction and lead by example, if you have high turnover, you are constantly training new people.

Why are people changing jobs so often? Generally, people are disenchanted. They don't feel like the company cares about them, so they have very little loyalty. There are at least 4 reasons for employee dissatisfaction.

- We don't talk to our employees.
- We don't treat them like they are important, like they are extensions of ourselves when it comes to customer contact.
- We don't keep them informed.
- We don't explain the 'why' behind our decisions.

How can you fix this or prevent this from happening? If you only remember one thing from these comments, remember to put yourself in the other guy's shoes. At least mentally, visualize what you are communicating and what your reaction would be.

So as not to get too philosophical, here are some specific suggestions that you can put to good use:

- All new employees should have an orientation session about the operation, its philosophy on service, and their particular job.
- Mandatory crew meetings should be conducted at least once a quarter. These meetings can be used to talk about current events, to discuss areas needing improvement, and to solicit input from your people. These meetings will go a long way towards focusing everyone in the same direction.
- You need to give constant doses of positive reinforcement. It's not hard to catch people doing things right. This reinforcement can range from a pat on the back to naming (and displaying a photo of) an employee of the month, to a formal review process. Everybody likes to know that someone is keeping score and that their efforts are appreciated. We have to concentrate on not being too busy to recognize and comment on the type of behavior we want.

If you can reduce turnover, what will this mean to you? Studies that indicate that companies with the lowest turnover have higher sales and make higher profits on the same sales dollar. Reduced turnover also minimizes the new employee training you have to do. It allows your people to build a sense of team and to build confidence. A lot of life is mental. If you walk out on the field and you think you are going to win, you win.

The 3 points mentioned will not guarantee success. You need the right idea, proper capitalization, a sound marketing approach, etc., but without them, you are doomed.

Meeting Problems

One final issue that people frequently try to ignore should be addressed: the problem. Even the best-managed organizations run into problems occasionally. It's a lot easier for the manager to hide in the office and let someone else handle the problem of a foul-up. What people don't realize is that they can turn a negative experience into a positive selling experience. The secret is to look for problems and then overwhelm the customer with satisfaction—an apology, an explanation, a discount on a future purchase, etc.

The hospitality industry has taught customers to expect a mediocre to poor experience and that they are not important to us. If you exceed those expectations, you win a customer. The right product and the right price may be the ingredients that initially attract guests. But friendly, attentive service will draw them even more—and keep them coming back.

Hospitality Suggestions

Make all of your guests feel welcome. Greet them pleasantly and take the attitude that they are guests in your own home.

- Be courteous, attentive, alert, and cordial; but don't be too 'forward.'
- Have a general knowledge of your ranch, community, and the surrounding area.
- Know your ranch history and attractions in the area.
- Build up your community because you are a part of it.

Know where other services can be located, such as:

Art galleries	Tourist bureau	Restaurants
Automobile repair	Barbers & Hairdressers	Museums
Bands (by name)	Celebrations	Hospitals
Fairs, rodeos	Churches	Sporting events
Festivals	Newspaper offices	City government offices
Local craft shops	Parks	Doctors and Dentists
Hotels, motels	Points of interest	Fax machines
Post office/or P. O. drop box	Hospitals	

Hospitality Tips for Heritage/Agritourism Hosts

(And Employees)

- DO** make the guest feel at home and at ease.
- DO** treat the guests like they are special and give the little extra helpfulness that may be needed.
- DO** know your area. Volunteer added information on local products and/or crafts. Know and explain about the artist, craftsman, cultural attractions, and special events.
- DO** show your place willingly. The guest is more likely to return and may be a voter who protects your rights in the future.
- DO** be proud of your home, the old barn, chickens, gardens, and the spouse, kids, and family dog. Let your guests know you like living on the land!

- DON'T** give the impression you are only interested in the guest's dollar. Make them feel they are being given excellent service and have obtained the service they expected, paid for, and will receive when they return next time.
- DON'T** allow your guests to get the impression that you are doing them a favor to let them spend their money. Yours ain't the only place in North Carolina!
- DON'T** give your guests the tired feeling. Be cheerful, friendly, and willing to serve your guests (You can sleep in the winter).
- DON'T** complain about the weather, federal government, and other items you have no control over. Always point out the good and positive features.
- DON'T** run down your community or neighbors. To a guest you are part of the community so when you downgrade it, you are discrediting yourself.
- DON'T** apologize for anything on your farm or garden. IT IS YOUR HOME!

Ten Commandments of Good Business

1. **GUESTS** are the most important people in any business.
2. **GUESTS** are not dependent upon us – we are dependent on them.
3. **GUESTS** are not an interruption of our work – they are the purpose of it.
4. **GUESTS** do us a favor when they call – we are not doing them a favor by serving them.
5. **GUESTS** are part of our business, not outsiders.
6. **GUESTS** are not cold statistics; they are flesh and blood human beings with feelings and emotions like our own.
7. **GUESTS** are not someone to argue or match wits with.
8. **GUESTS** are those who bring us their wants – it is our job to fill those wants.
9. **GUESTS** are deserving of the most courteous and attentive treatment we can give them.
10. **GUESTS** are the life blood of the farm and ranch recreation business.

