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Red Carpet Service--Linking Rural Communities to Travelers and Tourists

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Red Carpet Service--Linking Rural Communities to Travelers and Tourists

Abstract

As rural communities develop their tourism potential they often overlook one basic aspect, hospitality training for front-line staff. This article describes a train-the-trainer program, Red Carpet Service, designed to help front-line employees increase tourism awareness, discover traveler tools, and practice customer service skills. It is based on a service-profit chain model that outlines the relationship between internal service quality and business profitability. The article highlights program evaluation results from post-then-pre surveys and mystery shopper interviews as well as community development roles for Extension faculty and suggests tourism as way for communities to begin working together at a regional level.

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Introduction

A cashier at the local gas station or grocery store could well be a key player in rural, small-town tourism development. They are the people who are the "face of the community" to travelers and tourists. They are often asked to give directions or recommendations for restaurant and entertainment options, information that could result in more dollars spent by travelers visiting a community. Yet the contribution front-line, hourly-wage employees can make toward generating tourism dollars is often overlooked. Employees and their supervisors often do not recognize their potential value to the economic development of their community.

To address this need, an educational program called "Red Carpet Service" was developed by University of Nebraska faculty. A community sponsored train-the-trainer program, it was designed to not only increase awareness of the importance of local tourism, but to build skills used to serve travelers and tourists. In addition, the program attempted to empower front-line employees by helping them better understand: 1) the critical role they provide in customer service to travelers and tourists and 2) their contribution to potential business and community growth through interaction with travelers and tourists.

Purpose--The Importance of Tourism and the Role of Service

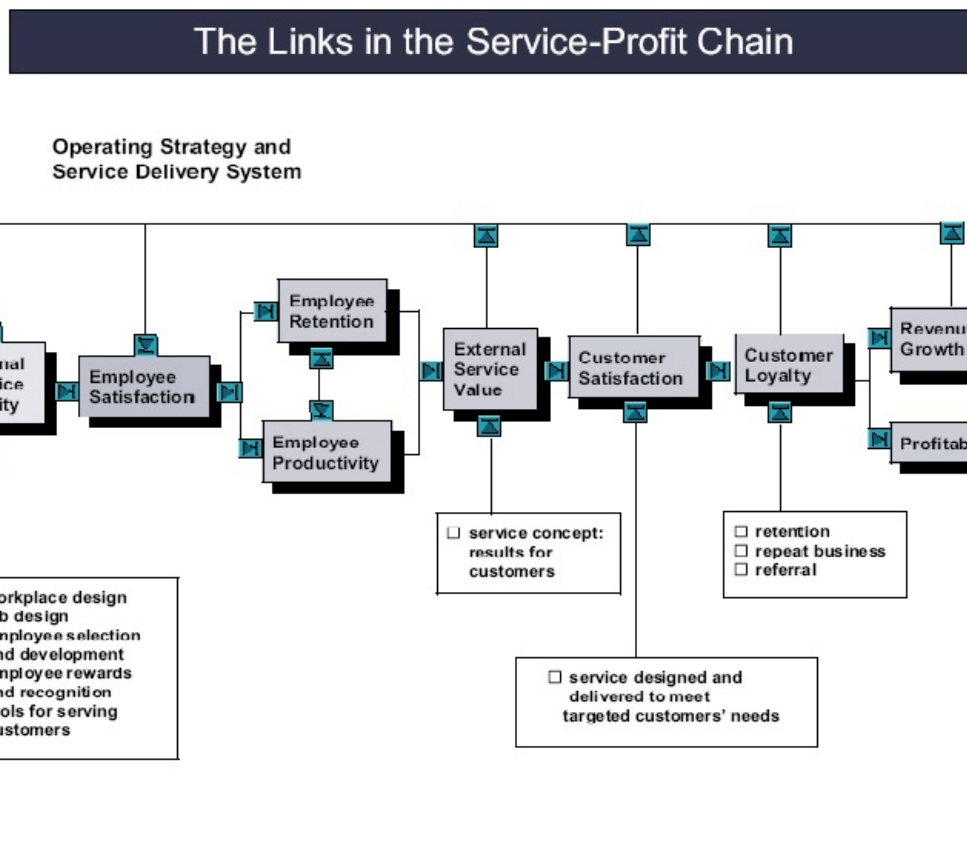
Tourism is becoming increasingly important in rural states like Nebraska. Currently it is Nebraska's third largest earner of revenue from outside the state, after agriculture and manufacturing (NE Division of Tourism, 2006). But as an economic development strategy, it has historically been

undervalued and underutilized by small communities and rural regions within the state.

However this is changing. With renewed interest in agricultural diversification, unique businesses are emerging in rural areas that focus on serving travelers and tourists. These businesses may include such amenities as bed and breakfast accommodations, dude ranch adventures, hunting and fishing opportunities, horseback riding, and wine tasting rooms. Employee interaction and service becomes an integral part of the tourism experience. These new businesses are quickly recognizing that front-line workers are an essential link between customers and potential economic benefit for the community.

Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser Jr., and Schlesinger, in *Putting the Service-Profit Chain to Work* (2000), clearly outlined the relationship between internal service quality, employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and business profitability (Figure 1). This model provided the overarching framework for the Red Carpet Service program. It established the relationship between employee development and profitability. When customer service tools are made available at the work site, employees experience greater job satisfaction, which leads to employee retention and productivity. The result for customers is greater service value and customer satisfaction, which leads to revenue growth and profitability. Crafted as an employee development program, the Red Carpet Service curriculum targets tourism-related businesses to help them capitalize on the service-profit chain.

Figure 1.
Service-Profit Chain (Heskett et al, 2000)



Objectives--Key Concepts and Program Delivery

Objectives of the Red Carpet Service program were for participants to:

- Discover tools to promote tourism in their region;
- Understand their community and its assets and talk about them in a positive light; and
- Gain enthusiasm, confidence, and commitment to meet travelers' needs.

Red Carpet Service was offered in three 90-minute sessions. Teaching methods included: lecture, discussion, group activity, personal reflection, small group work, creative report-back, and homework. Teaching topics included: the importance of tourism to front-line employees and to their community, the basics of giving directions, using community resource material and other available resources, an introduction to local and state tourism web sites, principles of providing good customer service, real life customer service situations, and local "hidden treasures." Hidden

treasures were defined as people, places, or things that could be of interest to someone visiting the area. A fourth session, a "hidden treasures" tour to be arranged by the local sponsoring organization, was highly recommended but not required. A more complete audio-narrated overview of the program can be found at: <http://www.panhandle.unl.edu/redcarpet.mov>.

Red Carpet Service was a user-fee-based program that included instruction and a copy of the complete curriculum that was customized to the location. Participants voluntarily participated in the program. It was designed as a train-the-trainer model with the expectation that selected participants would volunteer to teach the class regularly on an annual or biannual basis. The training was scheduled through a sponsoring community organization that took responsibility for promoting the class to business owners/managers in the region and for teaching additional classes in the future.

Since piloting the program in the fall of 2004, 11 locations in Nebraska have completed the program. Sponsoring organizations range from local chambers of commerce to regional tourism groups.

Evaluation Methods

Impact of Red Carpet Service was measured using two evaluation tools: 1) a retrospective post-then-pre evaluation and 2) a mystery shopper evaluation both before the program and approximately 60 days following the program. The post-then-pre evaluation included 11 statements on a four-point scale related to level of understanding, ability, knowledge, and perceptions of participants of customer service and tourism-resource issues plus additional reflective open-ended questions. The post-then-pre format allows for changes in learners' knowledge and perceptions by allowing participants to first report present behavior (post) and then think back and rate how they see these same behaviors just before participating in the program (then pre) (Rockwell & Kohn, 1989).

Mystery shopper interviews were conducted with a purposefully selected sample of preregistered participants at their place of business. The interviews were conducted by the program instructors both for convenience and to comply with Institutional Review Board recommendations. The purpose of the mystery shopper interview before the program was to get a baseline assessment of how tourists and travelers are treated when they ask for information about the region. The mystery shoppers asked for:

1. Directions to a specific local attraction

2. Information about where additional tourism resources can be found

3. Suggestions for what to see while they are in the area.

Mystery shopper interviews following the program allowed the instructors to learn how information from the class was used and to capture community impact. It also demonstrated to participants the importance of their role as a front-line professional in creating a positive first impression of their community. By making a personal contact both before and after the program, the instructors showed a unique commitment to the participants and the community.

Findings

To date, participants have shown an increase in each of the learning objectives on the post-then-pre evaluation (Table 1).

Table 1.
Comparison of the Retrospective Evaluation Post-Then-Pre Test Means (N=242)

Desired Customer Service & Resource Issues	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Percentage Perceived Change
How would you rate your <u>level of understanding</u> about:			
1. tourism's importance to the region's economy?	2.61	3.81	46%
2. importance of your role in providing service to travelers?	2.67	3.81	43%
3. the secrets of customer service?	2.77	3.83	39%
How would you rate your <u>ability</u> to:			
4. give accurate directions to travelers?	2.47	3.36	36%
5. share information about several "hidden treasures" in the area?	2.17	3.42	58%

6. apply service principles to real life situations?	2.69	3.50	30%
How would you rate your knowledge of:			
7. how to locate and use local maps?	2.70	3.55	32%
8. where additional local tourism resources are located?	2.40	3.63	51%
9. the main attractions and "hidden treasures" in your area?	2.13	3.53	60%
How do you feel about:			
10. your ability to help travelers/tourists?	2.68	3.54	32%
11. your level of enthusiasm, confidence and commitment to meet traveler needs?	2.85	3.70	30%
Scale for questions #1 - #3 ranged from 1 (very little) to 4 (a lot); questions #3 - #11 ranged from 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent)			

On average, respondents showed a 41.5% increase on all 11 questions. The greatest change was indicated in the following areas:

- Knowledge of the main attractions and hidden treasures in your area (+60%)
- Ability to share information about several hidden treasures in the area (+58%)
- Knowledge of where additional local tourism resources are located (+51%)

It is critical that communities become more aware of the importance of customer service training for front-line employees who regularly meet travelers and tourists. The first step in developing this community awareness is communication. For this reason, the evaluation asked participants how many people they shared program information with during the 3 weeks of the class. Results indicated that 24% had shared it with nine or more people, 30% had shared with five to eight people, 36% had shared with one to four people, and 10% did not respond.

