

Destination Marketing – Have You Provided a Memorable Visitor Experience?

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Mr. John Hendrie

Successful brand marketing is effective story telling! Each of us has a story to promote about our business. Our visitors book their rooms, purchase their tickets, and make their reservations, based upon the anticipated experience you have framed for them. They are ready to be delighted, surprised and wowed! Have we, as hospitality professionals, managed and optimized this expectation well?

As a destination, either stand-alone or a member of the hospitality community, you need, unemotionally, to review six factors, which dictate how well you have performed. Remember, we are in the experience business!

1. Product/Service

What did you present to your visitor? Beyond pricing, level of amenity, special packages, did you effectively provide an experience which emphasized cleanliness, safety, comfort, reasonable service level, and acceptable facility condition? These are the fundamentals of hospitality.

What should be your approach? You need to be very careful not to fall into the trap of the “halo effect”, where your perspective becomes the only means of validating your product/service. Many lodging operators try to live the guest experience – they stay in a guest room, use the bathroom and become attuned to what their guest sees, feels, hears and even smells. Successful restaurant owners are circumspect, judging service, presentation, taste and the sensation of the dining experience, leaving no room for false pride. In the attractions realm, prominent operators make their rounds with a tough, critical eye, judging content and value, whereas retail proprietors continually appraise and test their merchandising techniques.

Take some time and get to know your local competition. These competitive “shops” always provide some satisfaction – either you are ahead of the curve or you learn new concepts to adapt. Be flexible and open.

There are professional services available, too. Secret shoppers can provide a “window in time” evaluation of your operation – reviewing your controls, your staff performance and your products. For a more comprehensive review, assessment companies typically provide an in-depth evaluation, oriented to continual improvement of your operation.

Your visitor will pay for the “bells and whistles”, but the hospitality business is still based on the premise that you have established quality standards, the most fundamental expectation of our trade. You can build from that foundation.

2. Delivery on Customer Service and Sales

A visitor expects to be cared for in a courteous fashion, have all questions/concerns answered, be treated professionally, even spoiled. They are special and are your lifeblood. Your staff also has the opportunity to create business for your own operation as well as your community “partners”. Appropriate referral and up-selling benefits all.

We all can relate to the good, bad and quite ugly customer service experience. You dictate the environment and establish the culture; if you treat your employees well, this will be transferred to how they deal with the guest.

There are really three phases to a successful customer service interaction – the welcome, situation

management, and the farewell. We are talking behaviors and education. To be candid, many of our front line employees may come from environments which are not traditionally laden with courtesy and quality standards, much less Hospitality excellence. In your selection process, hire the right attitude; the technical side is trainable. These employees carry your message and reputation in the marketplace; they must be enthusiastic and believe in your story.

The Welcome

This naturally begins with the smile and the friendly greeting. Make the visitor feel welcome as a guest, that they are important, that their needs shall be addressed, and that you care. This can be accomplished with warmth and respect. Personalize, if possible, by addressing the guest by name. Use "sir" and "Ma'am" otherwise. Be prepared to anticipate needs and requests.

Situation Management

Understand what the guest requires. Clarify, if necessary. If the immediate answer is elusive, ensure the guest that you will research and provide the answer in a timely fashion. Then, deliver. There are two other aspects which are important in this phase: up-selling and complaint handling.

Up-selling. One can effectively guide a guest through good sales techniques and awareness, whether it be towards a restaurant; a new feature like a spa; some wine with dinner, perhaps desert and liquors; a unique boutique; the newest ride; or try new golf irons. The list is endless, as is the opportunity to represent your goods and services, as well as others in the community. If your business does not feature or offer what the guest seeks, be prepared to refer. The mantra – the guest/customer always comes first.

Complaint Handling. The guest with a complaint wants answers, action, and attention. Your employees must be empowered to act and address the problem. The guest expects response and regard for their problem. As stated above, if you do not have an immediate answer, tell them that, what you will do for them, and when you will have an answer. Show them you care and that you "own" the problem until it is resolved. Establish a level of trust.

The Farewell

This is the time to express your pleasure in serving the guest. Say thank you. Say you hope to have the pleasure of serving them again. And, finally, thank them for choosing your business.

Remember, the customer service exchange starts with the visitor as an unknown quantity and subtly evolves into a more familiar rapport as your guest and your responsibility.

3. Reward and Recognition

An employee, who performs and excels, requires some form of acknowledgement. Their success is yours.