How do You Look to Your Customer and Competition?

The position of your farm/garden operation is strongly related to image and how it is perceived. You need to create an image or atmosphere for the service you are trying to market.

Here are some ideas about what “talks” to the guest:

- Logo
- Calling card/business card
- Stationery
- Cleanliness
- Signs
- Posters
- Appearance
- Advertising
- Publicity
- Safety
- Telephone courtesy
- Quality
- Others

Here are some ideas about what should be available to put into your business press kit:

- Cover Letter
- Business card (2)
- Biographical sketch
- Brochure
- Location & directions
- Services provided
- Pictures (ranch & people)
- Photographs (B & W; color)
- Price list
- Publicity
- Testimonials

Hospitality and Customer Service for Your Visitor-Based Business

The goal of providing quality hospitality and customer service to your consumers can easily be stated in a nutshell, “service to the consumer should always exceed customer expectations, always!”

Customer Service is a must for your business in many aspects. It is in some cases a legal obligation to the consumer through proper sanitation, safety and food and beverage controls. For example is your food service rated a “A” or “B” with the county’s Health Department? Is your liability coverage sufficient for a horseback riding accident? It is how you market your business for validity and reliability to the consumer. False advertising is misleading.

What is Hospitality and Customer Service?

‘Customer Service is the ability to meet your customer’s real and perceived needs through the actions of your staff and suppliers. Customer service occurs every time ecotourists come into contact with your business.’ The Business of Ecotourism,” Carol Patterson, Kalahari Management Inc. It is the way they are treated whether they are calling for trip information or to make a booking. It is the impression they receive when they drive into your parking lot. It is the experience they have when they take one of your guided nature walks.

The following is taken from Debra H. Sasser, “Stays Marketing.”

I. Attitude says It All!

Your business is no place for Apathy, Aloofness, Cluelessness, Complacency, Snootiness and Egotistical Personalities.

Your business is a place for Positive Attitudes, Smiles, Anticipation of Customer Needs and Asking the Customer what they would Like.

II. Teamwork includes the concept that all the customer’s needs will be met every possible contact with your business: before, during and after the customer arrives, stays and leaves your business.

III. Handling Complaints is an opportunity to learn from the customer what may be wrong with the service of your business, while being sympathetic and positive with the situation in order not to lose a customer. Offer options and work with the customer to find a solution to the problem.

- IV.** Communication whether by phone, email, mail, literature or other forms of media should relay a message of swiftness, accuracy and positive image to the customer. Remember to sell your service or product, not your prices. Be honest and sympathetic to customer's requests.
- V.** Examples of Setting Standards:
- All visitors upon arrival to your business will be greeted within five minutes.
 - Each customer will receive a demonstration on how the item in question can be utilized.
 - Refreshments will be made daily and kept hot or cold.
 - Rooms will be cleaned daily and whenever needed.
 - Visitors will be asked about their dietary needs.
 - A "Thank You" will be given to each visitor for visiting your operation or business.
 - If a tour operation, a guide will stay with the slowest member of the party.

Hospitality and Customer Service Management

A Customer Service and Hospitality Management Plan needs to be designed for your business prior to opening for business or as an annual training session. This should include how you are going to train yourself and your staff, setting standards and objectives and evaluation of your business. In order to deliver excellent customer service one must create a plan that includes the following:

- I. **Policies**: Principles to define what level of service you are going to have to meet customer's needs. Policies give direction to how a certain situation or issue can be handled.
- II. **Procedures**: A procedure is a protocol on how your business will be operated. For example: "Each customer will be greeted upon arrival to your business with an educational program explaining and/or demonstrating your operation, what they might view, what their visit will include, etc." Procedures provide consistency to a business, which is comforting to a customer.
- III. **Recruitment**: Whom you hire is crucial to your success. You can train people to give a nature walk or how to teach customers to paddle a canoe, but not everyone can provide that human element of leadership, that personable touch or people skills.
- IV. **Training**: Evaluate your staff as to their deficiencies. Do they lack communication or operational skills or do they lack technical skills?
- V. **Quality Control**: Evaluation of your business must occur on a regular basis. This includes determining where your deficiencies in customer service lie. Performance of staff and overall business operations is necessary to provide feedback in order to make accurate management decisions.
- VI. **Recognition**: When an employee does something exceptional, reward it! Internal customer service is just as important as external customer service.

In a nutshell, hospitality and customer service accompanies everything that you do with your business. It is a by-the-second, by-the-minute, hourly, weekly, monthly, annual and infinite occupation.

