

Knowledge, the key differentiator for bricks and mortar agents



the key to survival and success of your business.

There are three key fronts on which you can fight the differentiation battle and they are all related to knowledge: price, quality, and service. Your ability to compete on price is about finding the best (value) price to satisfy the customer. Quality comes down to knowing what the customer really wants and enjoys. Service comes out on top when combined with knowledge.

The internet has brought enormous self-service and product differentiation to the vast majority of prospective travellers. Hence many simply do not see the need for a travel agent. Knowledge-service is, therefore, the best strategy for competing.

The commitment to knowledge-driven service requires five very important steps:

1. Set clear objectives and knowledge-based service standards. High quality service must be defined so employees know what it looks like and how to provide it.

2. Train well. The commitment must include the time, money, and effort necessary to train employees properly. When service expectations are raised, employees must be given the skills to meet or exceed those expectations.

3. Monitor and measure service. Service has to be made concrete so that it can be monitored, measured, and made a part of everyone's performance review.

4. Reward or retrain. People who excel at providing excellent service should be rewarded; those who need help should be coached or retrained.

By Judith O'Neill*

LISTENING into a conversation last week between a wholesale company executive and a training company executive about the woeful lack of geographical and destination knowledge in travel consultants caught my interest.

Listening to a conversation between four friends this weekend about their international travel plans this year and the fact that they are all booking most of their arrangements via the internet caused concern. The two issues are definitely connected.

My friends, who all travel overseas at least every second year, all criticised the lack of knowledge displayed by travel consultants; lack of information given; and particularly how pricing varied between what was quoted and what they found on the internet.

Customer orientated surveys over the past three years have shown that retail customers want, in order of importance:

- Staff knowledge;
- Efficiency of service;
- Staff friendliness;

- Reliability;
- Professionalism;
- Responsiveness;
- Product range/appeal;
- Value for money (attractive pricing);
- Taking ownership of service;
- Atmosphere;
- Shop/agency presentation / environment; and
- Accessibility.

These results should challenge you to look at your business and rethink your priorities. Your level of customer contact should be high, whether face-to-face, on the phone or by email, and whether or not you sell leisure travel or business travel or both, there is a very clear message here to travel agency managers and owners.

If you look again at the 12 service elements that customers want, you will see that the top six elements all relate to personal interaction with the staff member on the frontline.

According to Tricia Olsen, CEO of International Customer Service Professionals: "Customers are looking for staff that take time to build meaningful and trusting relationships; are

efficient; show respect and compassion; have good product knowledge and go out of their way to be friendly. Customers want to be treated as a person, not a faceless shopper with a credit card".

Personal interaction is placed above price, yet many travel agency owners are still neglecting the essential element of knowledge based training and knowledge based transfer.

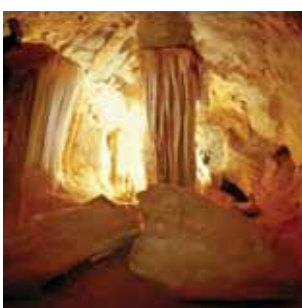
Given that in most travel agencies, the first point of contact is with a consultant or another staff member, you must make sure that your people are not only well trained geographically but are knowledgeable about destinations. It is not up to wholesalers to train your consultants on destinations.

Nor is it up to wholesalers to train your consultants in the difference between the euro, dollar or pound! And most of all, it is not up to your customers to point out the differences, as was the case with one of my friends who gave up on the travel consultant she was (trying to) deal with.

Think about differentiation being



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