There are a number of means to address exceptional performance. Most operations have the technology to track overall sales, sales of specific items, number of rooms cleaned, safety issues addressed, upgrades, even visitor complaints and comments. Reward is quantitatively based upon meeting/exceeding benchmarks. Admittedly, some performance is qualitative, particularly problems and situations which are resolved extremely well through poised action. These performances are within the management realm to address immediately. Both types require appropriate reward/recognition methods, for this is your means to salute employees who represent your story and your pursuit of excellence. Each also requires a means of measurement to remove any subjectivity.

Nothing defeats good intentions more than an empty gesture – such as too many "nice jobs" or the commendable "pat on the back".

You know your culture, and there is a novel means to create effective and reputable reward/recognition programs or systems – allow your employees to establish them. You set the parameters; they create the programs. In this fashion, they have a sense of participation, ownership and will proudly carry the "buzz". Actually, they also know better than you what will be seen as important to their fellow employees.

Any program which is seen as top-down will ultimately fail. Recognize this reality! When the program is in place, the communication effort must be effective, and you need some immediate success stories. Involve your employees, be very timely with your recognition, highlight the accomplishments, and be prepared to be creative. They are your ambassadors. Your story will sing, and your guests will notice!

4. Communication

Knowledge is power. Your staff must be informed about your own operation/events/activities, as well as those in the greater community, in order to respond positively to visitor inquiry.

A hospitality operation which communicates effectively shall succeed. The effort foremost begins with you, for you must, daily, keep your story and your priorities in front of the people who will translate this to your guest.

Shift updates and pre-service meetings are extremely important, for events of the day can be discussed, special meetings, gatherings, groups, new menu items, specific problems, and even recognition can be covered in a "face to face" session. This interaction provides information as well as creates an esprit d'corps. Additionally, it allows your employees to be part of the process. Certainly, if an employee is in an informational role, a directory, bulletins, and daily events schedule is appropriate.

Communication is a process, a two way sharing of information, problems and resolutions. You simply cannot leave your employees "naked", for it places them in an untenable situation, is embarrassing, and more pointedly, will impact your operation. The better informed your employee is, the better the impression left with your guest.

5. Marketing, promotion and advertising

The vehicle(s) you have selected to tell your story needs to be fully evaluated. Budgeted monies need to relate to revenue produced. Review your results, your mix, and, perhaps, your message.

Your goal is to reach the uninitiated, excite those who know you, and influence that global marketplace. Attracting visitors to your hospitality business is a daunting and expensive venture, yet it must be done to remain competitive and profitable. The first step to assess your success in influencing skills is to define the tools available and what might be the best mix for your business. Most hospitality businesses rely on the Internet, print and affiliations.

If you do not have an Internet presence, you will not remain in business. Your website does not need to be complex, lengthy or extreme. Your reader, the browser, may spend three to five seconds on your site: they want information, easy navigation, and a reason, compelling them to "book their business" with you. You must understand this reality and respond in kind.

The compelling reason is your opportunity to tell your story, and this is where a good webmaster can be of assistance. They know what works, what words to use, what pictures to reflect, what format and background will be the most effective. This still will leave you with some opportunity to be creative, but your story cannot be a "fairy tale" or an Icelandic Saga, for your audience will see that attempt as transparent or frivolous; they are a discerning lot. An added bon mot – have people in your pictures, not just a sterile view of a room, a dining alcove, a golf course or a ferris wheel.

Print media (magazines, pamphlets, table tents, brochures, fliers, catalogues, et al) are required in your mix. They are a visible presentation or reminder of your business, and the marketplace STILL enjoys the touch, the feel, the comfort, if you will, of print.

But, it is probably your most expensive vehicle, too, particularly advertising in magazines, newspapers or trade publications. If you have created a data base (which is highly recommended) of your guest and visitor traffic, you now have some demographic information which must directly tie into the readership statistics of the publication.

Every piece of print media must serve a purpose: informational, sales, up-selling, announcements, specials, etc. They need to be professionally presented, eye catching, and tasteful. There is nothing worse than finding a Xerox copy of something, done on normal copying paper, in an establishment which is supposedly top drawer. It reflects no style, and it is remembered.

As a suggestion, gather all your marketing and promotional material, lay them out on a table, step back, and take a hard look – Do they tell your story, are they coordinated, are they fresh, do they honestly reflect your business, and, most importantly, do they influence?