Interpretation

“Interpreting Yourself and Resources Through a Story”

Interpretation is a unique way to educate the visitor about the resource they are visiting, whether that be natural, cultural or other. Through interpretation the visitor gains a better understanding and awareness of the resource, while being intrigued in an interesting and informative manner. Interpretation of a resource is usually informal with both tour guide and visitor interacting. Another method of interpretation includes signs, living history programs, demonstrations, videos, etc. The interpreter is telling a story of the resource, which gives the visitor a better understanding of the resource and will ultimately give the visitor more of an appreciation of the resource. The goal of the interpretive process is to ultimately provide protection or create appreciation and value of the resource to the visitor. An Example of this could be in Williamsburg, Virginia where the goal of the colonial site is to educate the user through a unique experience, while giving the visitor a choice of what the value of the resource is to him or her.

Key Points of Interpretation:

1. Interpretation should have informative subject matter that the visitor may want or need to know; i.e. where are the restrooms; directions to site; why does that tree grow here and not there; cabins were built this way in the early 1800’s.
2. Interpretive methods should include an element of making the visitor question and/or create critical thinking in order to allow the visitor to make choices about an issue, natural or cultural resource, or just gain an educational understanding of the resource.
3. Interpretation programs should not be status quo; they should be reinventing themselves to keep the visitor interested. Visuals, maps, equipment, material, etc. can be utilized so that the participant can touch, smell or feel something.
4. Methods should be clear, concise, educational and interesting in order to not confuse the visitor; however the material presented should challenge the visitor and cause him or her to think. Ask questions of the participant.
5. Interpretation programs should keep the interest of the participant, whether the resources are present or not. If a night fails to have owls, have something else to talk about.
6. Interpretive programs should not be too long, so that the participant does not become bored or tired. The length of the program depends on whether you have a one day, ½ day or just an hour tour. Let the participant know the agenda of the program, so they won’t be surprised.

7. Make sure the participant is equipped with the correct clothes, equipment, sunscreen, food and water, and other essentials. If it were a bird walk perhaps a bird book would be good to carry along for educational purposes, binoculars, along with insect repellent and sunglasses. If it is a night-hike, a jacket and flashlight may be beneficial.

Case Study for a Night Hike on the Old Hobbs Farm

While designing an Interpretive Program, write out a “Purpose Statement,” and a “Management and Contingency Plan” for the program so that surprises will be minimized. Plans need to be explicit in detail. An educational and fun experience is the goal.

- I. **Purpose Statement:** The purpose of the Hobbs Farm Night Hike is to educate the visitor on the significance of the Hobbs Farm from the period 1700 until 1950. This educational experience will create a sense of adventure; awareness, intrigue and understanding of the area to the participant in order that they may better appreciate and respect the natural, cultural and historical characters and resources of the farm area.
- II. **Management Plan: In the case of rain, the program will be at the barn.**
 - ◆ Tour Guide will be in the parking lot at 7:45 p.m. to meet and greet the guests. At 8:00 P.M. the tour Night Hike talk will begin. The tour guide will explain the hike, what to expect and arrival time back to the parking lot. Guide will make sure they have a jacket and flashlight and tell them to only use the flashlight in case of an emergency and to keep them off at all times if possible.
 - ◆ Guide will lead them through maple and beech forest on trail. The tour will be single with the guide telling them about the Shawnee who once roamed this area 200-300 years ago. At this point, a character dressed in Shawnee clothing will step out of the woods once the group passes, and speaking in third person will speak to them about Shawnees of the period and tell them who he is and what he is doing....”Hunting in the night for a bear.” ***12 minutes maximum at this stop.***
 - ◆ Guide will lead the group from the native forests to an opening, which includes a field. Once there, the tour guide will speak of the first family that arrived on this site in 1844. At this moment, a family will come out of the woods (portraying settlers coming through the wilderness to find farm-land. The family will also speak in third person and describe their adventure over the Appalachians with Indians and mountains. ***12 minute stop***
 - ◆ The trail will continue to lead to a historic barn on the other side of the field. Once at the barn, the participants will be asked to take a seat. Once settled, a Storyteller will arrive behind a glowing fire in 1890 farm clothes. Farm

stories...on the order of “Jack Tales” will be shared with the group. **25 minutes at this stop in the barn**

- ◆ The guide will assist the participants on a wagon pulled by a tractor through the remainder of the farm (Hayride) telling them about farming operations; what they grew, how life was on the farm during the depression, how the industrial revolution changed American agriculture and the earlier way of life. **15 minutes on the Hayride.**
- ◆ Once back at the parking lot, the tour guide will answer any questions the participants may have and then offer them refreshments at the campfire. **15 minutes.**

***NOTE: Many variations could be added to this type of “Living History Interpretive Program,” such as craftsmen making crafts; women making food; planting a garden, etc.**

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Source: Hospitality - Your Keys to Success. Lanny Hass, Rob Hawk. NC Cooperative Extension.