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Training Needs of Tourism-Based Businesses

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Training Needs of Tourism-Based Businesses

Abstract

Tourism is a viable economic development strategy for many communities. Wood County, West Virginia has an established industry with potential for additional growth. Interaction with employees is key to the quality of the tourism experience. A survey of local tourism businesses was used to determine such needs. Worker training needs were strongest in customer service and local tourism opportunities, followed by training needs in hospitality, public relations, and first aid. On-site training modules, a First Impressions for Tourism Program, and cooperation with local institutions of higher learning are ways that Extension can help meet training needs.

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Introduction

As one of the country's largest employers, tourism is a viable economic development strategy for many communities. Rural areas and smaller metropolitan communities with a declining economic base have turned to tourism as an alternative (Fredrick, 1993). The tourism industry is complex because it includes parts of a variety of economic sectors (transportation, accommodations, food and beverage services, recreational activities, retail shopping, and entertainment). A community tourism industry can, therefore, be defined as a collection of businesses that sell goods and services to visitors (Minnesota Extension Service, 1991). It is those visitors that travel into the area for any purpose that are then defined as the tourists.

The tourism industry is highly competitive because local destinations vie with other communities and national and international destinations for market share. The tourism experience is a quality-driven one, and interaction with employees of tourism-based establishments is a key determinant of quality. Hence, determining local training needs of tourism-based employees would provide value assistance to any local tourism industry. The training needs of the tourism industry in Wood County West Virginia provide a case study for Extension personnel interested in helping develop their local tourism industry.

Situation: Tourism in Wood County and Elsewhere

As part of the Mid-Ohio Valley region, Wood County, West Virginia has numerous attractions and an established tourism industry with growth potential. Yet, various elements could hinder its expansion. Changes in the nature of the demand for tourism present both opportunities and challenges for local tourism based establishments. The travel industry is very competitive. Communities vie for visitors with neighboring communities and national and international destinations. The delivery of quality customer service is often the competitive difference.

Consumer perceptions about the quality of their experiences are paramount to success. Inattention

to visitor needs, poor infrastructure, lack of cooperation between businesses and between local government and non-government can all contribute to declines in quality. Such declines can chock off the potential for future growth, because dissatisfied tourists will turn to alternative activities (Minnesota Extension Service, 1991).

Interaction with employees is key in determining the quality of the tourism experience as emphasized in the literature. Businesses surveyed in a Pocahontas County West Virginia study (Selin, 1998) emphasized the need for a university sponsored training program. In a Minnesota and Wisconsin study (Erkkila, 1996), worker training needs included customer service, public relations, first aid, and food preparation training. Customer service training was also an identified business need in a study conducted in northern Minnesota (Minnesota Extension Service, 2000) and in research conducted by Page and Getz (1997) and Alexander and McKenna (1998). Such training may be especially important because tourism entrepreneurs may overestimate the quality of services that they provide (Reichel, Towergart, & Ady, 2000).

Hence, a focus on worker training needs is appropriate. Further, Extension personnel (in Wood County and elsewhere) can provide worker training for tourism businesses (Honadle, 1990). A needs assessment concerning such training has never been conducted in Wood County.

Method of Analysis

A survey instrument was developed in cooperation with the Parkersburg/Wood County Convention and Visitor's Bureau (Bureau) by the Wood County WVU Extension Service with the objective of determining training needs. Based on the types of businesses identified as tourism-related in other studies and on discussions with the Bureau, a criteria for the types of local Wood County businesses that are tourism related was developed. Tourism-related businesses fell into the eight categories:

- Hotels,
- Bed and breakfast inns,
- Campgrounds,
- Automobile rental businesses,
- Golf and recreation,
- Restaurants,
- Specialty stores, and
- Tourism attractions.

The population of local tourism-related businesses was collected utilizing the American Business Disk (Reference USA, 2000), the Yellow Pages, and a list of Bureau members. A total of 124 businesses were identified based on the eight categories.

The eight categories were used to generate a stratified random sample, with "oversampling" of one category. For seven of the eight categories (excluding tourism attractions), one out of every three businesses was selected as part of the sample. Because of the nature of the study, all tourist attractions were included in the sample. The result was a sample of 54 businesses, which closely followed the makeup of Wood County tourism businesses, the only exception being that we "oversampled" (surveyed completely) tourism attractions. The resulting sample percentages by major category were hotels (12%), bed and breakfasts (2%), campgrounds (4%), auto rentals (6%), golf and recreation (8%), restaurants (39%), specialty stores (16%), and tourist attractions (12%). Several business closures and unsuccessful efforts to contact other businesses reduced the population sample from 54 to 43.

Letters were mailed to the 43 businesses requesting their participation in the survey. Each business was then telephoned to ascertain their willingness to participate. Twenty-two businesses agreed to participate in the process, for a survey return rate of 51%. This return rate compares favorably with business surveys in general. The WVU Extension Service administered the surveys in Wood County during the first two weeks of August 2000 with the aid of a summer intern.