A good affiliation relationship can be of significant importance for your business. Professional or industry related groups are representing your business, and, as you are paying a membership fee at minimum, you should have certain expectations, leading with, "What are you doing for me". To be candid, all those internet companies, representing all types of businesses, are the first that you see for several pages on the Internet, rather than your specific organization. It is brutal competition, and you may wish to reconsider your affiliation, or at least, task the organization for a higher promotional presence.

Lastly, there is nothing better than an endorsement or testimonial by word of mouth. Any guest who has savored your business must be courted and thanked. Loyalty programs are important. Be known by your attention to hospitality standards of excellence. Your highest form of recognition comes from you and your staff, and how they represent the establishment. You create the memorable experience!

6. Visitor/Guest Satisfaction

This is your report card. What your guest has told you is critical to your ongoing success. How you gather this information, accept the responses, and adapt will insure continued profitability, or not.

There are two means to gather this information: Verbally or in writing.

Normally, your verbal solicitation is during or after the hospitality event, and your question is typically couched with phrases such as "How is everything?", "Was everything satisfactory?", "Did you enjoy your stay?", etc. Of course, we understand that if a guest is dissatisfied, they usually alert us quickly. These verbal exchanges are helpful, but hardly always demonstrable of the experience. They do help establish that you care, though, which is an important message, however obliquely delivered. How many guests have said to you, face to face, that they had a horrible time? Very few I would imagine. So, you have to dig deeper.

The better you understand your guest's expectations, the easier it is to meet and exceed them. And, you want this "feedback" from a broad, diverse group, who will be honest in their appraisal of the experience. This exercise is not a "one shot deal"; it is on-going, for your guest's tastes and expectations change, and you must adapt or perish.

Gathering information can take many forms. We discussed earlier the use of "secret shoppers" and assessment companies. Many businesses use comment cards to be completed at the time of service or mailed later (remember to add a stamp). Others use a follow-up survey after the event, which is again to be mailed. Some of the more sophisticated operations have chosen the Internet to enable the survey results. Others employ focus groups. Some businesses also use companies to gather the data for them and interpret the results. Whatever the means (and they all have value), to be useful, your guest/visitor satisfaction system must be timely, represent a true cross section of your audience, and provide sufficient response that is relevant, so you can make the business decisions with the best information at hand.

And, then you need to act, for your market has spoken.

Also, you must create your own in-house data bank and gather pertinent information which will help personalize your guest's next visit and build a sound marketing system, for we do know that it is easier to retain an existing guest than recruit a new one. I refer you again to the value of a guest loyalty program and the wealth of information and business this component brings to the table.

The "halo effect" can be very powerful, and my radar is up when I hear hospitality people say "everything is wonderful" or "why should I have someone else tell me what I already know". They just do not get it and stubbornly hold to their perception, little mindful of the ultimate consumer's perspective. You can only deliver a memorable experience when your guest concurs.

Each of the six factors represent core considerations for anyone in the hospitality business. Your story flows through each; your passion for excellence is reflected in each. The six factors support and are interwoven; you fall short in one arena, and the end result is diminished. Take a moment and reflect. Is your story a worthy tale, a successful brand, a valued experience?

With a strong background in Hospitality, Human Resources, Organizational Effectiveness, and Communications, John Hendrie has devoted his career to establishing and evaluating Standards of Excellence across varied Industrial segments. Hospitality Performance, Inc., of which he is Chief Executive Officer, is a Company which changes perception into marketing success through their Quality Assurance approach for a Destination. Using Hospitality Standards for cleanliness, security, comfort, service level and property condition, they perform a hands-on Assessment for Hospitality Businesses (lodgings, restaurants, cruise lines, attractions and retail stores), resulting in a Quality Designation, which can be marketed by and for the independent property or the Destination community. No other company provides this unique benefit for the Destination market, in addition to full service Consulting resources. He began with WESTIN HOTELS, opening the Peachtree Plaza Hotel (Atlanta) in charge of Training and then the Los Angeles Bonaventure Hotel, responsible for Training and Staffing. He was promoted to Senior Management at the WESTIN St. Francis (San Francisco) and served on the Executive Committee. Additionally, as an "effective Business Partner", he has provided Strategies to better define Product/Service, Contain Costs, Increase Productivity and Enhance Profitability within Manufacturing, Transportation, the Graphic Arts and Life Sciences. He can be contacted at 978-346-4387 or JRHendrie@aol.com

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