When asked what they like most about the training, some typical responses were:

- "Being made to think about the PR that our business is putting out to our customers (local and tourist)."
- "Learning about the many attractions we have in the area, and their locations. It has extended the options that I have to give customers."

Results from the mystery shopper interviews following the program showed a variety of community-specific outcomes. In these conversations, the following examples were shared:

- The local hidden treasures list was shared with a regional television station and sparked enough interest for the station to run a feature story on the community and its hidden treasures.
- A woman's clothing store now displays a variety of local tourism information brochures for men to review while they wait.
- Participants have regularly shared information at their local downtown business association meetings.
- As a result of the program, a community realized the need for a tear-off area map and then developed it.
- A grocery store located on a major highway decided to incorporate an electronic message crawler into a new marquee so that events could be highlighted for both visitors and local clientele.

Implications for Extension

Red Carpet Service is one example of how Extension has mobilized resources to meet current needs. In this case both business and community needs were addressed. The areas of hospitality training, customer service, and public relations are often lifted up by tourism businesses as opportunities where more education is needed (Ohnoutka & Hughes, 2002). Working in the tourism arena is not new for Extension. Our profession has been encouraged to develop partnerships with local, regional, and national institutions to develop and deliver interdisciplinary programming focused on tourism development for several years (Honadle, 1990; Ohnoutka & Hughes, 2002).

The challenge for Extension may be to think beyond the traditional role of creating and

implementing an educational program and look at other ways our profession can assist communities. As professionals we need to encourage ourselves to see development issues more broadly. In this situation, the Red Carpet Service program was a tool that sparked development in other areas.

View Economic Development in a Broader Context

Economic development in rural communities is often defined as strictly new business attraction, which can seem like a daunting task for local volunteers. Economic development defined more broadly opens up opportunities for realistic and incremental growth in small towns and rural areas. Tourism can be one component of an economic development plan for many communities. In rural areas, tourism can capitalize on local, state, and federal highways; environmental amenities; and community assets. It is a tactic that can be seen locally as a "doable" strategy with potential quality of life benefits for families, improved community appearance, increased development of attractions and events, and possible entrepreneurial opportunities to serve travelers.

Think and Work Regionally

Tourism is the perfect first step for communities wanting to work on a regional level. Travelers do not see community or county boundaries. Instead they see a region that begs to be explored. Red Carpet Service has taken advantage of this situation to bring together participants from multiple communities and counties to discuss regional assets. Often it has been one of the first concrete reasons for citizenry to work together beyond community or county borders. Programs like Red Carpet Service can increase the likelihood of additional regional efforts, a strategy being highly encouraged for rural areas (McDaniel, 2003; Weiler, Henderson, & Cervantes, 2006).

Strengthen Regional Autonomy

Red Carpet Service was designed as a train-the-trainer program to give communities an economical, customized way to offer the program on a regular basis. This was done to combat two major roadblocks in providing front-line customer service training in rural communities: 1) repeated contracts with outside trainers are expensive, making them unaffordable for small rural communities, and 2) purchased curriculums are often too generic and lack the local information needed to meet traveler needs.

Another benefit is that train-the-trainer opportunities enhance self-development strategies within communities, according to Korsching and Allen (2004). In this case, the self-development strategy is the recognized need to help front-line employees understand the importance of their role in selling their community to visitors and tourists. The involvement of a local organization, investment of local resources, and local control of program results increases the likelihood of program success.

Create Opportunities to Strengthen Bonding and Bridging Social Capital

The development of social capital is increasingly seen as a key component in the long-term sustainability of communities (Flora, Flora, & Fey, 2003). As defined in Flora, Flora, and Fey's (2003) *Rural Communities: Legacy + Change*, bonding capital (involving multiple ties among persons or organizations who know each other well enough to have emotional ties) and bridging capital (single ties, often with a specific purpose, that do not have an exchange of emotion or affect) are both needed in community settings. Red Carpet Service creates an opportunity for bonding capital to grow by developing relationships among like-minded people in neighboring communities to enhance and develop a regional identity. Bridging capital is strengthened by building relationships with university faculty and other tourism professionals outside the community who can be used as resources in future tourism development efforts.

Conclusion

The Red Carpet Service program was developed from an identified community need for front-line employee hospitality training to help convey a more positive first impression to travelers and tourists. The authors first worked with a local committee to design a curriculum that was specifically tailored to meet their needs and implementation constraints. It has subsequently been delivered in other communities across the state.

Besides increasing awareness of the important role of front-line employees, a long-term outcome of the program has been to encourage rural communities to strongly consider tourism promotion as part of their overall economic development plan. In the broader context, seemingly simple educational programs have the potential to become a catalyst for more diversified economic growth. Extension professionals need to challenge themselves to look beyond the program role and nurture broader community development opportunities.

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