Responses provided a reasonably representative sample of the Wood County tourism industry. Restaurants (20%) and recreation (5%) were somewhat underrepresented. Tourism attractions (16%) and lodging (bed and breakfasts, campgrounds, and hotels) (36%) were somewhat overrepresented. Retail establishments (specialty stores plus auto rental) exactly matched the original sample. Survey results are adequately representative for drawing inferences about the needs of the local tourism industry.

Survey Results

Business Characteristics

Analysis of responding businesses indicated a healthy mix of newer and more established businesses. Respondents ranged from large (well over a million dollars) to small (under \$100,000) businesses in gross sales. Both large and small businesses provided lodging, retail, restaurants, and tourist attractions. However, the majority of lodging providers were larger, while tourism attraction providers tended to be smaller.

Training Needs

Businesses were asked several questions concerning their employee training and assistance needs. The majority indicated that they would like employee training in the areas of customer service (14), public relations (12), hospitality (12), local tourism information (15 businesses), and first aid (13) (Figure 1). Businesses also indicated a desire to train employees in lodging and housekeeping skills (6), food preparation (7), water safety (4), and sanitation and cleaning skills (9) (Figure 2).

Figure 1.

Number of Businesses Seeking Worker Training, Wood County Tourism Industry Survey.

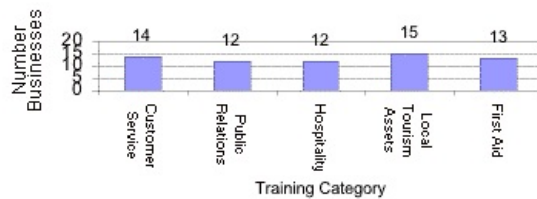
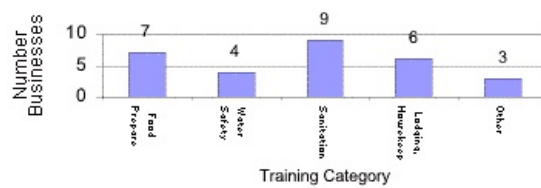


Figure 2.

Number of Businesses Seeking Worker Training, Wood County Tourism Industry Survey.



The various types of surveyed businesses showed some variation in their training needs. The majority of tourism attractions, lodging, retail, and restaurants indicated a need for worker training in customer service and in public relations. Lodging, retail, and restaurants had a marked demand for worker training in hospitality and in providing first aid and emergency services.

Surveyed businesses were also asked to indicate the number of employees that they would likely train in various areas of service delivery. Across all businesses, an average of 11.7 employees would be trained in customer service, 12.4 in public relations, 11.3 in hospitality, 14.4 in local tourism information, and 19.4 in providing first aid training (Figure 3). An average of 7.5 employees would be trained in lodging and housekeeping skills, 7.6 in food preparation, 1.6 in water safety, and 10.9 in sanitation and cleaning skills (Figure 4).

Figure 3.

Number of Employees to be Trained Per Business, Wood County Tourism Industry Survey.



Figure 4.

Number of Employees to be Trained Per Business, Wood County Tourism Industry Survey.



Business also requested additional information in the training needs area. Ten surveyed businesses would like more information on customer service training, while six indicated they would like more information on computer training.

Reaction to Training Needs

Our central finding is a definite need for worker training for tourism businesses. Surveyed businesses desired training in:

- Customer service,
- Local tourism opportunities,
- Hospitality,
- Public relations, and
- First aid.

Consistent with the literature, tourism-based businesses in other communities will have similar training needs. How can Extension personnel help to meet such needs?

One would expect various forms of training to be in demand. However, businesses and their employees are busy and may not find the time to attend training efforts (the case in Wood County in the past) despite the need. We recommend that Extension personnel consider partnering with local tourism organizations in developing on-site training. In Wood County, the WVU Extension Service is partnering with the Bureau in developing training modules for on-site use by businesses during regular staff meetings.

The WVU Extension Service has a First Impressions Program in which volunteer visitors evaluate initial experiences with and impressions of a community. As a result of this research, a modified version of the program emphasizing experiences with the tourism industry has been implemented in Wood County. As a byproduct, a report is produced detailing visitor's experiences in the county. Through identifying visitor experiences, worker training needs in hospitality and local tourism opportunities can be further defined. We recommend that interested Extension personnel may consider implementing such a program in their communities.

One training need identified in our research was in the area of local tourism assets. In particular, visitors to businesses such as restaurants often receive a negative reaction to their questions concerning what there is to see locally. Accordingly, a packet highlighting local attractions, history of the area, directions to attractions, and information about regular events is being developed for training new tourism employees in Wood County. Interested Extension personnel should consider developing such materials for training tourism business employees in their communities.

Extension personnel may also help local businesses in forming training partnerships with local or regional educational institutions. In Wood County, an exciting recent development is a 2-year program now being offered in Lodging Management and Hospitality Services to local high school students by the technical center (Parkersburg/Wood County Convention and Visitors Bureau, 2000). The program prepares students for entry-level positions in the hospitality industry and advanced placement in appropriate post-secondary degree programs. Course content includes development of guest service skills, some on-the-job training, and internship opportunities. The possibility of a formal partnership among the Bureau, the Technical Center, and the WVU Extension Service is being explored. Such Extension-based partnerships can lead to the identification and fulfillment of training goals in other places.

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